

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

[Number Twenty-Nine.]

A Pattern Syrian Village—A Sorry Picture—
Something about an Ancient Sport—
The Mighty Temple of the Sun---Wonders of Old-Time Engineering---A Cut at Ambitious Nobodies---Magnificent Ruin of a Horse.

IN CAMP, Eight Hours)
Beyond Damascus, September 17th.)

Portrait of a Syrian Village.

That is the cheapest way to put it, perhaps. There is a Syrian village of the usual style near here, and I think they spell it Kaf'r Hauer, but I do not know. It don't matter, though. Most people don't care anything about names, and cannot recollect them after they hear them. When I say that that village is of the usual style, I mean to insinuate that all Syrian villages within fifty miles of Damascus are alike—so much alike that it would require more than human intelligence to tell wherein one differed from another. A Syrian village is a hive of huts one story high (six feet) and as square as a dry goods box; it is mud-plaster all over, flat roof and all, and generally white-washed after a fashion. The same roof often extends over half the town, covering many of the streets, which are generally about a yard wide. When you ride through one of these villages at noonday, you first meet a melancholy dog, that looks up at you and silently begs that you won't run over him, but he does not offer to get out of the way; next you meet a young boy without any clothes on, and he holds out his hand and says "Bucksheesh!"—he don't really expect a cent, but then he learned to say that before he learned to say mother, and now he cannot break himself of it; next you meet a woman with a black veil drawn closely over her face, and her bust exposed; finally, you come to several sore-eyed children and children in all stages of mutilation and decay; and sitting humbly in the dust, and all fringed with filthy rags, is a poor devil whose arms and legs are gnarled and twisted like grapevines. These are all the people you are likely to see. The balance of the population are asleep within doors, or abroad tending goats in the plains and on the hill sides. The village is built on some poor little water-course (water is a scarce article in this country), and about it is a little fresh-looking vegetation. Beyond this charmed circle, for miles on every side, stretches a weary desert of sand and gravel, which produces a gray bunchy shrub like sage-brush. A Syrian village is the sorriest sight in the world, and its surroundings are eminently in keeping with it.

Nimrod, the Mighty Hunter.

I would not have gone into this dissertation upon Syrian villages but for the fact that Nimrod, the Mighty Hunter of Scriptural notoriety, is buried in this one close to which our tents are pitched, and I wanted you to know about how he is located. Like Homer, he is said to be buried in many other places, but this is the only true and genuine place where he is planted.

Nimrod was a brick. When the original tribes were dispersed, more than four thousand years ago, Nimrod and a large party travelled three or four hundred miles, and preempted claim where the great city of Babylon afterwards stood. Nimrod built that city. He also began to build the famous Tower of Babel, but circumstances over which he had no control put it out of his power to finish it. He ran it up eight stories high, however, and two of them still stand, at this day—a huge mountain of brickwork, rent down the centre by earthquakes, and seared and vitrified by the lightnings of an angry God. But the vast ruin will still stand for ages, to shame the puny labors of these modern generations of men. Its huge compartments are tenanted by owls and lions, and old Nimrod lies neglected in this wretched village, far from the scene of his grand enterprise. He did the best he could with his little tower, but they rung in too many languages on him. When things got so mixed that when a mason sung out for bricks and they brought him mortar, Nimrod saw that the game was up with him, and so he settled with the hands and left destroying Time a job of fifty centuries to worry over.

Baalbec.

But I am getting along too fast. When I wrote last we were approaching Baalbec, a noble ruin whose history is a sealed book. It has stood there for thousands of years, the wonder and admiration of travellers—but who built it, or when it was built, are questions that may never be answered. One thing is very sure, though. Such grandeur of design, and such matchless grace of execution, as one sees in the temples of Baalbec, have not been equalled or even approached in any work of men's hands that has been built within twenty centuries past.

The great Temple of the Sun, the Temple of Jupiter, and several smaller temples, are clustered together in the midst of one of these miserable Syrian villages, and look strangely enough in such a plebeian company. These great temples are built upon massive substructions that might support a world, almost; the materials used are blocks of stone as large as an omnibus—very few, if any of them, are smaller than a carpenter's tool chest—and these substructions are traversed by tunnels through which a train of cars could pass. With such foundations as these, it is little wonder that Baalbec has lasted so long. The Temple of the Sun is nearly three hundred feet long and one hundred and sixty wide. It had fifty-four columns around it, but only six are standing now—the others lie broken at its base, a confused and picturesque heap. The six columns are perfect, as also are their bases—Corinthian capitals and entablature—and six more shapely columns do not exist. The columns and the entablature together are ninety feet high—a prodigious altitude for shafts of stone to reach, truly—and yet one only thinks of their beauty and symmetry when looking at them; the pillars look slender and delicate, the entablature, with its elaborate sculpture, looks like rich stucco work. But when you have gazed aloft till your eyes are weary, you glance at the great fragments of pillars among which you are standing, and find that they are eight feet thick; and with them lie beautiful capitals apparently as large as a small cottage; and also single slabs of stone, superbly sculptured, that are four or five feet thick and would completely cover the floor of any ordinary parlor. You wonder where these monstrous things came from, and it takes you some little time to satisfy yourself that the airy and graceful fabric that towers above your head is made up of their matter. It seems too preposterous.

The Temple of Jupiter is a smaller ruin than the one I have been speaking of, and yet is immense. It is in a tolerable state of preservation. One row of nine columns stands almost uninjured. They are sixty-five feet high and support a sort of porch or roof, which connects them with the roof of the building. This porch-roof is composed of tremendous slabs of stone which are so superbly sculptured on the under side that the work looks like a finely finished fresco from below. One or two of these slabs had fallen, and again I wondered if the gigantic masses of carved stone that lay about me were no larger than those above my head. Within the temple, the ornamentation was magnificent and colossal. What a wonder of architectural beauty and grandeur this edifice must have been when it was new! And what a noble picture it and its statelier companion, with the chaos of mighty fragments scattered about them, makes in the moonlight!

I cannot conceive how these immense blocks of stone were ever hauled from the quarries, or how they were ever raised to the dizzy heights they occupy in the temples. And yet these sculptured blocks are trifles in size compared with the rough-hewn blocks that form the wide verandah or platform which surrounds the Great Temple. One stretch of that platform, 300 feet long, is composed of blocks of stone as large, and some of them larger, than a street car. They surmount a wall about ten or twelve feet high. I thought these were large rocks, but they sank into insignificance compared with those which formed another section of the platform. These were three in number, and I thought that each of them was about as large as four street cars. In combined length these three stones stretch nearly 300 feet; they are 13 feet square; two of them are 64 feet long each, and the third is 69. They are built into the massive wall some 20 feet above the ground. They are there, but how they got there is the question. I have seen the hull of a steamboat that was smaller than one of these stones. All these great walls are as exact and shapely as the flimsy things we build of bricks in these degenerate days. A race of gods or of giants must have inhabited Baalbec many a century ago. Men like the men of our day could hardly rear such temples as these.

I went to the quarry from whence the stones of Baalbec were taken. It was about a quarter of a mile off, and down a hill. In a great pit lay the mate of the largest stone in the ruins. It lay there just as the giants of that old forgotten age had left it when they were called hence—just as they had left it to remain for thousands of years, an eloquent rebuke unto such as are prone to think slightly of the men who lived before them. This enormous block lies there, neatly squared and ready for the builders' hands—a solid mass fourteen feet by seventeen, and seventy feet long! Two buggies could be driven abreast of each other, from one end of it to the other, and have room enough for a man or two to walk on either side. Three such stones laid side by side in Platt's Hall would leave small room for an audience. One might step upon them from the galleries, I think.

You might swear that all the John Smiths and George Wilkinsons, and all the other pitiful nobodies between Kingdom Come and Baalbec would inscribe their poor little names upon the walls of Baalbec's magnificent ruins, and would add the town, the county, and the State they came from—and swearing thus, you would be correct. It is a pity some great ruin does not fall in and flatten out some of these cattle and scare their tribe out of ever giving their names to fame upon any walls again, save those of the water-closets where they were wont to inscribe them before they wandered from their native land.

Trouble Brewing.

I was going to write about the ancient city of Damascus, but this last new horse I have got is trying to break his neck over the tent-ropes, and I shall have to go out and anchor him. Jericho and I have parted company. The new horse is not much to boast of, I think. One of his hind legs bends the wrong way, and the other one is as straight and stiff as a tent pole. Most of his teeth are gone, and he is as blind as a bat. His nose has been broken at some time or other, and is arched like a culvert now. His under lip hangs down like a camel's, and his ears are chopped off close to his head. I had some trouble at first to find a name for him, but I finally concluded to call him Baalbec, because he is such a magnificent ruin. I cannot keep from talking about my horses, because I have a very long and tedious journey before me, and they naturally occupy my thoughts about as much as matters of apparently much greater importance. And while I am writing about him Baalbec has tripped again and caved in one side of the tent, and I am just as good as out of doors. I shall have to go out and see about this.

MARK TWAIN.