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LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

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The Oldest City of the World---Paradise--- "Beautiful for Situation"---The Gardens of Damascus---Abana and Pharpar--- Modern Adaptation of the Story of Naaman---The Horrors of Leprosy.

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Damascus the Eternal.

"Though old as history itself, thou art fresh as the breath of spring, blooming as thine own rose-bud, and fragrant as thine own orange-flower, O Damascus, pearl of the East!"

Damascus dates back anterior to the days of Abraham, and is the oldest city in the world. It was founded by Uz, the grandson of Noah. "The early history of Damascus is shrouded in the mists of a hoary antiquity." Leave the matters written of in the first eleven chapters of the Old Testament out, and no recorded event has occurred in the world but Damascus was in existence to receive the news of it. Go back as far as you will into the vague Past, there was always a Damascus. In the writings of every century for more than four thousand years, its name has been mentioned and its praises sung. To Damascus, years are only moments, decades are only fitting trifles of time. She measures time, not by days and months and years, but by the empires she has seen rise, and prosper and crumble to ruin. She is a type of immortality. She saw the foundations of Baalbec, and Thebes and Ephesus laid; she saw them grow into mighty cities, and amaze the world with their grandeur--and she has lived to see them desolate, deserted, and given over to the owls and the bats. She saw the Israelitish Empire exalted, and she saw it annihilated. She saw Greece rise and flourish two thousand years, and die. In her old age she saw Rome built; she saw it overshadow the world with its power; she saw it perish. The few hundreds of years of Genoese and Venitian might and splendor were, to grave old Damascus, only a trifling scintillation hardly worth remembering. Damascus has seen all that has ever occurred on earth, and still she lives. She has looked upon the dry bones of a thousand Empires, and will see the tombs of a thousand more before she dies. Though another claims the name, old Damascus is by right the Eternal City.

Mahomet's Paradise, and the Bible's.

We arrived, after a long day's ride in a scorching sun, upon a high mountain overlooking the city, and as the glare of day mellowed into twilight, we looked down upon a picture which is celebrated all over the world. I think I have read about four hundred times that when Mahomet was a simple camel driver he reached this point and looked down upon Damascus for the first time, and then called at the office and got his money. He said man could enter only one paradise; he preferred to go to the old regular one above. So he sat down there and feasted his eyes upon the earthly paradise of Damascus, and then went away without entering its gates. They have erected a tower on the hill to mark the spot where he stood.

Damascus is beautiful from the mountain. It is beautiful even to foreigners accustomed to luxuriant vegetation, and I can easily understand how unspeakably beautiful it must be to eyes that are only used to the God-forsaken barrenness and desolation of Syria. I should think a Syrian would go wild with ecstasy when such a picture bursts upon him for the first time.

In a vast level plain Damascus sits, a great snow-white city nestling in the heart of a sea of brilliant green shrubbery that stretches for fifteen miles up and down the plain and is five or six miles wide. Outside of that billowy expanse of shining foliage is the desert--pure, unadulterated, yellow sand, apparently, and smooth as velvet, and threaded far away with fine lines that stand for roads, and dotted with creeping mites that we know are camel-trains and journeying men--and fencing in the desert are bald, bare mountains that have no green thing about them to soften their forbidding aspect. From Mahomet's stand-point you have the wall of dreary mountains, the wide, yellow desert, the dense mass of rich green foliage and the great white city with its hundred domes and its forest of minarets, gleaming out of the midst of it. You have these for a picture--and when you think of the leagues of blighted, blasted, sandy, rocky, sun-burnt, ugly, dreary, infamous country you have ridden over to get here, you think it is the most beautiful, beautiful picture that ever human eyes rested upon in all the world! If I were to go to Damascus again, I would camp on Mahomet's hill about a week, and then go away. There is no need to go inside the walls. The Prophet was wise without knowing it when he decided not to go down into the Paradise of Damascus.

There is an honored old tradition that the immense garden which Damascus stands in was the Garden of Eden, and modern writers have gathered up many chapters of evidence tending to show that it really was the Garden of Eden, and that the Rivers Pharpar and Abana are the "two rivers" that watered Adam's Paradise. It may be so, but it is not Paradise now, and one would be as happy in the desert as he would be likely to be within. It is so crooked and cramped and dirty that one cannot realize that he is in the splendid city he saw from the hill top. The gardens are hidden by high mud walls, and the Paradise is become a very sink of pollution and uncomeliness. Damascus has plenty of clear, pure water in it, though, and this is enough, of itself, to make an Arab think it beautiful and blessed. Water is scarce in blistered Syria. We run railways by our large cities in America; in Syria they curve the roads so as to make them run by the meagre little puddles they call "foun'ains," and which are not found oftener on a journey than every four hours. But the "rivers" of Pharpar and Abana of Scripture (they do not amount to quite as much as the Carson and the Humboldt) run through Damascus, and so every house and every garden have their sparkling fountains and rivulets of water. With her forest of foliage and her abundance of water, Damascus must be a wonder of wonders to the Bedouin from the deserts. Damascus is simply an oasis--that is what it is. For four thousand years its waters have not gone dry or its fertility failed. Now you understand why the city has existed so long. It could not die. So long as its waters remain to it away out there in the midst of that howling desert, so long will Damascus live to bless the sight of the tired and thirsty wayfarer.

In Damascus they just think there are no such rivers in all the world as their little Abana and Pharpar. The Damascenes have always thought that way. In II Kings, chapter 5, Naaman brags most ridiculously about them. That was three thousand years ago. He says: "Are not Abana and Pharpar Rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them and be clean?" But perhaps you never heard the story. I will give it you.

The Story of Naaman.

Major General Naaman was the Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian armies and wore the brass collar. He was the pet of the King, and had much shekels, and lived in a two-story house and put on more style than any man in Damascus. "He was a mighty man in valor, but he was a leper." [Strangely enough, the house they point out to you now as his, has been turned into a leper hospital, and the inmates expose their horrid deformities and hold up their ghastly hands and beg for "bucksheesh" when you enter.] A little captive Israelitish maid servant of Naaman's wife remarked one day that if the Prophet Elisha, who was living down in Samaria somewhere, would only take hold of Naaman's case, he could cure him. This came to the ears of Naaman's friend, the King, and he at once (on such slim evidence), sent his sick Major General off to Elisha with bucksheesh enough to pay ten thousand doctors' bills, viz.: "ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold and ten changes of raiment." This would naturally look like a pretty good thing for Elisha, who was the successor of a prophet who had been fed by the ravens, and who was in indifferent circumstances himself. But it never started the prophetism in Elisha once. Naaman thought the prophet would rush down and invite him in and make a great fuss over him, and all that sort of thing, but he never did anything of the kind. He just said, in his careless way, that about the best thing the old party could do would be to go and wash himself--wash himself in the Jordan--and with a happy facetiousness, he suggested that he had better wash seven times--for Elisha had been to Damascus, and knew it was not a clean place by any means. But, to wash in the Jordan! That was what stuck in Naaman's craw. It was then that he said: "Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them and be clean?" And he told his eunuch to drive on. He was very wroth.

However, his servants got around him and persuaded him, and he did finally travel a good deal out of his way and dip seven times in the Jordan. He was surprised to find himself entirely cured. He was a just man and a gentleman, and he drove back at once to acknowledge the service that had been done him, and to atone for his former ungracious conduct as well as he could. But a greater surprise was in store for him: he offered the prophet bucksheesh, and it was refused. [It hardly seems possible that this could have occurred in Syria. Why, in Syria, if a person even looks at you he expects a piastre or two for bucksheesh, and if he smiles, he charges double.] Naaman offered his bucksheesh again, and again it was refused. Naaman was astounded. It came near giving him a relapse. Then he said he knew that Elisha's God must be the true God. After this he went his way.

But Gehazi, the prophet's servant (prophets paid not high wages in those days), said, "Behold, my master hath spared Naaman, this Syrian, in not receiving at his hands that which he brought; but as the Lord liveth I will run after him and take somewhat of him." He would take "somewhat" of him. He was outraged at the prophet's loose way of doing business. So he ran after Naaman, and put up an absurd story about two young men of the sons of the prophets having just arrived on a bit of a tear from Mount Ephraim, and said, "Give them, I pray thee, a talent of silver and two changes of linen." Naaman gave him double as much as he asked, and Gehazi returned back home, following the two servants of Naaman that carried the silver--for there were two men's loads of it. And when he came to the tower, he bestowed the treasure within and discharged the men. Then he chuckled to himself as one that had done a good thing and knoweth to go slow and keep shady about it; and he went and stood before Elisha his master, and said in his singular way of speaking, that he hadn't been "any whither." But Elisha capped that. He knew better. He knew everything. So, he pronounced a curse upon him which was as terrible as it was well deserved:

"The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee and unto thy seed forever. And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow!"

One cannot appreciate the horror of that curse until he looks upon leprosy in all its ghastliness, in Naaman's ancient dwelling there in Damascus. Bones all twisted out of shape, great knots protruding from face and body, joints decaying and dropping away--I pass.

MARK TWAIN.