

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

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In Damascus—Unexpected Comforts—Street Scenes—The Story of Paul—The House and Well of Ananias—Other Damascene Lions—"Christian Dogs"—Turkish Ingratitude.

BANIAS, September, 1867.

More of Damascus.

We reached the city gates that night we arrived, just at sundown—just in time to get in before the gates were closed for the night. They do say that you can get into any walled city of Syria, after night, for bucksheesh, except Damascus. But Damascus, with its four thousand years of respectability in the world, has many old fogy notions. There are no street lamps there, and the law compels all who go abroad at night to carry lanterns, just as was the case in old days, when heroes and heroines of the Arabian Nights walked the streets of Damascus, or flew away toward Bagdad on enchanted carpets.

It was fairly dark a few minutes after we got within the wall, and we went long distances through wonderfully crooked streets, eight to ten feet wide, and shut in on either side by the high mud walls of the gardens. At last we got to where lanterns could be seen flitting about here and there, and knew we were in the midst of the curious old city. In a little narrow street, crowded with our pack-mules and with a swarm of uncouth Arabs, we alighted, and through a kind of a hole in the wall entered the hotel. We stood in a great flagged court, with flowers and citron trees about us, and a huge tank in the centre that was receiving the waters of many pipes. We crossed the court and entered the rooms prepared to receive four of us. In a large marble-paved recess between the two rooms was a tank of clear, cool water, which was kept running over all the time by the streams that were pouring into it from half a dozen pipes. Nothing, in this scorching, desolate land could look so refreshing as this pure water flashing in the lamp-light; nothing could look so beautiful, nothing could sound so delicious as this mimic rain to ears long unaccustomed to sounds of such a nature. Our rooms were large, comfortably furnished, and even had their floors clothed with soft, cheerful-tinted carpets. It was a jolly thing to see a carpet again, for if there is anything drearier than the tomb-like, stone-paved parlors and bedrooms of Europe, I do not know what it is. They make one think of the grave all the time. A very broad, hard cushioned, gaily comparisoned divan some twelve or fourteen feet long, extended across one side of each room, and opposite were single beds with spring mattresses. There were great looking-glasses and marble-top tables. All this luxury was as grateful to systems and senses worn out with an exhausting day's travel, as it was unexpected—for one cannot tell what to expect in a Turkish city of even a quarter of a million inhabitants.

I do not know, but I think they used that tank between the rooms to draw drinking water from; that did not occur to me, however, until I had dipped my baking head far down into its cool depths. I thought of it then, and superb as the bath was, I was sorry I had taken it, and was about to go and explain to the landlord. A finely curled and scented poodle-dog frisked up and wiped the calf of my leg just then, and before I had time to think, I had scoused him to the bottom of the tank, and when I saw a servant coming with a pitcher I went off and left the pup trying to dig out and not succeeding very well. Satisfied revenge was all I needed to make me perfectly happy, and when I walked in to supper that first night in Damascus I was blissful. We lay on these broad divans a long time, after supper, smoking narghilies and long-stemmed chibouks, and talking about the infernal ride of the day, and I knew then what I had sometimes known before—that it is worth while to get tired out because one so enjoys resting afterward.

Damascus Street car.

In the morning we sent for donkeys. It is worthy of note that we had to send for these things. I said Damascus was an old fogy, and she is. Anywhere else we would have been assailed by a clamorous army of donkey-drivers, guides, peddlars and beggars—but in Damascus they so hate the very sight of a foreign Christian that they want no intercourse whatever with him; only a year or two ago, his person was not always safe in Damascus streets. It is the most fanatical Mahometan hole out of perdition. Where you see one green turban of a Hadji elsewhere, (the honored sign that my lord has made the pilgrimage to Mecca,) I think you will see a dozen in Damascus. The Damascenes are the ugliest, wickedest looking villains I have seen. All the veiled women we had seen yet, nearly, left their eyes exposed, but numbers of these in Damascus completely hid the face, and under a close-drawn black veil that made the woman look like a mummy. If ever we caught an eye exposed it was quickly hidden from our contaminating Christian vision; the beggars actually passed us by without demanding bucksheesh; the merchants in the bazaars did not hold up their goods and cry out eagerly, "Hey, John!" or "Look this, Howah!" On the contrary, they only scowled at us and said never a word.

The narrow streets swarmed like a hive with men and women in strange Oriental costumes, and our small donkeys knocked them right and left as we ploughed through them, urged on by the merciless donkey-boys. These persecutors run after the animal; shouting and goading them for hours together; they keep the donkey in a gallop always, yet never get tired themselves or fall behind. The donkeys fell down and spilt us over their heads occasionally, but there was nothing for it but to mount and hurry on again. We got banged against sharp corners, loaded porters, camels, and citizens generally; and we were so taken up with looking out for collisions and casualties that we had no chance to look about us at all. We rode half through the city and through the famous "street which is called Straight" without seeing anything, hardly. Our bones were nearly knocked out of joint, we were wild with excitement, and our sides ached with the jolting we had got. I do not like riding in the Damascus street-cars.

The Story of Paul.

We were on our way to the reputed houses of Judas and Ananias. About eighteen or nineteen hundred years ago, one Saul, a native of Tarsus, was particularly bitter against the new sect called Christians, and he took out letters of marque at Jerusalem and started across the country on a furious privateering crusade against them. He went forth "breathing threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord."

"And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus, and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:

"And he fell to the earth and heard a voice saying unto him, 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?'"

And when he knew that it was Jesus that spoke to him he trembled, and was astonished, and said "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"

He was told to arise and go into the ancient city and one would tell him what to do. In the meantime his soldiers stood speechless and awe-stricken, for they heard the mysterious voice but saw no man. Saul rose up and found that that fierce supernatural light had destroyed his sight, and he was blind, so "they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus." He was converted. Alas! there are others that will never be convinced by any milder argument than to be struck by lightning.

Paul lay three days, blind, in the house of Judas, and during that time he neither ate nor drank.

There came a voice to a citizen of Damascus, named Ananias (not the justly celebrated liar,) saying, "Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus; for behold, he prayeth."

Ananias did not want to go at first, for he had heard of the enterprising Saul before, and he had his doubts about that style of a "chosen vessel" to preach the gospel of peace. However, in obedience to orders, he went into the "street called Straight" (how he ever found his way into it, and after he did, how he ever found his way out of it again, are mysteries only to be accounted for by the fact that he was acting under Divine inspiration). He found Paul and restored him, and ordained him a preacher; and from this old house that we had hunted up in the street which is miscalled Straight, he had started out on that bold missionary career which he prosecuted till his death. It was not the house of the shaky disciple who sold the Master for thirty pieces of silver. I make this explanation in justice to the gentleman, who was a far different style of man from the party just referred to. A very different style of man, and lived in a very good house. It is a pity we do not know more about him.

The Straight Street.

The street called Straight is straighter than a corkscrew, but not as straight as a rainbow. St. Luke is careful not to commit himself; he does not say it is the street which is straight, but "the street which is called Straight." It is a fine piece of irony; it is the only facetious remark in the Bible. I believe. St. Luke probably considered it the best thing he ever said. We traversed the street called Straight a good way, and then turned off and called on Ananias; he was out; he has been out about eighteen centuries. But there is no question that a part of his house is there still; it is an old room 12 or 15 feet under ground, and its masonry is evidently ancient. If Ananias did not live there in St. Paul's time, somebody else did, which is just as well. I took a drink out of Ananias' old well, and singularly enough, the water was just as fresh as if the well had been dug yesterday. I was deeply moved. I mentioned it to the old Doctor, who is the religious enthusiast of our party, and he lifted up his eyes and his hands and said: "Oh, how wonderful is prophecy!" There isn't any prophecy about that rusty old well, but that is just his gait; when he don't know anything else to say, he always comes out with that: "Oh, how wonderful is prophecy!" I start a bogus astonisher for him every now and then, just to hear him yelp.

The Rest of the Sights.

We went out toward the north end of the city to see the place where the Disciples let Paul down over the Damascus wall at the dead of night—for he got to preaching Christ so fearlessly in Damascus that the people sought to kill him, just as they would to-day for the same offence, and he had to escape and flee to Jerusalem.

Then we called at the tombs of Mahomet's children and at a tomb which purported to be that of St. George who killed the dragon, and so on out to the hollow place under a rock where Paul hid during his flight till his pursuers gave him up; and to the mausoleum of the five thousand Christians who were massacred in Damascus in 1861 by the Turks. They say those narrow streets ran blood for several days, and men, women and children were butchered indiscriminately and left to rot by hundreds all through the Christian quarter; the stench was dreadful. All the Christians who could get away fled from the city, and the Mahometans would not defile their hands by burying the "infidel dogs." The thirst for blood extended to the high lands of Hermon and Anti-Lebanon, and in a short time 25,000 more Christians were massacred and their possessions laid waste. How they hate a Christian in Damascus!—and pretty much all over Turkeydom as well! And how they will sweat for it when Russia gets after them again!

It is nothing to the human heart to curse England and France for interposing to save the Ottoman Empire from the destruction it has so richly deserved for a thousand years. I want to live to see the Sultan dethroned, and his subjects scattered to the four winds of heaven. It makes me savage to see these vermin persecuted pagans refuse to eat of food that has been cooked for us; or to eat from a dish that we have eaten from; or to drink from a goatskin which we have polluted with our Christian lips, except by filtering the water through a rag which they put over the mouth of it or through a sponge! I never had a Chinaman as I hate these degraded Turks and Arabs, and when Russia gets ready to exterminate them a little I hope England and France will not find it good or good judgment to interfere in the business. MARK TWAIN.