

# THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

## LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

[Number Thirty-Two.]

### The Pains of Travel—The Umbrella Nuisance—A Novel Caravan—Jonesborough in the Desert and El Yuba Dam—A Stately Ruin—On the Borders of Holy Land—Vandalic Relic Hunters.

BANIAS, September, 1867.  
Journeying South.

The last twenty-four hours we staid in Damascus I lay prostrate with a violent attack of cholera, or cholera morbus, and therefore I had a good chance and a good excuse to lay there on that wide divan and take an honest rest. I had nothing to do but listen to the pattering of the fountains and take medicine and throw it up again. It was dangerous recreation, but it was pleasanter than travelling in Syria. I had plenty of snow from Mount Hermon, and as it would not stay on my stomach, there was nothing to interfere with my eating it—there was always room for more. I enjoyed myself very well. Syrian travel has its interesting features, like travel in any other part of the world, and yet to break your leg or have the cholera adds a welcome variety to it.

We left Damascus at noon and rode across the Plain a couple of hours and then stopped a while in the shade of some fig trees to give me a chance to rest. It was the hottest day we had seen yet—the sun flowed down like the shafts of fire that stream out before a blow-pipe; the rays seemed to fall in a steady deluge on the head and pass downward like rain from a roof. I imagined I could distinguish between the floods of rays—I thought I could tell when each lot struck my head, when it reached my shoulders, and when the next lot came. It was terrible. All the desert glared so fiercely that my eyes were swimming in tears all the time. All the boys had white umbrellas heavily lined with dark green. They were a priceless blessing. I thanked God that I had one, too, notwithstanding it was packed up with the baggage and was ten miles ahead. It is madless to travel in Syria without an umbrella. They told me in Beirout (these people who always fill you up to the chin with advice) that it was madness to travel in Syria without an umbrella. It was on this account that I got one. They told me to take the best of care of it, so as to make it last the journey through. They said this was very important. Therefore the idea of losing the umbrella became such a bagbear to me, and distressed me so much that I thought it best to take it to the head mulateer and get him to send it ahead with the baggage. He did so, and I have been happy ever since. Every night, the first thing after the tents are pitched, he brings that precious umbrella for me to inspect, and then takes it back, greatly satisfied with himself when nothing is found wrong with it.

But, honestly, I think an umbrella is a nuisance anywhere when its business is to keep the sun off. No Arab wears a brim to his fez, or uses an umbrella, or anything to shade his eyes or his face, and he always looks comfortable and proper in the sun. But of all the ridiculous sights I ever have seen, our party of eight is the most so—they cut the most outlandish figure you can imagine. They travel single file; they all wear the endless white rag of Constantinople, wrapped round and round their hats and dangling down their backs; they all wear thick green spectacles, with side-glasses to them; they all hold white umbrellas, lined with green, over their heads; without exception their stirrups are too short—they are the very worst gang of horsemen on earth; their animals to a horse trot fearfully hard—and lo! when these pilgrims get strung out one after the other; glaring straight ahead and breathless; bouncing high and out of turn, all along the line, and coming down one after the other like the stamps of a quartz mill; knees well up and stiff, elbows flapping like a rooster's that is going to crow, and the long file of umbrellas popping convulsively up and down—when one sees this outrageous picture exposed to the light of day, he is astounded that the gods don't get out their thunderbolts and just haze these pilgrims from Julesburg to Jericho! I do—I wonder at it. I wouldn't let any such caravan go through a country of mine.

And when the sun drops below the horizon and the boys close their umbrellas and put them under their arms, it is only a variation of the picture, not a modification of its absurdity.

But may be you can't see the wild extravagance of my panorama. You could if you were here. Here, you feel all the time just as if you were living about the year 1200 before Christ—or back to the patriarchs—or forward to the New Era. The scenery of the Bible is about you—the customs of the patriarchs are around you—the same people, in the same flowing robes, and in sandals, cross your path—the same long trains of stately camels go and come—the same old religious solemnity and silence rest upon the desert and the mountains that were upon them in the old days of antiquity, and behold, intruding upon a scene like this, come this fantastic gang of green-spectacled Yanks with their flapping elbows and bobbing umbrellas! It is just Daniel in the lion's den with a green cotton umbrella under his arm, all over again. I wish I had a magazine under these fellows, with four or five hundred thousand barrels of powder in it.

I see that I have been digressing somewhat. However, I have had my say, and that is something, anyhow. My umbrella is with the baggage, and so are my green spectacles. They have always been there, and there they shall stay. I will not use them. I will show some respect for the eternal fitness of things. It will be rough enough to get sun-struck, without looking ridiculous into the bargain. If I fall, let me fall bearing about me the semblance of a Christian, at least.

#### The Old Castle.

Three or four hours out from Damascus we passed the spot where they say Saul was so abruptly converted, and from this place we looked back over the scorching desert, and had our last glimpse of beautiful Damascus, decked in its robes of imperial green. After nightfall we reached our tents, just outside of the nasty Arab village of Jonesborough. Of course the real name of the place is El something or other, but I can't spell these infamous Arab names, or pronounce them either—and so I shall just have to substitute decent Christian names for them, and I hope a charitable people will sympathize with my sorrows and pardon my conduct in this matter.

We left Jonesborough very early in the morning, and rode forever and forever and forever, it seemed to me, over parched deserts and rocky hills, hungry and with no water to drink. We had drained the goat-skins dry in a little while. At noon we halted before the wretched Arab town of El Yuba Dam, perched on the side of a mountain, but the dragoman said if we applied there for water we would be attacked by the whole tribe, for they did not love Christians. We had to journey on. Two hours later we reached the foot of a tall isolated mountain, which is crowned by the crumbling castle of Banias, the stateliest ruin of that kind on earth, no doubt. It is a thousand feet long and two hundred wide, all of the most symmetrical, and at the same time the most ponderous masonry. The massive towers and bastions are more than thirty feet high, and have been sixty. From the mountain's peak its broken turrets rise above the groves of ancient oaks and olives, and look wonderfully picturesque. It is of such high antiquity that no man knows who built it or when it was built. It is utterly inaccessible, except in one place, where a bridle-path winds upward among the solid rocks to the old portcullis. The horses' hoofs have bored holes in these rocks to the depth of six inches during the hundreds and hundreds of years that the castle was garrisoned. We wandered for three hours among the chambers and crypts and dungeons of the fortress, and trod where the mailed heels of many a knightly Crusader had rang, and where Phœnician heroes had walked ages before them.

I wondered how such a solid mass of masonry could be affected even by an earthquake, and could not understand what agency had made Banias a ruin; but I found the destroyer, after a while, and then my wonder was increased ten fold. Seeds had fallen in crevices in the vast walls; the seeds had sprouted; the tender, insignificant sprouts had hardened; they grew larger and larger, and by a steady, imperceptible pressure forced the great stones apart, and now are bringing sure destruction upon a giant work that even has mocked the earthquakes to scorn! Gnarled and twisted trees spring from the old walls everywhere, and beautify and overshadow the gray battlements with a wild luxuriance of greenest foliage.

From these old towers we looked down upon a broad, level, far-reaching green valley (pleasant to look upon after the deserts,) glittering with the pools and rivulets which are the sources of the sacred river Jordan.

And as the evening drew near we clambered down the mountain, through groves of the Biblical oaks of Bashan, (for we were just stepping over the border and entering the long-sought Holy Land,) and at its extreme foot, toward the wide valley, we entered this little execrable village of Banias and camped in a great grove of olive trees near a torrent of sparkling water whose banks are splendidly arrayed in fig trees, pomegranates and oleanders in full leaf. Barring the proximity of the village, it is a sort of paradise.

The very first thing one feels like doing when he gets into camp, all burning up and dusty, is to scare up a bath. We followed the stream up to where it gushes out of the mountain side, 300 yards from the tents, and took a bath that was so icy that if I did not know this was a main source of the sacred river, I would expect harm to come of it. It was bathing at noonday in the chilly source of the Abana, "River of Damascus," that gave me the cholera, so Dr. Birch said. However, it generally does give me the cholera to take a bath.

The village of Banias stands among the ruins of the Biblical city of Cesarea Philippi, and—

I cannot write any more. The boys have come in with a lot of specimens broken from the ruins. I wish I could stop this Vandalism. They broke off chunks from Noah's tomb; from the exquisite sculptures of the temples of Baalbec; from the houses of Judas and Ananias, in Damascus; from the tomb of Nimrod the Mighty Sport, in Jonesborough; from the worn Greek and Roman inscriptions set in the hoary walls of the Castle of Banias; and now they have been hacking and chipping these old arches here that Jesus looked upon in the flesh. God protect the Holy Sepulchre when this tribe invades Jerusalem!

MARK TWAIN.