

# THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

## LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

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### "From Dan to Beersheba"—The Sources of the Jordan—Ancient Filibusters—The Roman Colossus of Roads—Glimpses of Oriental Life—A Naked and Treeless Land—Descendants of the Patriarchs.

WILLIAMSBURG, CANAAN,  
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#### Ancient History of Dutch Flat.

About an hour's ride over a rough, rocky road, half-flooded with water (which is a singular thing in the arid land of Syria,) and through a forest of oaks of Bashan (this little district was once the kingdom famous in Scripture for its oaks and its bulls,) brought us to Dutch Flat. Dutch Flat is more popularly known as Dan, and the expression "from Dan to Beersheba" makes it familiar to all peoples under the sun. To my mind, "from Dutch Flat to Beersheba" sounds infinitely better. Dan was the northern and Beersheba the southern limit of Palestine—hence the expression.

From a little mound here in the plain issues a broad stream of limpid water and forms a large shallow pool, and then rushes furiously away toward Lake Huleh and the Sea of Galilee. This fountain (every puddle in Syria is a "fountain") is an important source of the Jordan. The banks of the pond and the brook are respectably adorned with blooming oleanders, but the unutterable beauty of the spot will not throw a well-balanced man into convulsions, as the customary style of Syrian books of travel would lead one to suppose.

The small mound I have mentioned was once occupied by the Phœnician city of Laish. A party of filibusters from Zarah and Eshtool captured the place, and lived there in a free and easy way, worshipping gods of their own manufacture and stealing idols from their neighbors whenever they were their own out. Jeroboam set up a golden calf here to fascinate his people and keep them from making dangerous trips to Jerusalem to worship, which might result in a return to their rightful allegiance. With all respect for those ancient Israelites, I cannot overlook the fact that they were seldom virtuous enough to withstand the seductions of a golden calf. However, perhaps it was pleasantly suggestive of free lunch.

Some forty centuries ago the city of Sodom was pillaged by the Arab princes of Mesopotamia, and among other plunder they seized upon the patriarch Lot and brought him here on their way to their own possessions. You will remember Lot as the party whose wife was turned into a pillar of salt and left standing in this condition in the most public place in Palestine. We sympathize with the woman, because she could not but look unpleasantly conspicuous; and we feel deeply for Lot, because the circumstance could not be otherwise than irritating to him. It would irritate anybody.

The Arab Princes brought Lot to this spot which the Bible calls Dan, and father Abraham, who was pursuing them, crept softly in at dead of night, among the whispering oleanders and under the shadows of the stately oaks, and fell upon the slumbering victors and startled them from their dreams with the clash of steel. He recaptured Lot and all the other plunder.

#### Character of the Ranch.

We moved on. We were now in a green valley, five or six miles wide and fifteen long. The streams which are called the sources of the Jordan flow through it from Lake Huleh, at its southern end, called the "Waters of Merom" in the Old Testament,) a sheet of water about three or four miles in diameter. The Lake is surrounded by a broad marsh, grown with reeds. Between the marsh and the mountains that wall the Valley is a respectable strip of fertile land; at the end of the Valley, toward Dan, as much as half the land is solid and fertile, and watered by Jordan's sources. There is actually enough of it to make a farm. It almost warrants the unbiblical enthusiasm of the spies of that rabble of filibusters who captured Dan. They said: "We have seen the land, and behold it is very good." "A place where there is no want of anything that is in the earth."

Well, I suppose they were pardonable. They hadn't seen any country but Palestine, and surely this was very good for Palestine. They thought that little patch was plenty for their six hundred men and their families. There do not seem to be in the good old Bible times Palestine had a population of six million souls—Palestine, the promised land, a small strip of rocks and deserts and mountains, not equal in to the State of Massachusetts, (which one cannot always see on the map of the United States without shutting one eye, Mrs. A. J. M.)—Palestine, where every hundred acres of arable land is protected by three mountains on each side and a desert at each end to keep it from bolting for want of company. I suppose Dutch Flat struck the filibustering spies as something extraordinary in the way of wide-extended fertility. At the same time, though, they drew it just a little strong when they said it was "a place where there is no want of anything that is in the earth." That was a *little* strong. A good deal of the north end of the farm had the boulders of original creation bedded in the soil as thick as nail-heads in a hair trunk, and they are there yet. Other portions of the farm lacked many things that are in the earth, and likewise lacked the capacity to produce those things. Still, it was a good piece of country for Palestine.

#### Signs That Fall Not in Dry Times.

When we got fairly down on the level part of the Danite farm, we came to places where we could actually run our horses. It was a notable circumstance. Wherever imperial Rome carried her banners, she left the sign and symbol of her greatness and her intelligence in roads and bridges that endure to this day. In Italy, in England, in France, in Spain, in Africa—everywhere that one wanders, he finds these footprints of the fallen Colossus. Roads are the highways of the arts, and sciences, and commerce. One can tell what a nation is if he can only see its roads. Glance at the thing for a moment. France has such magnificent roads!—miserable Spain has none; England has roads—Portugal has not; the Northern States of America are webbed with roads—the South is not. The Cæsars were great. They built roads. Napoleon the First was great. He inaugurated the road system of France, and men point to some of his roads to-day as wonderful works. Napoleon the Third is great. He is opening up France from centre to circumference with countless leagues of macadamized roads that are as smooth and hard and clean as the floor of a drawing-room. Alexander II is the most genuinely great man that has ever occupied the throne of Russia. He has inaugurated a system that will completely thread his vast empire with iron rails in a very few years. But if ever the nations of Palestine were great, the proof must be sought elsewhere than in the roads they have left behind them. They never even made a trail. Their goats made paths, and they followed them. The goats made the paths four thousand years ago; and to this day the caravans follow those same old trails. Israel was not great in architecture, either. She has left no monument of that kind. She was great in sanguinary warfare—in the extermination of tribes, even to the destroying of every woman and every child. She was also great in her worshiping of the true God so long as He showered blessings upon her and held her to her allegiance with a rigid hand; but when He left her to herself a moment, she was great in her propensity to fly back to her golden calves.

We had been painfully clambering over interminable rocks for days together, and when we suddenly came upon this astonishing piece of rockless, level ground, every man drove the spurs into his horse and sped away with a velocity that he could surely enjoy to the utmost, but could never hope to comprehend in Palestine.

#### Glimpses of the Hoary Past.

Here were evidences of cultivation—a rare sight in this country—an acre or two of rich soil studded with last season's dead corn-stalks of the thickness of your thumb and very wide apart. But in such a land as this it was a thrilling spectacle. Close to it was a stream, and on its banks a great herd of curious looking Syrian goats and sheep were gratefully eating gravel. I do not state this as a petrified fact—I only suppose they were eating gravel, because there did not appear to be anything else for them to eat. The shepherds that tended them were the very pictures of Joseph and his brethren I have no doubt in the world. They were tall, muscular, and very dark-skinned Bedouins, with inky black beards. They had firm lips, unquailing eyes, and a kingly staidness of bearing. They wore the parti-colored half-bonnet, half hood, with fringed ends falling upon their shoulders, and the full, flowing robe barred with broad black stripes—the dress one sees in all pictures of the swarthy sons of the desert. They say these people are the descendants of Israel, but I guess they are. These chaps would sell their younger brothers if they had a chance, I think. They have the manners, the customs, the dress, the occupation and the loose principles of the ancient stock. [They attacked our camp last night, and I bear them no good-will.] They had with them the pigmy jackasses one sees all over Syria and remembers in all pictures of the "Flight into Egypt," where Mary and the Young Child are riding and Joseph is walking alongside, towering high above the little donkey's shoulders. [That picture is marked by a gross blunder: Joseph ought to be riding and carrying the Child, and Mary ought to be walking. Whoever heard of a Syrian walking while his wife or his mother or his sister rode?—and behold, these people are exceedingly like the people who have always lived here since Abraham's days. The blunder in the picture is entirely pardonable, but it is a blunder, nevertheless.] When I see these hooded, full-robed, bearded, swarthy Arabs riding on a mighty-eared jackass the size of a young calf, and swinging their prodigious feet contentedly to and fro within four inches of the ground, and pouring forth that maddening caterwauling which they call music, my heart goes back to the old days of the patriarchs and I behold the pride of Canaan and the hope of the world—Israel the blest!

We could not stop to rest two or three hours out from our camp, of course, albeit the brook was beside us. So we went on an hour longer. We saw water, then, but nowhere in all the waste around was there a foot of shade, and we were scorching to death. "Like unto the shadow of a great rock in a weary land." Nothing in the Bible is more beautiful than that, and surely there is no place we have wandered to that is able to give it such touching expression as this blistering, naked, treeless land.

Here you don't stop just when you please, but when you can. We found water, but no shade. We travelled on and found a tree at last, but no water. We rested and lunched, and came on to this place, Ain Mellahah (Williamsburgh.) It was a very short day's run, but the dragoman don't want to go further, and has gotten up a plausible lie about the country beyond this being infested by ferocious Arabs, who would make sleeping in their midst a dangerous pastime. Well, they ought to be dangerous. They carry a rusty old weather-beaten flint-lock gun, with a barrel that is longer than themselves; it has no sights on it; it will not carry farther than a brick-bat, and is not half so certain. And the great sash they wear in many a fold around their waists has two or three absurd old horse-pistols in it that are rusty from eternal disuse—weapons that would hang fire just about long enough for you to walk out of range, and then burst and blow the Arab's head off. Exceedingly dangerous these sons of the Desert are.

And yet, how they do remind one of the former glory of Israel! They live in tents of the rudest possible pattern, made of matting in localities where the materials are plenty, and of coarse black cloth elsewhere. They are so like the cheerful children of Benjamin, and Judah, and Exodus, and all those old parties of the elder days. These latter borrowed all the jewelry their loving and trusting bosom friends had, the night before they ~~possessed~~ the Egyptian ranch, and it is not stated that they ever sent any of it back again—forgot it, likely—and these sweet-scented sons of the desert around us would waltz through this camp, if we kept no watch, and leave us neither food or raiment or horses, or a sign of the wherewithal to purchase more and save our bodies from perishing. How pleasant it is to read the stirring narratives of the old Scriptures, and revel in these scenes of the ancient patriarchal times!

MARK TWAIN.