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LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

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The Waters of Merom—Ancient Battles—An Old Prophecy Fulfilled—An Ancient Story Modernized—A Dramatic Chapter with a Thrilling Denouement—Etc.

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A Famous Locality.

All this valley of the Waters of Merom is historical. The localities about it are familiar to readers of the Old Testament and the New. A Minie rifle-shot from our camp is the lake that is called the Waters of Merom. Above its north end is Dan; from its south end flows the Jordan, some fifteen or eighteen miles, and empties into the sea of Galilee. The borders of that little sea were the home of Christ for three years; there he performed most of his miracles, and not a rod of ground exists about it but was pressed by his feet.

About fifteen hundred years before Christ, this camp ground of ours by the Waters of Merom was the scene of one of Joshua's exterminating battles. Jabin, King of Hazor (up yonder above Dan), called all the sheiks about him together, with their hosts, to make ready for Israel's terrible General who was approaching.

"And when all these Kings were met together, they came and pitched together by the Waters of Merom, to fight against Israel."

"And they went out, they and all their hosts with them, much people, even as the sand that is upon the sea shore for multitude," etc. [There were probably about ten thousand—there is hardly country enough in all the land around here to support more, with their families, but still "much people" is a good figure.]

But Joshua fell upon them and utterly destroyed them, root and branch. That was his usual policy in war. He never left any chance for newspaper controversies about who won the battle. He made this valley, so quiet now, a reeking slaughter-pen.

Somewhere in this part of the country—I do not know exactly where—Israel fought another bloody battle a hundred years later. Deborah, the prophetess, told General Barak to take ten thousand men and sally forth against another King Jabin who had been doing something, I suppose. Barak came down from Mount Tabor, twenty or twenty-five miles from here, and gave battle to Jabin's forces, who were in command of one Sisera, who could not have been more than a Brigadier General—I never heard of him before. Barak won the fight, and while he was making the victory complete by the usual method of exterminating the remnant of the defeated host, Sisera fled away on foot, and when he was nearly exhausted by fatigue and thirst, one Jael, a woman he seems to have been acquainted with, invited him to come into her tent and rest himself. The weary soldier acceded readily enough, and Jael put him to bed. He said he was very thirsty, and asked his generous preserver to get him a cup of water. So she went out. Presently when he was asleep she came softly in with a hammer and drove a hideous tent-pin down through his brain! It was very funny. The gentle children of Israel, the race beloved, were full of amusing eccentricities.

Stirring scenes like these occur in this valley no more. There is not a solitary village throughout its whole extent—not for thirty miles in either direction. There are two or three small clusters of Bedouin tents, but not a single permanent habitation. One may ride ten miles, hereabouts, and not see ten human beings.

To this region one of the prophecies is applied: "I will bring the land into desolation; and your enemies which dwell therein shall be astonished at it. And I will scatter you among the heathen, and I will draw out a sword after you; and your land shall be desolate and your cities waste." No man can stand here in deserted Williamsburgh and say the prophecy has not been fulfilled.

The Story of Joseph.

Without changing my date, I will observe that we have traversed some miles of desolate country, whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds—a silent, mournful expanse, wherein we saw only three persons—Arabs with nothing on but a coarse shirt. Shepherds, they were, and they charmed their flocks with the traditional shepherd's pipe—a reed instrument that made music as exquisitely infernal as these same Arabs create when they sing. I wonder if it was to this kind of recollections the angels brought tidings that a Saviour was born? It rather staggers me to believe it. We have traversed this solitude, and are resting now at Joseph's Pit. This is a ruined Khan of the Middle Ages, in one of whose side courts is a great walled and arched pit with water in it, and this pit, one tradition says, is the one Joseph's brethren cast him into. A more authentic tradition, aided by the geography of the country, places the pit in Dethan, some two days journey from here. However, since there are many who believe in this present pit as the true one, it has its interest. I suppose your readers are very rusty about the history of Joseph. It is my duty to recount it:

Joseph had eleven brethren and a father, making twelve in all. He is dead now. Joseph was the youngest but one, and the best beloved. So well beloved was he that his father gave him a coat of many colors. They went a good deal on coats of many colors in those days. Joseph was only a thoughtless lad of seventeen, and that coat corralled his sympathies. He used to swell around and put on many frills among his brethren; inasmuch that they reasoned among themselves, and said: "As Jacob, our father, liveth, there is too much style about this upstart. For, behold, even before these days were they down upon him."

Not satisfied with having a coat of many colors, Joseph proceeded to further atrocities and began to dream dreams. And he had a fashion of interpreting them in a way that was very comforting to himself—in a way that seemed to foreshadow that he would one day be exalted high above his father Jacob and his other brethren. These things made the wrath of the eleven to increase by many fold, and in a greater degree than ever were they down upon him.

In the fullness of time Jacob sent his sons away up in the north country to pasture their flocks, and by and by the mails got irregular and he wondered if anything was the matter, because of his not hearing from them. So he sent Joseph to look into the matter, and, just like a boy, he started off through that vilest, rockiest, dustiest country in Asia, tricked out in his rotting, dustiest, gotten-up regardless of expense—arrayed in the pride of his heart, his beautiful claw-hammer coat of many colors.

When the other boys saw him coming they said: "Lo, here is the dreamer—let us kill him." But Reuben pleaded with tender eloquence for his innocent brother, and said: "O, pity him!" Wherefore they pitted him in here in this place, even to this day. And here it will remain until the next detachment of image-breakers and tomb-desecrators arrives from the Quaker City excursion, and they will infallibly dig it up and carry it away with them. For behold in them is no reverence for the solemn monuments of the past, and whithersoever they go they destroy and spare not. Then the brethren sold Joseph to some Ishmaelites, at the ruling rates, ten per cent. off for cash, and dabbled his coat in the blood of a kid and sent it to their father, who rent his garments and believed that his boy, the jewel of his heart and the joy of his old age, was gone from him to return no more forever.

The Ishmaelites took Joseph into Egypt, and sold him to Potiphar, an officer of the King's household, and lost money on him, which served them right. Joseph became foreman of Potiphar's affairs and prospered greatly. He had the run of the whole establishment, and was trusted to the utmost. He got into trouble with Potiphar's wife at last, and both gave in their versions of the affair, but the lady's was plausible and Joseph's was most outrageously shaky. So they threw him into prison and he staid there two years. He got to eating too much again, and consequently he got to dreaming. The same was the case with the other prisoners. They all wanted their dreams interpreted. This was Joseph's strong suit. The interpretations proved correct. This came to Pharaoh's ears, after a while, and, most luckily, just at the time when he had had a couple of curious dreams himself and had run so short of dreaming material that he dreamt them over again, which astonished him. Joseph enlightened him. He said, "Sire, your dreams signify that there are going to be seven years of extraordinary plenty in Egypt, and they will be followed by a howling famine that will distress the whole world for full seven years." Then he closed one eye and looked exceedingly shrewd out of the other, after the manner of a man who knoweth that which he is about, and said, "Behold, thou and thy servant can gather together divers and sundry shekels out of this thing—let us bear the market and buy against the season of famine." And Pharaoh said, "I perceive that thou art not of them that know not to come in when it doth rain; behold, it shall be even as thou sayest."

Wherefore he made Joseph ruler over all the land of Egypt, and gave unto him chariots and horses, and servants to wait upon him; and clothed him in sumptuous garments whereunto the coat of many colors was not so much as a circumstance. Then did Joseph show what manner of man he was. He beared the market and bought all the corn that was to be raised in Egypt for seven years to come, and stored it away. And when the first year of the famine was approaching he bought again at six months, buyer's option, and surprised the boys very greatly, for when he called his stocks they could not deliver. In that day many a man sold short and Joseph had them on the hip, and their names were posted and they forfeited their seats in the Board. And during all those years of famine, ships came from far countries that were in distress, and lo, the corn that Joseph bought at forty cents he sold it unto them at seven dollars and a half. Before a time and a half or two Pharaoh owned about two-thirds of Egypt; and it is estimated that if Pharaoh could have dreamed one more dream and got Joseph to interpret it, they would have shortly owned the balance of it.

By and by Jacob sent ten of his sons down to Egypt to buy corn. Joseph knew them, but never let on. He called them spies, and blackguarded them until he thought he had about got even with them for selling him out, and then he sold them corn, hid their money in their sacks, and sent them home. But he held on to Simeon, and bound him. He appeared to have a special grudge against Simeon. He said he would hold on to Simeon and crowd him all the while, until they brought down Benjamin, the one they had left home. So he made it lively for Simeon.

Jacob was sore distressed when he heard the news, but as the boys had only brought one sack of corn apiece after travelling all the way to Egypt, they necessarily ran out shortly and were morally obliged to go again. Jacob nerved his heart and parted with his young boy.

The brethren saw Joseph again, and again he knew them, but said no word. They got their corn and went away, but once more they got into trouble. Young Benjamin, with the artless simplicity of youth, nipped a silver cup, and the servant of Joseph found it in his sack. Then there was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. They had to go back, though, to the palace, and then came the climax of Joseph's stirring drama! While the sorrowing strangers stood with bowed heads before the mighty lord of Egypt, he fell upon Benjamin's neck and cried: "Ha! the long-lost brother! upon your left arm!—it is I! it is my long-lost brother!" [Slow music.]

Forgiven, and the past forgotten, the brethren of Joseph rejoiced with a joy they had never known before. A feast was spread, and, surrounded by the grandeur of princely Egypt, they partook of the squarest meal that had passed their lips since the day that the famine came upon the land. Let us draw the curtain over this sacred family blow-out. It was splendid, and cordial, and never cost the brethren a cent.

One day old Jacob lifted up his eyes and saw a caravan winding its long line over the hills—a caravan like unto the caravans that bear princes and their goods. And when it was come nigh, behold his sons were with it, and they said, "These are for thee; for lo, Joseph thy son liveth, and is lord over all the land of Egypt!" The joy of Jacob, and the words that he spoke, are they not written in the chronicles of the book that is called Genesis? So Jacob went down into the land of Egypt, and tripped and fell upon Joseph's neck; but Joseph caught him all right, and said, "Go slow, Governor!" and from that hour the happiness of Jacob was complete. Through Joseph, he and his sons were honored in the land all their days; and they prospered mightily, and never know sorrow any more.

So ends the story of Joseph—the most touching and beautiful, and also the most dramatic, in the Old Testament. Of all the patriarchs, Joseph was the noblest. In his perfect character one can find no flaw. From his boyhood onward to the day of his death, he was both great and good. At one time or another of their lives, the other patriarchs did things that were not entirely creditable, but Joseph's record was clear from the beginning even unto the end.

I will go down into this gloomy pit his brethren cast him into thirty-five hundred years ago, and drink to his honored memory a cup of its waters mingled with certain drops of the curious cordial I have brought hither from the strange lands that are beyond the sea.

MARK TWAIN.