

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

[Number Thirty-Five.]

Tiberia and Tahoe--An Accursed Land-- Agricultural Capabilities of Palestine-- Its Smallness--A Sacred Locality.

CAPERNAUM, September, 1867.

Unpoetical Scenery--Famous Holy Places.

The celebrated Sea of Galilee is not so large a sea as Lake Tahoe by a good deal—it is just about two-thirds as large. And when you speak of beauty, this sea is no more to be compared to Tahoe than a meridian of longitude is to a rainbow. The dim waters of this puddle cannot suggest the limpid brilliancy of Tahoe; those low, shaven, yellow hillocks of rocks and sand, so devoid of perspective, cannot suggest the grand peaks that compass Tahoe like a wall, and whose ribbed and chamed fronts are clad with stately pines that seem to grow small and smaller as they climb, till one might fancy them reduced to weeds and shrubs far upward, where they join the everlasting snows. Silence and solitude brood over Tahoe; and silence and solitude brood also over this lake of Genesaret. But the solitude of the one is as cheerful and fascinating as the solitude of the other is dismal and repulsive.

In the early morning one watches the silent battle of dawn and darkness upon the waters of Tahoe with a placid interest; but when the shadows sulk away and one by one the hidden beauties of the shore unfold themselves, in the full splendor of noon, when the still surface is belted like a rainbow with broad bars of blue and green and white, half the distance from the circumference to centre; when, in lazy summer afternoons, one lies in a boat, far out to where the dead blue of the deep water begins, and smokes the pipe of peace and idly winks at the distant peaks and patches of snow from under his cap brim; when the boat drifts shoreward to the white water, and one loafs over the gunwale and gazes by the hour down through the crystal depths and notes the colors of the pebbles and averages the spots upon the school of trout a hundred feet below; when at night he sees moon and stars, mountain ridges feathered with pines, jutting white capes, bald promontories, grand sweeps of rugged scenery topped with bald, glimmering peaks, all magnificently pictured in the polished mirror of the lake, in richest, softest detail, the tranquil interest that was born with the morning deepens and deepens, by sure degrees, till it culminates at last in resistless fascination.

It is solitude, for birds and squirrels on the shore and fishes in the water are all the creatures that are near to make it otherwise, but it is not the sort of solitude to make one dreary. Come to Galilee for that. If these unpeopled deserts, these rusty mounds of barrenness, that never, never, never do shake the glare from their harsh outlines, and fade and faint into vague perspective; this melancholy ruin of Capernaum; that stupid village of Tiberias, slumbering under its three or four funeral plumes of palm trees; yonder desolate declivity where the swine of the miracle ran down into the sea, and doubtless thought it was better to swallow a devil or two and get drowned into the bargain than have to live longer in such a place; this cloudless, blistering sky; this solemn, sallow, tintless lake, reposing within its rim of yellow hills and low, steep banks, and looking just as expressionless and unpoetical (when you leave its sublime history out of the question,) as any bath-tub on earth—if these things are not food for rock me to sleep mother, none exist, I think; if they do not make an exquisitely dismal solitude, I am not able to conceive what it is that is lacking.

They say the land is accursed; I don't think there can be any shadow of a doubt about that. And it was about as responsible a piece of cursing as ever was done, too, I take it. I am strong, very strong, in the doctrine that it was cursed. And also inclined a little to the suspicion that the curse dates from the morning of creation. It looks most uncommonly like it. I do not see any more reason to think there was ever any soil on these hills and in these deserts than I do that there was ever soil in the deserts and on the hills of Washoe. In the short valley we have left behind us, and on the table lands above and just beyond Tiberias, and here in the little plain of Genesaret, there are very respectable expanses of land that would be called rich anywhere—but the deserts sadly oversize the arable sections. This country reminds me of Washoe all the time. Take Washoe Valley, and you have this Valley of the Sources of the Jordan; take Washoe Lake and you have the Waters of Merom exactly; take the swamps that border it and you have the dwelling-place of the Bedouin, goat surround the picture, and strip them of every tree, every shrub, and batter from their outlines every semblance of grace and beauty, and you have the mountains that border Merom—in a word, you have the country to perfection that comes down from Cesarea Phillippi to the Sea of Galilee. They say it is a most favorable specimen of Palestine. If it is a favorable specimen of Palestine, surely Palestine is Washoe's born mate. I have thought over such information as I could get, and ciphered it down, and as nearly as I can come at it, there is really as much good farming land in Washoe as there is in Palestine. It astounds me, but I am sure the figures are correct. It begins to make me a little shaky about Silverland. I don't make me a little shaky about Silverland. I don't make me a little shaky about Silverland. I don't make me a little shaky about Silverland.

What put this figuring into my head was the apparent infertility of Syria. The idea suggested was, that if Palestine was a similar country, how did it support six millions of people in ancient times? How could Washoe do it? As nearly as one can come at it, Washoe is six times as large as Palestine, and California is twelve times as large. Now I have got it reduced to the plainest proposition in the world, viz, if Washoe, with her agricultural facilities, could support 36,000,000 persons, the present population of the United States, then I know that, industriously cultivated, Palestine could really support the 6,000,000 attributed to her in old times. And if California, (supposing she were as barren and rocky and sandy as Palestine,) could support 72,000,000 of people, the same being the population of the vast Russian Empire, which covers a seventh part of the habitable globe, then there would be no question in my mind that little Palestine *did* support a swarm of 6,000,000 human beings in the olden time. Just at present, though, it don't look promising to me. The land must have been blessed much harder then than ever it was cursed afterwards.

One of the most astonishing things that have yet fallen under my observation is the exceedingly small portion of the earth from which sprang the now flourishing plant of Christianity. The longest journey our Saviour ever performed was from here to Jerusalem—say 150 miles—about as far as from Sacramento to Carson City, I should judge. The next longest was from here to Sidon—say about forty miles. Instead of being wide apart—as American appreciation of distances would naturally suggest—the places made so celebrated by the presence of Christ are nearly all right here in full view, and within cannon-shot of the spot where we are camped. Leaving out two or three short journeys of the Saviour, he spent his life, preached his gospel and performed his miracles within a compass no larger than an ordinary county in the United States. It is as much as I can do to get this stupefying fact through my head. Now you can imagine how it wears a man out to have to read up a hundred pages of history every two or three miles—for verily the celebrated localities of Palestine occur that close together. You cannot imagine how wearily, how bewilderingly they swarm about your path.

Historical.

Something more than eighteen hundred years ago, the Saviour was born in Bethlehem of Judea, and his parents came and dwelt in the insignificant village of Nazareth, fifteen or twenty miles from here.

In this town of Capernaum, where we are, he began to tell the people of the new religion that he had brought unto the world, and also to heal the sick. There was a man here by the name of Jairus, whose daughter lay dead in his house. The Saviour entered and spoke to her and she rose up alive. Peter's wife's mother lay sick of a fever and he cured her with a touch. He also cured the servant of the centurion without even going near him. If they brought a blind man to him, he merely spoke and the man opened his eyes and saw. Many and many and many a cripple hobbled hither from the country round about here, and when he looked upon them they got upon their feet and walked whithersoever they would. He performed all measures of miracles, and his fame spread abroad in the land.

He gathered together some disciples, from this place and from one or two of the towns a rifle-shot from here, and bade them leave off fishing and go about the land and preach. Once when himself and some of these disciples were out on the lake here in a boat, a heavy storm arose and the disciples were frightened and took in their sails and woke him trembling. But he spoke to the winds and the waves and they went peacefully to rest.

But the most notable event happened yonder close to Bethsaida. There were fed the five thousand with five loaves and two little fishes. Only five and two for five thousand.

MARK TWAIN.

[NOTE BY THE EDITORS.—We have received a private letter from our correspondent, in which we expected some explanation of his strange conduct in presenting the above information to the public with such a confident air of furnishing news, but he offers none. He does not refer to the subject of the letter at all, except in the postscript, and then only to mention casually that he has inserted nothing in it but what can be substantiated.]