

# THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

## LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

(SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.)

[Number Thirty-Six.]

### At the Sea of Galilee---Enthusiasm of the Pilgrims---A Bitter Disappointment---Fine Arts and Magdalen---Syrian Architecture---Extraordinary Reception of the Pilgrims---Mary Magdalen's House.

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#### Pious Enthusiasm of the Pilgrims.

At noon we took a swim in the Sea of Galilee—a blessed privilege in this roasting climate—and then lunched under a neglected old fig tree at the fountain they call Ain-et-Tin. As I have remarked before, every trifling rivulet that gurgles out of the rocks and sands of Palestine is dignified with the title of "fountain," and lunatics familiar with the Hudson, the great lakes and the Mississippi fall into transports of admiration over them, and exhaust their powers of composition in writing their praises. If all the poetry and nonsense that have been discharged upon the fountains and the bland scenery of Palestine were collected in a book it would make a most valuable volume to burn.

During luncheon, the pilgrim enthusiasts of our party, who had been so wild with religious ecstasy ever since they touched holy ground that they did nothing but mutter incoherent rhapsodies about how wonderful is prophecy, and that sort of thing, could scarcely eat, so anxious were they to "take shipping" and sail in very person upon the waters that had borne the vessels of the Apostles and upheld the sacred feet of the Saviour. I thought they cherished a sort of vague notion that a fervor such as theirs might peradventure earn for them a little private miracle of some kind or other to talk about when they got home. Their anxiety grew and their excitement augmented with every fleeting moment, until my fears were aroused and I began to have misgivings that in their present condition they might break recklessly loose from all considerations of prudence and buy a whole fleet of ships to sail in instead of hiring a single one for an hour, as quiet folk are wont to do. I trembled to think of the ruined purses this day's performances might result in. Never before had I known them to lose their self-possession when a question of expenses was before the tribe, and now I could not help reflecting bodingly upon the intemperate zeal with which middle-aged men are apt to surfeit themselves upon a seductive folly which they have tasted for the first time. And, yet, I did not feel that I had a right to be surprised at the state of things which was giving me so much concern. These men had been taught from infancy to revere, almost to worship, the holy places whereon their happy eyes were resting now. For many and many a year this very picture had visited their thoughts by day and floated through their dreams by night. To stand before it in the flesh—to see it as they saw it now—to sail upon the hallowed sea, and kiss the holy soil that compassed it about; these were aspirations they had cherished while a generation dragged its lagging seasons by and left its furrows in their faces and its frosts upon their hair. To look upon this picture, and sail upon this sea, they had forsaken home and its idols and journeyed thousands and thousands of miles, in weariness and tribulation. What wonder that the sordid lights of work-day prudence should pale before the glory of a hope like theirs in the full splendor of its fruition? Let them squander millions! I said—who speaks of money at a time like this?

Ab, Me!

In this frame of mind I followed, as fast as I could, the eager footsteps of the pilgrims, and stood upon the shore of the lake, and swelled, with hat and voice, the frantic hail they sent after the "ship" that was speeding by. It was a success. The toilers of the sea ran in and beached their barque. Joy sat upon every countenance.

"How much?—ask him how much, Abraham!—how much to take us all—eight of us, and you—to Bethsaida, yonder, and to the mouth of Jordan, and to the place where the swine ran down into the sea—quick!—and we want to coast around everywhere—everywhere!—all day long!—I could sail a year in these blessed waters!—and tell him we'll stop at Masdala and finish at Tiberias!—ask him how much?—anything—anything whatever!—tell him we don't care what the expense is!" [I said to myself, I knew how it would be.]

ABRAHAM—(interpreting) "He says two Napoleons—eight dollars."

One or two countenances fell—no, matter whose.

"Too much!—we'll give him one!"

I never shall know how it was—I shudder yet when I think how the place is given to miracles—but in a single instant of time, as it seemed to me, that ship was twenty paces from the shore, and speeding away like a frightened thing! Eight crest-fallen creatures stood upon the shore, and this—this—after all that frenzied zeal, that overwhelming ecstasy! Oh, shameful, shameful ending, after such unseemly boasting! It was too much like "Hol let me at him!" followed by a prudent "Two of you hold him—one can hold me!"

Instantly there was wailing and gnashing of teeth in the camp. The two Napoleons were offered—more if necessary—and pilgrims and dragoman shouted themselves hoarse with pleadings to the retreating boatmen to come back. But they sailed serenely away and paid no further heed to pilgrims who had dreamed all their lives of some day skimming over the sacred waters of Galilee and listening to its hallowed story in the whisperings of its waves, and had journeyed countless leagues to do it, and—then concluded they had better not, because it would cost a dollar apiece! Impertinent Mahomedan Arabs, to think such things of gentlemen of another faith!

Well, there was nothing to do but just submit and forego the privilege of voyaging on Genesaret, after coming half around the globe to taste that pleasure. There was a time, when the Saviour taught here, that boats were plenty among the fishermen of the coasts—but boats and fishermen both are gone, now; and old Josephus had a fleet of men-of-war in these waters eighteen centuries ago—a hundred and thirty bold canoes—but they, also, have passed away and left no sign. They battle here no more by sea, and the commercial marine of Galilee numbers only two small ships, just of a pattern with the little skiffs the disciples knew. One was lost to us for good—the other was miles away and far out of hail. So we mounted the horses and rode grimly on toward Magdala, cantering along in the edge of the water for want of the means of passing over it.

How the pilgrims abused each other! Each said it was the other's fault, and each in turn denied it. No word was spoken by the sinners—even the mildest sarcasm might have been dangerous at such a time. Sinners that have been kept down and had examples held up to them, and suffered frequent lectures, and been so put upon in a moral way and in the matter of going slow and being serious and bottling up slang, and so crowded in regard to the matter of being proper and always and forever behaving, that their lives have become a burden to them, would not lag behind pilgrims at such a time as this, and wink furtively, and be joyful, and commit other such crimes, because it wouldn't occur to them to do it. Otherwise they would.

So we all rode down to Magdala, while the gnashing of teeth waxed and waned by turns, and harsh words troubled the holy calm of Galilee.

#### Curious Specimens of Art and Architecture.

Magdala is not a beautiful place. It is thoroughly Syrian, and that is to say that it is thoroughly ugly, and cramped, squalid, uncomfortable and filthy—just the style of cities that have adorned Palestine since Jacob's time, as all writers have labored hard to prove, and have succeeded. The streets of Magdala are anywhere from three to six feet wide, and reeking with uncleanness. The houses are from five to seven feet high, and all built upon one arbitrary plan—the ungraceful form of a dry-goods box. The sides are daubed with a smooth white plaster, and tastefully frescoed aloft and arow with disks of camel-dung placed there to dry. This gives the edifice the romantic appearance of having been riddled with cannon-balls, and imparts to it a very pleasing effect. When the artist has arranged his materials with an eye to just proportion—the small and the large flakes in alternate rows—and separated by carefully-considered intervals—I know of nothing more cheerful to look upon than a spirited Syrian fresco. Nothing in this world has such a charm for me as to stand and gaze for hours and hours upon the inspired works of these old masters. I have seen the *chef d'oeuvre* of Verne, Tintoretto, Titian and a host of others whose fame is known in every land, but few of them ever affected me like the battle-pieces of these nameless sons of Art. Yet who speaks of them? No one. Book-makers swarm through the galleries of Europe, and lavish praises with untiring lips; they invade the Holy Land and prate of temples that are gone and statues that never had a being; they find it glorify it—but never a page have they given to Syrian fresco. Like the lost art of painting on glass, it will pass from the knowledge of men, and then, too late, the world will mourn.

But I digress. The flat, plastered roof of the Syrian dwelling is garnished by picturesque stacks of fresco materials, which, having become thoroughly dried and cured, are placed there where it will be convenient. It is used for fuel. There is no timber of any consequence in Palestine—none at all to waste upon fires—and neither are there any mines of coal. If my description has been intelligible, you will perceive, now, that a square, flat-roofed hovel, neatly frescoed, with its wall-tops gallantly bastioned and turreted with dried camel refuse, gives to a landscape a feature that is exceedingly festive and picturesque, especially if one is careful to remember to stick in a cat wherever about the premises, there is room for a cat to sit. There are no windows to a Syrian hut, and no chimneys. When I used to read that they let a bed-chamber man down through the roof of a house to get him into the presence of the Saviour, I generally had a three-story brick in my mind, and marvelled that they did not break his neck with the strange experiment. I perceive now, however, that they might have taken him by the heels and thrown him clear over the house without discommoding him very much. Palestine is not changed any since those days, in manners, customs, architecture or people.

#### Public Reception of the Pilgrims.

As we rode into Magdala not a soul was visible. But the ring of the horses' hoofs roused the stupid population, and they all came trooping out—old men and old women, boys and girls, the blind, the crazy and the crippled, all in ragged, soiled and scanty raiment, and all abject beggars by nature, instinct and education. How the vermin-tortured vagabonds did swarm! How they showed their scars and sores, and piteously pointed to their maimed and crooked limbs, and begged with their pleading eyes for charity! We had invoked a spirit we could not lay. They hung to the horses' tails, clung to their manes and the stirrups, closed in on every side in scorn of dangerous hoofs—and out of their infidel throats with one accord, burst an agonizing and most infernal chorus: "Howjji, bucksheesh! howjji, bucksheesh! howjji, bucksheesh! howjji, bucksheesh! howjji, bucksheesh! howjji, bucksheesh!" I never was in a storm like that before.

#### Mary Magdalene's House.

As we paid the bucksheesh out to sore-eyed children and brown, buxom girls with repulsively tattooed lips and chins, we filed through the town and by many an exquisite fresco by some unspan Syrian Verne, till we came to a bramble-infested inclosure and a Roman-looking ruin which was the veritable dwelling of St. Mary Magdalene, the friend and follower of Jesus. The guide believed it, and so did I. I could not well do otherwise, with the house right there before my eyes as plain as day. The pilgrims took down portions of the front wall for specimens, as is their honored custom, and then we departed. There was nothing else in Magdala to see—nothing else save treasures of art. We had no catalogue. We journeyed on.

We are camped in this place, now, just within the city walls of Tiberias. We went into the town before nightfall and looked at its people—we cared nothing about its houses. Its people are best examined at a distance. They are greasy Jews, Arabs and negroes. Squalor and poverty are the pride of Tiberias. The young women wear their dower strung upon a strong wire that curves downward from the top of the head to the jaw—Turkish silver coins that they have raked together or inherited. Most of these maidens were not wealthy, but some few had been very kindly dealt with by fortune. I saw heiresses there worth, in their own

right—worth, well, I suppose I might venture to say, as much as nine dollars and a half. But such cases are rare. When you come across one of these, she naturally puts on airs. She won't ask for bucksheesh. She won't even permit of undue familiarity. She throws herself on her dignity and goes on serenely prospecting with her fine-tooth comb and quoting poetry just the same as if you were not present at all. Some people can't stand prosperity.

They say that the long-nosed, lanky, dyspeptic-looking body-snatchers, with the indescribable hats on, and a long curl dangling down in front of each ear, are the old, regular, self-righteous Pharisees we read of in the Scriptures. Verily, they look it. Judging merely by their general gait, and without other evidence, one might easily suspect that self-righteousness was their strong suit.

From various authorities I have culled information concerning Tiberias. It was built by Herod Antipas, the murderer of John the Baptist, and named after the Emperor Tiberias. It is believed that it stands upon the site of what must have been, ages ago, a city of considerable architectural pretensions, judging by the fine porphyry pillars that are scattered through Tiberias and down the lake shore southward. These were fluted, once, and yet, although the stone is about as hard as iron, the flutings are almost worn away. This modern town—Tiberias—is only mentioned in the New Testament; never in the Old.

The Sanhedrim met here last, and for three hundred years it was the metropolis of the Jews in Palestine. It is one of the four holy cities of the Israelites, and is to them what Mecca is to the Mohammedan and Jerusalem to the Christian. It has been the abiding place of many learned and famous Jewish rabbins. They lie buried here, and near them lie also 25,000 of their faith who travelled far to be near them while they lived and lie with them when they died. The great Rabbi Ben Israel spent three years here in the early part of the third century. He is dead, now.

The metaphors of the Bible have to me an aptness and a significance now that they never possessed before. I never knew but one poem by heart in my life—it was impressed upon my mind at school by the usual process, a trifle emphasized. I even discover a new excellence in that poem now as I look out upon the still sea of Galilee and mark how these multitudes of strangely lustrous stars fling their counterfeit upon it and gem the whole broad surface with their glittering splendor:

"And the sheen of his spear was like  
Stars on the sea,  
When the blue wave rolls  
Nightly on deep Galilee."

I see the long files of burnished spear-heads stretching, rank upon rank, far away till they are lost in the mists that brood over the further shore.

The pilgrims are gone to rest, but they did not sail on Galilee. Let us not exult, but let us rather endeavor to be blandly sorrowful.

MARK TWAIN.