

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

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A View from Mount Tabor—The Plain of Esdrael—An Old Story Modernized—The Palestine of To-day—A Bit of a Moral.

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Mount Tabor.

We got to Tabor safely, and considerably in advance of that old iron-clad swindle of a guard. We never saw a human being on the whole route, much less lawless hordes of Bedouins. Tabor stands solitary and alone; a giant sentinel above the Plain of Esdrael. It rises some 1400 feet above the surrounding level, a green, wooded cone, symmetrical and full of grace—a prominent landmark, and one that is exceedingly pleasant to eyes weary of the repulsive monotony of desert Syria. We climbed the steep path to its summit, through breezy glades of thorn and oak. The view presented from its highest peak was almost beautiful. Below, was the broad, level plain of Esdrael, checkered with fields like a chess-board, and full as smooth and level, seemingly dotted about its borders with white, compact villages, and faintly pencilled, far and near, with the curving lines of roads and trails. When it is robed in the fresh verdure of spring, it must form a charming picture, even by itself. Skirting its southern border rises "Little Hermon," over whose summit a glimpse of Gilboa is caught. Nain, famous for the raising of the widow's son, and Endor, as famous for the performances of her witch, are in view. To the eastward lies the Valley of the Jordan and beyond it the mountains of Gilead. Westward is Mount Carmel. Snow-touched Hermon in the north—the table-lands of Bashan—Safed, the holy city, gleaming white upon a tall spur of the mountains of Lebanon—a steel-blue corner of the Sea of Galilee—saddle-peaked Hattin, the traditional "Mount of Beatitudes" and the mute witness of the last brave fight of the Crusading host for Holy Cross—these fill up the picture.

To glance at the salient features of this landscape through the picturesque framework of a ragged and ruined stone window-arch of the time of Christ, thus hiding from sight all that is unattractive, is to secure to yourself a pleasure worth climbing the mountain to enjoy. One must stand on his head to get the best effect in a fine sunset, and set a landscape in a bold, strong framework that is very close at hand, to bring out all its beauty. One learns this latter truth never more to forget it, in that mimic land of enchantment, the wonderful garden of my lord the Count Pallavicini, near Genoa. You go wandering for hours among hills and wooded glens, artfully contrived to leave the impression that Nature shaped them and not man; following winding paths and coming suddenly upon leaping cascades and rustic bridges; finding sylvan lakes where you expected them not; loitering through battered mediæval castles in miniature that seem hoary with age and yet were built a dozen years ago; meditating over ancient crumbling tombs, whose marble columns were marred and broken by the modern artist that made them; stumbling unawares upon toy palaces, wrought of rare and costly materials, and again upon a peasant's hut, whose dilapidated furniture can never suggest that it was made so to order; sweeping round and round in the midst of a forest on an enchanted wooden horse that is moved by some invisible agency; traversing Roman roads and passing under majestic triumphal arches; resting in quaint bowers where unseen spirits squirt jets of water on you from every possible direction, and where even the flowers you touch assail you with a shower; boating on a subterranean lake among caverns and arches royally draped with clustering stalactites, and passing out into open day upon another lake that is bordered with sloping banks of grass, and gay with royal barges that swim at anchor in the shadow of a miniature marble temple that rises out of the clear water and glazes its white statues, its rich capitals and fluted columns in the tranquil depths. So, from marvel to marvel you have drifted on; thinking all the time that the one last seen must be the chiefest. And, verily, the chiefest wonder is reserved until the last, but you do not see it until you step ashore, and passing through a wilderness of rare flowers; collected from every corner of the earth, you stand at the door of one more mimic temple. Right in this place the artist taxed his genius to the utmost, and fairly opened the gates of fairy land. You look through an unpretending pane of glass, stained yellow; the first thing you see is a mass of quivering foliage, ten short steps before you, in the midst of which is a ragged opening like a gateway—a thing that is common enough in nature, and not apt to excite suspicions of a deep human design—and above the bottom of the gateway perfect, in the most careless way, a few broad tropic leaves and brilliant flowers. All of a sudden, through this bright, bold gateway, you catch a glimpse of the faintest, softest, richest picture that ever graced the dream of a dying Saint, since John saw the New Jerusalem glimmering among the clouds of Heaven. A broad sweep of sea, flecked with careening sails; a sharp, jutting cape, and a lofty light house on it; a sloping lawn behind it; beyond, a portion of the old "city of palaces," with its parks and hills and stately mansions; beyond these, a prodigious mountain, with its strong outlines sharply cut against ocean and sky; and over all, varrant shreds and flakes of cloud, floating in a sea of gold. The ocean is gold, the city is gold, in the meadow, the mountain, the sky—everything is golden—rich, and mellow, and dreamy as a vision of Paradise. No artist could put upon canvas its entrancing beauty, and yet, without the yellow glass, and the carefully contrived accident of a frame-work that cast it into enchanted distance and shut out from it all unattractive features, it was not a picture to fall into ecstasies over. Such is life, and the trail of the serpent is over us all.

There is nothing for it now but to come back to old Tabor, though the subject is tiresome enough, and I cannot stick to it for wandering off to scenes that are pleasanter to remember. I think I will skip, anyhow. There is nothing about Tabor (except you concede that it was the scene of the Transfiguration,) but some rusty old ruins, stacked up there in all ages of the world from the days of General Gibeon and parties that flourished thirty centuries ago to the fresh yesterday of Crusading times. It has its Greek Convent, and the coffee there is good, but pever a splinter of the true cross or shin of a hallowed saint to arrest the idle thoughts of worldlings and turn them into graver channels. A church is nothing to me that has got no relics.

The plain of Esdrael—"the battle-field of the nations"—only sets one to dreaming of Joshua, and Benhadad, and Saul, and Gideon; Tamerlane, Tancréd, Courde Lion and Saladin; the warrior Kings of Persia, Egypt's heroes, and Napoleon. If the magic of the moonlight could summon from the graves of forgotten centuries and many lands the countless myriads that have battled on this wide, far-reaching floor, and array them in the thousand strange costumes of their hundred nationalities, and send the vast host sweeping down the plain, splendid with plumes and banners and glittering lances, I could stay here an age to see the phantom pageant. But the magic of the moonlight is a vanity and a swindle; and whose putteth his trust in it shall fare no better than he that betteth his substance upon "deuces and" when the thing the worldling calleth a flush is out against him.

The Home of the Prodigal Son.

Down at the foot of Tabor, and just at the edge of the storied Plain of Esdrael, is the wretched little insignificant village of Deburich, where Deborah, prophetess of Israel, lived. It is as much like Masdala as one Chinaman is like another, and therefore has its mud-hovels reeking with filth, copulous with cats and fleas, and seven kinds of lice, and hath also its strangely frescoed walls, and on its roofs the everlasting towers and turrets of ornamental ordure of beasts. As Deburich is now, so has it always been. Its men are lazy, its women are slovenly, its children have sore eyes. As in the days of old, the pensive youth, in curtailed shirt and naked shins, still breathes soft nothings in the ear of his adored, while she gathers her daily camel-dung and sorts it with a critical eye. I know, because I have seen the parties at it. Every day you see the young ladies of Palestine revelling in masses of the refuse of animals with their gentle hands and putting the treasure in baskets to be dried and used for fuel. I am susceptible, but even up to this very moment I have never taken what you might seriously regard as a shine to one of these young women. They are not fastidious enough for me. I may be too particular, but such is my bias, anyway.

However, I keep wandering from my subject, to-day, somehow. This Deburich is not handsome, but it is full of interest because of the fact that the Prodigal Son was born and raised here. His history is touching and suggestive. Few of your readers have ever heard of it, I suppose.

The Prodigal Son dwelt in the village of Deburich, ages and ages ago. His parents were very wealthy. They had three hundred goats, twelve camels, some donkeys and some horned cattle. Their mansion was like the mansion of a prince; and from its roof the fuel towered high aloft and filled the soul of every man with envy—yet, with admiration, likewise, and even hate, withal. In the mansion was there nothing lacking; there was a bowl and a spoon, and also a calabash. Yet were not these people proud. In that great mansion was room for the asses, and room for the men and room for the women-kind. All these things were before the Prodigal every day. From the days of his infancy naught knew he but luxury. He had two shirts that were his own—shirts that hung far-torn about his calves, and caused him to be admired by maidens, and even by the aged and the prophets. Elsewhere, in all the coasts of Galilee, was not another swell like unto him. When he passed by, all men bowed low, and said, Behold it is the rich man's son. He wrought not with his hands, yet every seventh day he ate of the broth of goat's meat and the luscious milk of asses. He lacked not anything that human heart could wish. But yet in elegant leisure and high living there is a bane that destroyeth happiness and maketh the cheerful spirit to droop. Wherefore, in the fulness of time, the Prodigal took to himself his share of his father's goods, and went away like many other foolish pilgrims, to travel and see strange lands that they know naught about, and are too stupid to learn.

So he journeyed to a far country and squandered his substance in riotous living. Strong drink betrayed his judgment, and in the end fell he a prey to the ravaging tiger.

Then went he to the Publican that erst had welcomed him with joy and gladness, and said, Behold, thy servant is naked and hungry, and penniless, and like to die with thirst; open thy gates, I pray thee. But the Publican laughed him to scorn, and said, Get thee to honest labor—put shekels in thy purse.

So he wrought in the field for a hard master, and fain would have eaten the husks wherewith he fed the swine. At last he said, I have seen the great world, and it is deceitful and fraught with sorrow. I will arise and go to my father. And when his father saw him afar off, he ran and fell upon his neck and kissed him, and said, Bring forth the fatted calf and kill it, for my son that was lost is found, and shoes upon his feet, and a ring upon his hand, and said, Let us feast and be merry. And when the Prodigal's brother heard these things, he said, I have labored for you faithfully, yet have you never given me a kid to make merry with my friends. And he liked it not.

I have said before, that a few days' sojourn in Syria and Palestine has given to Bible language a newer and fuller significance for me than it had before. I understand the Prodigal, now. They killed the fatted calf for him on this most momentous occasion that had ever happened in his father's family—showing that to have a fatted calf served up, was in all respects as grand a thing as a Champagne blow-out is with us to-day. These present citizens of Palestine would so regard it at the present time. It is precious few of them that have got a fatted calf among their riches, and precious few that ever taste so great a luxury. I never could comprehend before why the old party, the Prodigal's father, laid so much stress on the fatted calf. The subject hardly seemed to me to warrant such a flourish as he gave to it. It sounded too much like Who cares for expenses? and then squandering forty cents. But truly I perceive now that the old man came down, to the most gorgeous tune that was possible to his gamut.

And the brother complained that he had never been given a kid, so that he could have a princely revel with his friends. The young Palestine gen-

tleman of to-day fares no better. To give one of them a kid banquet would be to make him so airy and stuck up that there would be no such thing as living with him.

They gave the Prodigal "shoes"—worth a dollar and a half a thousand, and yet more indulged in by villagers who are inclined to put on a good deal of style than any other. And they clothed the Prodigal. Yet if they gave him more than one suit it was an event worth recording particularly. The beaux of Palestine can seldom afford much fine raiment. Shirts are a trifle scarce.

When I was in Sunday School I always regarded that Prodigal Son as the stupidest youth that ever lived, to go away from his father's palace where he had a dozen courses for dinner, and wore handsome clothes, and had fast horses, and dogs, and plenty of money to spend, and could go to the circus whenever he wanted to (I had an idea that this was a peculiar privilege of rich men's sons all the world over), and travel off to some strange land and get swamped and have to feed hogs for a living. But I always rejoiced to think he went back home again, and I took pleasure in thinking he must have appreciated its riches and its luxury so unspenkably then, I could not understand the fatted calf, but I never allowed him to interfere materially with the unities of my romance. But my dream is over, now. It was just about an even matter between the Prodigal's two homes. If he had had a shirt and something to eat when he was feeding swine, the difference between that place and his old home would not have paid for the trouble of the journey back again—save that one was *home* and the other was not.

MARK TWAIN.