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LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

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Travelling in Palestine—Arabs and Israelites— Nazareth and its Holy Places—Grottoes and Monkish Legends—Convenient Faith.

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Toward Nazareth.

We descended from Mount Tabor, crossed a deep ravine, and followed a hilly, rocky, villainous road to Nazareth—distant two hours. All distances in the east are measured by hours, not miles. A good horse will walk three miles an hour over nearly any kind of a road; therefore, an hour, here, always stands for three miles. This method of computation is bothersome and annoying; and until one gets thoroughly accustomed to it it seems to carry no intelligence to his mind until he has stopped and translated the pagan hours into Christian miles, just as people do with the spoken words of a foreign language they are acquainted with but not familiarly enough to catch the meaning in a moment. Distances travelled by human feet are also estimated by hours and minutes, though I do not know what the base of the calculation is. In Constantinople you ask "How far is it to the Consulate?" and they answer, "About ten minutes." "How far is it to the Lloyd's Agency?" "Quarter of an hour?" "How far is it to the lower bridge?" "Four minutes." I cannot be positive about it, but I think that there, when a man orders a pair of pantaloons, he says he wants them a quarter of a minute in the legs and nine seconds around the waist.

Two hours from Tabor to Nazareth—and as it was an uncommonly mean, narrow, crooked trail, we necessarily met all the camel trains and jackass caravans between Jericho and Jacksonville in that particular place and nowhere else. The donkeys do not matter so much, because they are so small you can jump your horse over them if he is an animal of spirit, but a camel is not jumpable. A camel is as tall as any ordinary dwelling house in Syria—which is to say a camel is from one to two, and sometimes nearly three feet taller than a good-sized man. In this part of the country his load is oftenest in the shape of colossal sacks—one on each side. He and his cargo take up as much room as a carriage. Think of meeting this style of obstruction in a narrow trail. The camel would not turn out for a King. He stalks serenely along, bringing his cushioned stilts forward with the long, regular swing of a pendulum, and whatever is in the way must get out of the way peaceably, or be wiped out forcibly by the bulky sacks. It was a tiresome ride to us, and perfectly exhausting to the horses. We were compelled to jump over upwards of eighteen hundred donkeys, and only one person in the party was unseated less than thirty-eight times by the camels. This seems like a powerful statement, but the poet has said "things are not what they seem." I cannot think of anything, now, more certain to make one shudder than to have a soft-footed camel sneak up behind him and touch him on the ear with its cold, flabby, hanging under-lip. A camel did this for one of the boys, who was drooping over his saddle in a brown study. He glanced up and saw the homely ostrich-head of the beast hovering above him, and made frantic efforts to get out of the way, but the camel reached out and bit him on the shoulder before he accomplished it. This was the only pleasant incident of the journey. It is soothing yet, to think of that majestic apparition sending Jack's heart to his boots with the touch of its clammy lips.

More Enlightenment.

We camped in an olive grove near the Virgin Mary's fountain, and that wonderful Arab "guard" came to collect some bucksheesh for his "services" in following us from Tiberias and warding off invisible dangers with the terrors of his armament. The dragoman had paid his master, but that counted as nothing—if you hire a man to smile on you, here, and another man chooses to help him, you have got to pay both. They do nothing whatever without pay. More Scriptural significance! How it must have astounded these vagrants to hear the way of salvation offered to them "without money and without price!" If the manners, the people or the customs of this country have changed in any respect since the Savior's time, the figures and metaphors of the Bible are not the evidences to prove it by. It is pretty safe, no doubt, to believe that from Abraham's time till now, Palestine has been peopled only with ignorant, degraded, lazy, unwashed loafers and savages. Arabs they were, they are, and always will be. Palestine would be part of Arabia but for an invisible boundary line that men have drawn on maps—God and nature have drawn no such lines. The countries are one, in that they breed people of like instincts, like customs, complexions, trains of thought and manners. The pure, unadulterated Arab nature crops out all through the Israelitish tribes of Old Testament history. The difference between a prowling varlet of an Arab of to-day and an Israelite of old amounts to nothing more, perhaps, than that you spell the nationality of the one with four letters and of the other with nine.

The City of Nazareth.

We paid the bucksheesh and discharged our gun-boat just at the very time that he might have begun to be useful, if it were possible for such an epoch as that to break the monotony of his worthless career. A glance at the population of Nazareth must surely suggest that a military escort would not be out of place here. Dirt and rags and squalor; vermin, hunger and wretchedness; savage costumes, savage weapons and looks of hate—these are the things that meet one at every step in Nazareth. Magdala is a miracle of barbarous degradation; Nazareth is worse. Here, numbers of the habitations are mere mud cones, like a magnified beehive; they have dirt floors of course; there is a small hole for entrance and exit, and this hole must do duty also as window and chimney; that there is room for a man to stretch out or stand up, inside, does not seem possible. Around the front of the bowl is a mangy pack of ragged, sore-eyed children, turbaned, dilapidated men, and scurvy women who a blessed instinct has taught to hide their criminal ugliness behind a veil, though even their bodies be not wholly concealed; all interstices among the group are filled with hungry dogs and cadaverous cats, and its circumference bounded by reclining camels and pensive donkeys. The streets are usually not wider than a double bed, and reek with an affluence of filth and abomination that surely cannot exist elsewhere unless it be in perdition itself. It would be foolish now to wonder that the ancients said, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" This is altogether the most unpromising place to expect a good thing to come from that occurs to my mind just now.

Grotto of the Annunciation.

We waded through, however, and entered the great Latin Convent which is built over the traditional dwelling place of the Holy Family. We went down a flight of fifteen steps below the ground level, and stood in a small chapel tricked out with tapestry hangings, silver lamps, and oil paintings. A spot marked by a cross, in the marble floor, under the altar, was exhibited as the place made forever holy by the feet of the Virgin when she stood up to receive the message of the angel. So simple, so unpretending a locality, to be the scene of so mighty an event! The very scene of the Annunciation—an event which has been commemorated by splendid shrines and august temples all over the civilized world, and one which the princes of art have made it their loftiest ambition to picture worthily on their canvas; a spot whose history is familiar to the very children of every house, and city, and obscure hamlet of the remotest lands of Christendom; a spot which myriads of men would toil across the breadth of a Continent to see—would consider it a priceless privilege to look upon. It was easy to think these thoughts. But it was not easy to bring myself up to the magnitude of the situation. I could sit off several thousand miles and imagine the angel appearing, with shadowy wings and lustrous countenance, and note the glory that streamed downward upon the Virgin's head while the message from the Throne of God fell upon her ears—one can do that, but few can do it here. I saw the little recess from which the angel stepped, but could not fill its void. The angels that I know are creatures of unstable fancy—they will not fit in niches of substantial stone. Imagination labors best in distant fields. I doubt if any man can stand in this Grotto of the Annunciation and people with the phantom images of his mind its too tangible walls of stone.

They showed us a broken granite pillar, depending from the roof, which they said was hacked in two by the Moslem conquerors of Nazareth, in the vain hope of pulling down the sanctuary. But the pillar remained miraculously suspended in the air, and, unsupported itself, supported them and still supports the roof. By dividing this statement up among eight, it was found not difficult to believe it. I could have believed the whole of it by myself, no doubt, if I had been well.

The "Grotto" Business.

Mind you, these gifted Latin monks never do anything by halves. If they were to show you the Brazen Serpent that was elevated in the wilderness, you could wager all you are worth that they had on hand the pole it was elevated on also, and even the hole it stood in. They have got the "Grotto" of the Annunciation here; and just as convenient to it as one's throat is to his mouth, they have got also the Virgin's Kitchen, and even her sitting-room, where she and Joseph watched the infant Savior play with Hebrew toys eighteen hundred years ago. All under one roof, and all clean, spacious, comfortable "grottoes." It seems funny that personages intimately connected with the Holy Family always lived in grottoes—in Nazareth, in Bethlehem, in imperial Ephesus—and yet nobody else in their day and generation thought of doing anything of the kind. If they ever did, their grottoes are all gone, and I suppose we ought to wonder at the peculiar marvel of the preservation of these I speak of. When the Virgin fled from Herod's wrath, she hid in a grotto in Bethlehem, and the same is there to this day. The slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem was done in a grotto; the Savior was born in a grotto—both are shown to pilgrims yet. It is exceedingly strange that these tremendous events all happened in grottoes—and exceedingly fortunate, likewise, because the strongest houses must crumble to ruin in time, but a grotto in the living rock will last forever. It is a swindle—this grotto stuff—but it is one that all men ought to thank the Catholics for. Wherever they ferret out a lost locality made holy by some scriptural event, they straightway build a massive—almost imperishable church there, and preserve the memory of that locality for the gratification of future generations. If it had been left to Protestants to do this most worthy work, we wouldn't even know where Jerusalem is to-day, and the man that could go and put his finger on delectable Nazareth would be too wise for this world. The world owes the Catholics its good will even for the happy rascality of hewing out these bogus grottoes in the rock; for it is infinitely more satisfactory to look at a grotto, where people have faithfully believed for centuries that the Virgin once lived, than to have to imagine a dwelling place for her somewhere, anywhere, nowhere, loose and at large all over this town of Nazareth. There is too large a scope of country. The imagination cannot work. If you were to select an imperishable boulder in the Bay of San Francisco, and prove by imaginary ancient MSS. that that was the identical boulder on which stout Sir Francis Drake stepped when he landed there in old Elizabeth's time, and so label it, an interest would spring up about that spot that would live for ages, and breed more poetry, and magazine romances, and grave historical disquisitions about Sir Francis and the "early days" he found on our coast, than would fill a library. But with the whole sweep of the Bay to devote to the old navigator, the thing is too much diffused. There is no one particular spot to chain your eye, rivet your interest and make you think. The old monks are wise. They know how to drive a stake through a pleasant tradition that will hold it to its place forever.

MARK TWAIN.