

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTERS FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

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The Arabs of the Desert—The Home of Jezebel—Story of Jezreel—Gideon's Band—History of the Same—In Samaria.

AT LARGE IN PALESTINE, September, 1857.

The "Free Son of the Desert."

As we trotted across the Plain of Jezreel, we met half a dozen Digger Indians (Bedouins,) with very long spears in their hands, cavorting around on old crowbait horses, and spearing imaginary enemies; whooping, and fluttering their rags in the wind, and carrying on in every respect like a pack of hopeless lunatics. At last, here were the "wild, free sons of the desert, speeding over the plain like the wind, on their beautiful Arabian mares" we had read so much about and longed so much to see! Here were the "picturesque costumes!" This was the "gallant spectacle!" Tatterdemalion vagrants—pitiful braggadocio—"Arabian mares" spined and necked like the ichthyosaurus in the museum, and humped and cornered like a dromedary! To glance at the genuine son of the desert is to take the romance out of him forever—to behold his steed is to long in charity to strip his harness off and let him fall to pieces.

Thus, one by one, the splendid attractions of Palestine are passing away—gradually, but surely, the paint and the gilding are peeling from its cheap theatrical scenery and exposing the unsightly boards beneath.

Jezreel—or, Logansport.

Presently we came to a ruinous old buzzard-roost on a hill, the same being the ancient Jezreel of Bible fame. I am sorry your readers are not acquainted with the history of this place, for then it would not be necessary for me to relate it.

Ahab, King of Samaria (this was a very vast Kingdom, for those days, and was very nearly as large as an ordinary county in the States,) dwelt in the city of Jezreel, which was his capital. Near him lived a man by the name of Naboth—no first name given—John W. Naboth will answer as well as any—and this man had a vineyard. The King asked him for it, and when he would not give it, offered to trade for it, or even buy it at thirty days. But Naboth declined. In those days it was considered a sort of crime to part with one's inheritance at any price—and even if a man did part with it, it reverted to himself or his heirs again at the next jubilee year. So this spoiled child of a King went and pouted over it, and lay down on the bed with his face to the wall, and would not take his regular squills. The Queen, a notorious character in those days, and whose name is a by-word and a reproach even in these, came in and asked him wherefore he had renigged, and he told her. Jezebel said that if that was all, she could fix it; and she went forth and forged letters to the nobles and wise men, in the King's name, and ordered them to proclaim a fast and set Naboth on high before the people, and suborn two witnesses to swear that he had blasphemed. They did it, and the people stoned the accused by the city wall, and he died. Then Jezebel came and told the King, and said, Behold, the defendant is no more—rise up and confiscate the vineyard. So Ahab confiscated the vineyard, and went into it to possess it. But the Prophet Elijah came to him there and read his fate to him, and the fate of Jezebel; and said that in the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs should also lick his blood—and he said, likewise, the dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel. In the course of time, the King was killed in battle, and when his chariot wheels were washed in the pool of Samaria, the dogs licked the blood. In after years a gentleman by the name of Jehu, who was King of Israel, marched down against Jezreel, by order of one of the Prophets, and administered one of those mild rebukes so common among the chosen, the highly-favored Israelites, to wit, he finished up a gang of kings and other people, and as he came along he saw Jezebel, painted and tricked out in her finery, looking out of a window, and ordered that she be thrown down to him. An obliging servant did it, and Jehu's horse trampled her under foot. Then Jehu went in and sat down to dinner; and presently he said, Go and bury this cursed woman, for she is a King's daughter. The spirit of portness came upon him, and he said, however, for the prophecy had already been fulfilled—the dogs had eaten her, and they "found no more of her than the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands." They were such nice, cheerful people, those those Israelites. Ahab, the late King, had left a helpless family behind him—not a large one for those days, but still enough to adorn a fireside—and Jehu, the King, walked into that nursery and scalped seventy of those orphans and otherwise made an end of them. Then he killed all the relatives, and teachers, and servants and friends of the family, and rested from his labors, until he was come near to Samaria, where he met forty-two persons and asked them who they were; they said they were brothers of the King of Judah. To speak after the manner of the vulgar, that let them out. When he got to Samaria, he said he would show his zeal for the Lord; so he gathered all the priests and people together that worshiped Baal, pretending that he was going to join that Church and offer up a great sacrifice; and when they were all shut up where they could not defend themselves, he caused every person of them to be slain. It was better than a circus—much better. Then Jehu, the missionary, rested from his labors once more. He knew how to discourage opposition to the true religion.

"If You Belong to Gideon's Band."

We went back to the valley, and rode to the Fountain of Ain Jeld, or Jacksonville, whichever you like best. They call it the Fountain of Jezreel, usually. It is a pond about one hundred feet square and two feet deep, with a stream of water trickling into it from under an overhanging ledge of rocks. It is in the midst of a great solitude. Here Gideon pitched his camp in the old times; behind Shunem lay the "Midianites, the Amalekites, and the Children of the East," who were "as grass-hoppers for multitude; both they and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea-side for multitude." Which means that there were 135,000 men, and that they had transportation service accordingly.

Gideon had only 32,000 men, mostly Home Guard material, no doubt, because when he proclaimed that all those who were cowardly and wanted to go home might go, 23,000 packed their trunks and left. Gideon was instructed that even a further sifting would help the army in the same way, and he made his remaining 10,000 step up to the pool and drink. He had a keen eye for a man without enterprise, and every one that got down on his knees to drink, he paid off and discharged. Those that dipped up the water in their hands and drank, he retained. This reduced his army to 300 men! He stopped then. He judged that it was not best to go on sifting any more. [The present inhabitants of the country must be a more soldierly-style of people than their ancestors, for they always scoop up the water in their paws and "lap it like a dog."] Then at dead of night Gideon placed a trumpet in each man's right hand, and a pitcher with a lamp in it in his left, and dividing the little army into three companies of a hundred men each, went softly and surrounded the vast camp of the Children of the East. It is likely that they would have to stand pretty wide apart to do it. At a given signal every man broke his pitcher and tooted his horn; the crash of the crockery awoke the sleeping army, the flash of the exposed lamps dazzled and bewildered them, the chorus of the trumpets made them think a great host had surprised them (they kept no scouts, perhaps, and did not know whether there were armies in their neighborhood or not,) and in the excitement of the time they fell to work and slaughtered each other, while Gideon's band stood still and said never a word. A hundred and twenty thousand of the enemy perished on the field, and Gideon chased the other fifteen thousand out of the country. Your readers will regard these statements as extravagant, but they are attested in the official reports of the battle.

Of all the unheard-of military stratagems ever invented, this of Gideon's was probably the wildest the world has any knowledge of. Considering the astonishing success which distinguished it, it is amazing that no General has ever been shrewd enough to try it since. The commonest sagacity, it would seem, ought to have caused it to be adopted into all codes of military tactics long ago.

Samaria.

We camped at Jenin before night, and got up and started again at one o'clock in the morning. Somewhere towards daylight we passed the locality where the best authenticated tradition locates the pit into which Joseph's brethren threw him, and about noon, after passing over a succession of mountain tops, clad with groves of fig and olive trees, with the Mediterranean in sight some forty miles away, and going by many ancient Biblical cities whose inhabitants glowered savagely upon our Christian procession, and were inclined to practice on it with stones, we came to the singularly terraced and unlovely hills that betrayed that we were out of Galilee and into Samaria at last.

We climbed a high hill to visit the city of Samaria, where the woman may have hailed from who conversed with Christ at Jacob's Well, and from whence, no doubt, came also the celebrated Good Samaritan, who was probably the only good Samaritan the province ever produced. Herod the Great is said to have made a magnificent city of this villainous place, and a lot of coarse, ugly limestone columns, twenty feet high and two feet through, that are guiltless of all architectural grace of shape and ornament, are exultingly pointed out by many authors as evidence of the fact. They would not have been considered worthy to build chicken coops of in ancient Greece. They are gay for Israel, though.

The inhabitants of this camp are particularly vicious, and stoned two parties of our pilgrims a day or two ago who brought about the difficulty by showing their revolvers when they did not intend to use them—a thing which is deemed bad judgment in California.

There was nothing to do here but buy handfuls of old Roman coins at a cent a grab, and look at a dilapidated church of the Crusaders and a vault in it which once contained the body of John the Baptist. This relic was long ago carried away, and we had seen fragments of it many times before, more particularly in Genes, where they have secured a commanding interest of the Saint and keep the same in a chapel in the Church of the Annunciation—a sanctum which women are allowed to visit only once a year, because it was to please one of the sex that John was beheaded.

Samaria stood a heavy siege, once, in the days of Elisha, at the hands of the King of Syria. Provisions reached such a figure that "an ass' head was sold for eighty pieces of silver and the fourth part of a cab of dove's dung for five pieces of silver."

An incident recorded of that heavy time will give one a very good idea of the distress that prevailed within these crumbling walls. As the King was walking upon the battlements one day, "a woman cried out, saying, Help, my lord, O King! And the King said, What aileth thee? and she answered, This woman said unto me, Give thy son, that we may eat him to-day, and we will eat my son to-morrow. So we boiled my son, and did eat him; and I said unto her on the next day, Give thy son that we may eat him; and she hath hid her son."