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THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTERS FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

[Number Forty-Four.]

First Families---Joseph's Tomb---The Well of Shechem---Camping---The Ladder of Jacob---Sacred Places---Accomplishment of the Pilgrimage---Jerusalem, at Last.

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A Curious Remnant of the Past.

The narrow cañon in which Nablous, or Shechem, is situated, is under high cultivation, and the soil is exceedingly black and fertile. It ought to be so, for it throws all Holy Land writers into spasms of admiration. It is well watered, and its affluent vegetation gains effect by contrast with the barren hills that tower on either side. One of these hills is the ancient Mount of Blessings and the other the Mount of Curses; and wise men who go about seeking for fulfilments of prophecy think they find here a wonder of this kind—to wit, that the Mount of Blessings is strangely fertile and its mate is strangely unproductive. We could not see that there was much difference between them in this respect—what there was, however, was manifestly in favor of the Hill of Curses.

Shechem is distinguished as one of the residences of the patriarch Jacob; and as the seat of those tribes that cut themselves loose from their brethren of Israel and propagated doctrines not in conformity with those of the original Jewish creed. For thousands of years this clan has dwelt in Shechem under strict *tabu*, and having lute commerce or fellowship with their fellow men of any religion or nationality. For generations they have not numbered more than one or two hundred, but they still adhere to their ancient faith and maintain their ancient rites and ceremonies. Talk of family and old descent! Princes and nobles pride themselves upon lineages they can trace back some hundreds of years. What is this trifle to this handful of old first families of Shechem, who can name their fathers straight back without a flaw for thousands—straight back to a period so remote that men reared in a country where the days of two hundred years ago are called "ancient" times grow dazed and bewildered when they try to comprehend it! Here is respectability for your—here is "family"—here is high descent worth talking about. This sad, proud remnant of a once mighty community still hold themselves aloof from all the world; they still live as their fathers lived, labored as their fathers labored, think as they did, feel as they did, worship in the same place, in sight of the same landmarks, and in the same quaint, patriarchal way their ancestors did more than thirty centuries ago. I found myself gazing at any straggling scion of this strange race with a riveted fascination, just as one would stare at a living mastodon, or a megatherium that had moved in the grey dawn of creation and seen the wonders of that mysterious world that was before the flood.

Carefully preserved among the sacred archives of this curious community is a MSS. copy of the ancient Jewish law, which is said to be the oldest document on earth. It is written on vellum, and is some four or five thousand years old. Nothing but bucksheesh can purchase a sight. Its fame is somewhat dimmed, in these latter days, because of the doubts so many authors of Palestine travels have felt themselves privileged to cast upon it. Speaking of this MSS. reminds me that I procured from the high-priest of this ancient Samaritan community, at great expense, a secret document of still higher antiquity and far more extraordinary interest, which I propose to publish as soon as I have finished translating it. The main object of my pilgrimage to the Holy Land was to get hold of this priceless record of a forgotten age of the world.

Joshua gave his dying injunction to the children of Israel at Shechem, and buried a vast treasure secretly under an oak tree there about the same time. Part of my errand to Palestine was to prospect for that jewelry, also, but I could not find it.

Joseph's Tomb.

About a mile and a half from Shechem we halted at the base of Mount Ebal, before a little square area, inclosed by a high stone wall, neatly white-washed. Across one end of this inclosure is a tomb built after the manner of the Moslems. It is the tomb of Joseph. No truth is better authenticated than this.

When Joseph was dying he prophesied that exodus of the Israelites from Egypt which occurred four hundred years afterwards. At the same time he exacted of his people an oath that when they journeyed to the land of Canaan, they would bear his bones with them and bury them in the ancient inheritance of his fathers. The oath was kept.

"And the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of silver."

Few tombs on earth command the veneration of so many races and men of divers creeds as this of Joseph. "Samaritan and Jew, Moslem and Christian alike, revere it, and honor it with their visits. The tomb of Joseph, the dutiful son, the affectionate, forgiving brother, the virtuous man, the wise Prince and ruler. Egypt felt his influence—the world knows his history."

Jacob's Well.

In this same "parcel of ground" which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor for a hundred pieces of silver and paid at least a hundred times too much for it, is Jacob's celebrated well. It is cut in the solid rock, and is nine feet square and ninety feet deep. The name of this unpretending hole in the ground, which one might pass by and take no notice of, is as familiar as household words to even the children and the peasants of many a far-off country. It is more famous than the Parthenon, it is older than the Pyramids.

It was by this well that Jesus sat and talked with a woman of that strange, antiquated Samaritan community I have been speaking of, and told her of the mysterious water of life. As descendants of old English nobles still cherish in the traditions of their houses how that this king or that king tarried a day with some favored ancestor three hundred years ago, no doubt the descendants of the woman of Samaria, living there in Shechem, still refer with pardonable vanity to this conversation of their ancestor, held some little time gone by, with the Messiah of the Christians. It is not likely that they undervalue a distinction such as this. Samaritan nature is human nature, and human nature remembers contact with the illustrious, always.

For an offence done to the family honor, the sons of Jacob exterminated all Shechem once—but, as I have remarked before, what is the use of my sitting up nights to find out things if I am to squander all the information so obtained immediately? I will husband some of it for another day. Very few people know anything about the matters I am instructing your readers in. I know very well how to appreciate the value of what I am doing.

Camping with the Arabs.

We left Jacob's Well and travelled till 8 in the evening, but rather slowly, for we had been in the saddle nineteen hours, and the horses were cruelly tired. We got so far ahead of the tents that we had to camp in an Arab village, and sleep on the ground. We could have slept in the largest of the houses, but there were some little drawbacks: it was populous with vermin, it had a dirt floor, it was in no respect cleanly, and there was a family of goats in the only bedroom, and two donkeys in the parlor. Outside there were no inconveniences, except that the dusky, ragged, earnest eyed villagers of both sexes and all ages grouped themselves on their haunches all around us, and discussed us and criticized us with noisy tongues till midnight. We did not mind the noise, being tired, but, doubtless, you know that it is almost an impossible thing to go to sleep when you know that people are looking at you. We went to bed at ten, and got up again at two and started once more. Thus are people persecuted by dragomen, whose sole ambition in life is to get ahead of each other.

About daylight we passed Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant rested three hundred years, and at whose gates good old Eli fell down and "brake his neck" when the messenger, riding hard from the battle, told him of the defeat of his people, the death of his sons, and, more than all, the capture of Israel's pride, her hope, her refuge, the ancient ark her forefathers brought with them out of Egypt. It is little wonder that under circumstances like these he fell down and brake his neck. But Shiloh had no charms for us. We were so cold that there was no comfort but in motion, and so drowsy we could hardly sit upon the horses.

Jacob's Ladder, Etc.

After a while we came to a shapeless mass of ruins, which still bears the name of Beth-el. It was here that Jacob lay down and had that supernatural vision of angels flitting up and down a ladder that reached from the clouds to earth, and caught glimpses of their blessed home through the open gates of Heaven.

The pilgrims took what was left of the hallowed ruin, and we pressed on toward the goal of our crusade, renewed Jerusalem.

The further we went the hotter the sun got, and the more rocky and bare, repulsive and dreary the landscape became. There could not have been more fragments of stone strewn broadcast over this part of the world, if every ten square feet of the land had been occupied by a separate and distinct stone-cutter's establishment for an age. There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country. No landscape exists that is more tiresome to the eye than that which bounds the approaches to Jerusalem. The only difference between the roads and the surrounding country, perhaps, is that there are rather more rocks in the roads than in the surrounding country.

We passed Ramah, and Bereth, and on the right saw the tomb of the prophet Samuel, perched high upon a commanding eminence. Still no Jerusalem came in sight. We hurried on impatiently. We halted a moment at the ancient Fountain of Beira, but its stones, worn deeply by the chafing chins of a hundred generations of thirsty horses, had no interest for us—we longed to see Jerusalem. We spurred up hill after hill, and usually began to stretch our necks minutes before we got to the top—but disappointment always followed:—more stupid hills beyond—more unsightly landscape—no Holy City.

The Pilgrimage Accomplished.

At last, away in the middle of the day, ancient bits of wall and crumbling arches began to line the way—we toiled up one more hill, and every pilgrim and every sinner swung his hat on high! Jerusalem!

Perched on its eternal hills, white and domed and solid, massed together and hooped with high gray walls, the venerable city gleamed in the sun. So small! Why, it was no larger than an American village of four thousand inhabitants, and no larger than an ordinary Syrian city of thirty thousand. Jerusalem numbers only fourteen thousand people.

We dismounted and looked, with very few words of conversation, across the wide intervening valley for an hour or more; and noted those prominent features of the city that pictures make familiar to all men from their school days till their death. We could recognize the Tower of Hippicus, the Mosque of Omar, the Damascus Gate, the Mount of Olives, the Valley of Jehoshaphat, the Tower of David and the Garden of Gethsemane—and dating from these landmarks could tell very nearly the localities of many others we were not able to distinguish.

I record it here as a notable but not discreditable fact that not even our pilgrims wept. I think there was no individual in the party whose brain was not teeming with thoughts and images and memories invoked by the grand history of the venerable city that lay before us, but still among them all was no "voice of them that wept." I suppose it was the only detachment that ever entered Jerusalem without crying about it. I have read all the books on Palestine, nearly, that have been printed, and the authors all wept. When Mr. Prime was here, before he wrote his curious "Tent Life in the Holy Land," he wept, and his party all wept, and the dragoman wept, and so did the muleteers, and even a Latin priest, and a Jew that came straggling along. It would have been just as cheap to believe that the camels and the asses wept also, and fully as likely; and he might as well have added them to the water company likewise. Prime got such a

start then that he never could shut himself off; and he went through Palestine and irrigated it from one end to the other. No man was ever so easily affected as he, probably. Whenever he found a holy place that was well authenticated, he cried; whenever he found one that was not well authenticated, he cried anyhow, and took the chances; whenever he couldn't find any holy place at all, he just cried "for a flyer," as the worldly say. No man ever enjoyed a funeral as Prime did his Sentimental Journey through the Holy Land. How his horse ever kept his health, being exposed to these periodical showers all the time, is a wonder. I never will believe anybody again that says he cried over Jerusalem; the book-makers have created within me a bitter animosity against these boastful Jerusalem-weepers and also a lack of faith in them. If ever a party were peculiarly liable to tears, under such circumstances, it is our pilgrims. They are the very boys to go into sentimental convulsions at the merest shadow of a provocation. Yet they wept not over Jerusalem. Just after noon we entered these narrow, crooked streets, by the ancient and the famed Damascus Gate, and now for several hours I have been trying to comprehend that I am actually in the illustrious old city where Solomon dwelt and Jesus was crucified, and have not succeeded. And never shall. I know that well enough. MARK TWAIN.