

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

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Traditional Holy Places---At the Centre of the Earth---The Dust of Adam---Curious Relics---A Noted Relic-Hunter---Myths and Mysteries.

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"The Bonds of Christ."

Still moving through the gloom of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre we came to a small chapel, hewn out of the rock—a den which has been known as "The Prison of Our Lord" for many centuries. Tradition says that here the Savior was confined just previously to the crucifixion. Under an altar by the door was a pair of stone stocks for human legs. These things are called the "Bonds of Christ," and the use they were once put to has given them the name they now bear.

"The Centre of the Earth."

This is the most roomy, the richest and the showiest chapel in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Its altar, like that of all the Greek Churches, is a lofty screen that extends clear across the chapel, and is gorgeous with gilding and pictures. The numerous lamps that hang before it are of gold and silver, and cost great sums.

But the feature of the place is a short column that rises from the middle of the marble pavement of the chapel, and marks the exact centre of the earth. The most reliable traditions inform us that this was known to be the earth's centre, ages ago, and that when Christ was upon earth he set all doubts upon the subject at rest forever, by stating with his own lips that the tradition was correct. Now, mark you, He said that that particular column stood upon the centre of the world. If the centre of the world changes, the column changes its position accordingly. This column has moved three different times, of its own accord. This is because, in great convulsions of nature, at three different times masses of the earth—whole ranges of mountains, probably—have flown off into space, thus lessening the diameter of the earth, and changing the exact locality of its centre by a point or two. This is a very curious and interesting circumstance, and is a withering rebuke to those ignorant philosophers who would make us believe that it is not possible for any portion of the earth to fly off into space.

To satisfy himself that this spot was really the centre of the earth, a sceptic once paid well for the privilege of ascending to the dome of the church to see if the sun gave him a shadow at noon. He came down perfectly convinced. The day was very cloudy and the sun threw no shadows at all; but the man was perfectly satisfied that if the sun had come out and made shadows it could not have made any for him. Proofs like these are not to be set aside by the idle tongues of cavilers. To such as are not bigoted, and are willing to be convinced, they carry a conviction that nothing can ever shake.

If even greater proofs than those I have mentioned are wanted, to satisfy the headstrong and the foolish that this is the genuine centre of the earth, they are here. The greatest of them lies in the fact that from under this very column was taken the dust from which Adam was made. This can surely be regarded in the light of a settler. It is not likely that the original first man would have been made from an inferior quality of earth when it was entirely convenient to get first quality dirt from the world's centre. This will strike any reflecting mind forcibly. That Adam was formed of dirt procured in this very spot is amply proven by the fact that in six thousand years no man has ever been able to prove that the dirt was not procured here whereof he was made.

It is a singular circumstance that right under the roof of this same great church, and not far away from that illustrious column, old Adam, the father of the human race, lies buried. There is no question that he is actually buried in the grave which is pointed out as his—there can be none—because it has never yet been proven that that grave is not the grave in which he is buried. I could not do less than shed some tender tears over poor old Adam. I could not but feel how much he had lost by dying so young. He had not seen the telegraph, or the locomotive, or the steamboat; he did not even see the flood. He missed the Paris Exposition. There was a roughness about that that cannot be over-estimated. He never had to pay three dollars a dozen for washing, and then have somebody's shirts come home to him that were too tight around the neck—but can a happiness like that atone for the suffering it must have cost him to have to go into company in the meagre costume of his time? When he first put on his leaves he probably felt innocently gay; and when he finally branched out and got himself up regardless of expense, in a sheep-skin, he must have considered himself positively gorgeous. But think of Adam, with that skin and his long patriarchal beard, and think of him in a claw-hammer coat, white kids, and a moustache. The more I reflected upon what Adam had lost in being taken away so early, the more I was moved and the more I wept. The subject is too painful for contemplation, even now. Let us change it.

The Martyred Soldier.

The next place the guide took us to in the holy church was an altar dedicated to the Roman soldier who was of the military guard that attended at the crucifixion to keep order, and who—when the veil of the Temple was rent in the awful darkness that followed; the rock of Golgotha was split asunder by an earthquake; the artillery of heaven thundered, and in the baleful glare of the lightnings the shrouded dead flitted about the streets of Jerusalem—shook with fear and said, "Surely this was the Son of God!" Exactly where this altar stands now, that Roman soldier stood then, in full view of the crucified Savior—in full sight and hearing of all the marvels that were transpiring far and wide about the circumference of the Hill of Calvary. And exactly in this self-same spot the blasphemous words he had spoken. There can be no question about these facts, because there is a picture of the whole affair on the front of the altar, where any one can see it who desires to do so. That soldier stood there, and there he was beheaded. I am as well satisfied about that as if there were two pictures of it.

"INRI."

In this altar they used to keep one of the most curious relics that human eyes ever looked upon—a thing that had power to fascinate the beholder in some mysterious way and keep him staring for hours together. It was nothing less than the copper plate Pilate put upon the Savior's cross, and upon which he wrote, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." I think St. Helena, the mother of Constantine, found this wonderful memento when she was prospecting here in the third century. She was all over Palestine, and she had a run of luck the like of which was never seen before nor since. Whenever she found a thing mentioned in her Bible, Old or New, she would take her umbrella and start out after that thing and never stop until she found it. If it was Adam, she would find Adam; if it was the Ark, she would find the Ark; if it was Goliath, or Josiah or Exodus, or any of those parties, she would find them; if it was a cup of a saint, or the handkerchief of the Virgin, or a painting by St. Luke, a man could risk his shekels that she would raise them; there was not anything she couldn't find. She was starting after Moses when she died; Moses is not found yet. And as for martyrs—why, martyrs were her strong suit, as you might say. She could start a martyr any time. She was pretty much always turning up a martyr somewhere, and dividing him up among the churches—a leg to this great cathedral, an arm to that, the body to the third, and so on, and the toe-nails she gave to the small fry. She meant well, of course, but then she has these martyrs divided up and scattered around so, that fragments of different ones have got mixed together, and there is going to be trouble some day on account of it. She was a most remarkable woman, and very impartial about martyrs.

She did best here on Calvary, no doubt. She had a claim here that she worked as long as she lived, and always had reason to be satisfied with it. She found the inscription here that I was speaking of, I think. She found it in this very spot, close to where the martyred Roman soldier stood. It is but just to say that the circumstance aroused no suspicion concerning the soldier. That copper plate is in one of the churches in Rome, now. I have seen it there. The inscription is very distinct. It is written in English, Italian and Spanish. This fact proves its authenticity, because these languages were not known in Pilate's time.

The Division of the Garments.

We passed along a few steps and saw the altar built over the very spot where the soldiers divided the raiment of the Savior. One cannot well doubt that this is the right spot, because he can see with his own eyes that the very same original locality is still here.

The Penitent Thief.

Then we went down into a cavern which cavilers say was once a cistern. It is a chapel, now, however—the Chapel of St. Helena. It is 51 feet long by 43 wide. In it is a marble chair which Helena used to sit in while she superintended her workmen when they were digging and delving for the True Cross. In this place is an altar dedicated to St. Dimas, the penitent thief. They have not dedicated anything to the other thief. He has never been popular here, and never deserved to be.

The Invention of the Cross.

From the cistern we descended twelve steps into a large roughly shaped grotto, carved wholly out of the living rock. Helena blasted it out when she was searching for the true cross. She had a laborious piece of work, here, but it was richly rewarded. Out of this place she got the crown of thorns, the nails of the cross, the true cross itself and the cross of the penitent thief. When she thought she had found everything and was about to stop, she was told in a dream to continue a day longer. It was very fortunate. She put in one more blast and raised out the cross of the penitent thief.

The walls and roof of this grotto still weep bitter tears in memory of the event that transpired here, and devout pilgrims groan and sob when these sad tears fall upon them from the dripping rock. The Monks call this apartment the "Chapel of the Invention of the True Cross"—a name which is unfortunate, because it leads blockheads to imagine that a tacit acknowledgment is thus made that the tradition that Helena found the true cross here is a fiction—an invention. It is a happiness to know, however, that intelligent people do not doubt the story in any of its particulars.

Priests of any of the chapels and denominations in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre can visit this sacred grotto to weep and pray and worship the gentle Redeemer. Two different congregations are not allowed to enter at the same time, however, because they always fight, and it is not a good place to fight in.

This Church of the Holy Sepulchre is the most interesting place I ever was in. There is more to see in a small space than can be found elsewhere in the world. It is the Vatican of Jerusalem. I have not finished with it yet. People of all branches of Christianity are deeply interested in it, and it will be proper and right to give to it another chapter.

MARK TWAIN.