

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

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The Sorrowful Way—St. Veronica's Handkerchief—Sacred Places—Where the Wandering Jew Started From—Some of His Wanderings—The Temple of Solomon—Mahommedan Superstitions.

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The Via Dolorosa.

We were standing in a narrow street by the Tower of Antonio. "On these stones, that are crumbling away," the guide said, "the Savior sat and rested before taking up the cross. This is the beginning of the Sorrowful Way, or the Way of Grief." The party took due note of the sacred spot, and moved on. It is curious, but no chapel is built upon that ground, and there is no grotto there. We passed under the "Ecce Homo Arch," and saw the very window from which Pilate's wife warned her husband to have nothing to do with the persecution of the Just Man. This window is in an excellent state of preservation, considering its great age. They showed us where Jesus rested the second time, and where the mob refused to give him up, and said, "Let his blood be upon our heads and upon our children's children forever." The French Catholics are building a church on this spot, and with their usual veneration for historical relics, are building in the new such scraps of ancient walls as they have found there. Further on, we saw the spot where the fainting Savior fell under the weight of his cross. A great granite column of some ancient temple lay there at the time, and the heavy cross struck it such a blow that it broke in two in the middle. We might have thought this story the idle invention of priests and guides, but the broken column was still there to show for itself. One cannot go behind the evidences.

We crossed a street, and came presently to the former residence of St. Veronica. When the Savior passed there, she came out, full of womanly compassion, and spoke pitying words to him, undaunted by the hootings and the threatenings of the mob, and wiped the perspiration from his face with her handkerchief. We had heard so much of St. Veronica, and seen her picture by so many masters, that it was like meeting an old friend unexpectedly to stumble upon her ancient home in Jerusalem. The strangest thing about the incident that has made her name so famous, is that, when she wiped the perspiration away, the print of the Savior's face remained upon the handkerchief, a perfect portrait, and so remains unto this day. I know this, because I saw this handkerchief in a cathedral in Paris, in another in Spain, and in two others in Italy. In the Milan Cathedral it costs five francs to see it, and at St. Peter's, at Rome, it is almost impossible to see it at any price. No tradition is so amply verified as this of St. Veronica and her handkerchief.

At the next corner we saw a deep indentation in the hard stone masonry of the corner of a house, but might have gone heedlessly by it but that the guide said it was made by the elbow of the Savior, who stumbled here and fell. Presently we came to just such another indentation in a stone wall. The guide said the Savior fell here, also, and made this depression with his elbow. We believed. We could not disbelieve, with the evidences before our eyes.

There were other places where the Lord fell, and others where he rested; but one of the most curious land-marks of sacred history we found on this morning walk through the crooked lanes that lead toward Calvary, was a certain stone built into a house—a stone that was so seamed and scarred that it bore a sort of grotesque resemblance to the human face. The projections that answered for cheeks were worn smooth by the passionate kisses of generations of pilgrims from distant lands. We asked "Why?" The guide said it was because this was one of "the very stones of Jerusalem" that Christ mentioned when he was reproved for permitting the people to cry "Hosannah!" when he made his memorable entry into the city upon an ass. One of the pilgrims said, "But there is no evidence that the stones did cry out—Christ said that if the people stopped from shouting Hosannah, the very stones would do it." The guide was perfectly serene. He said, calmly, "This is one of the stones that would have cried out." It was of little use to try to shake this fellow's simple faith—it was easy to see that.

House of the Wandering Jew.

And so we came at last to another wonder, of deep and abiding interest—the veritable house where the unhappy wretch once lived who has been celebrated in song and story for more than eighteen hundred years as the Wandering Jew. On the memorable day of the Crucifixion he stood in this old doorway with his arms akimbo, looking out upon the struggling mob that was approaching, and when the weary Savior would have sat down and rested him a moment, pushed him rudely away and said, "Move on!" The Lord said, "Move on, thou, likewise," and the command has never been revoked from that day to this. All men know how that the miscreant upon whose head that just curse fell has roamed up and down the broad world, for ages and ages, seeking rest and never finding it—courting death but always in vain—longing to stop, in city, in wilderness, in desert solitudes, yet hearing always that relentless warning to march—march on! They say—do these hoary traditions—that when Titus sacked Jerusalem and slaughtered eleven hundred thousand Jews in her streets and by-ways, the Wandering Jew was seen always in the thickest of the fight, and that when battle-axes gleamed in the air, he bowed his head beneath them; when swords flashed their deadly lightnings, he sprang in their way; he bared his breast to whizzing javelins, to hissing arrows, to any and to every weapon that promised death and forgetfulness, and rest. But it was useless—he walked forth out of the carnage without a wound. And it is said that five hundred years afterward, he followed Mahomet when he carried destruction to the cities of Arabia, and then turned against him. His calculations were wrong again. No quarter was given to any living creature but one, and that was the only one of all the host that did not want it. He sought death five hundred years later, in the wars of the Crusades, and offered himself, with them, to famine and pestilence at Ascalon. He escaped again—he could not die. These repeated annoyances could have at last but one effect—they shook his confidence. Since then the Wandering Jew has carried on a kind of desultory toying with the most promising of the aids and implements of destruction, but with small hope, as a general thing. He has speculated some in cholera, and railroads, and has taken almost a lively interest in infernal machines and patent medicines. He is old, now, and grave; as becomes an age like his; he indulges in no light amusements save that he goes generally to executions, and is fond of funerals.

There is one thing he cannot avoid: go where he will about the world, he must never fail to report in Jerusalem every fiftieth year. Only a year or two ago he was here for the thirty-seventh time since Jesus was crucified on Calvary. They say that many old people, who are here now, saw him then, and had seen him before. He looks always the same—old, and withered, and hollow-eyed, and listless, says that there is about him a something which seems to suggest that he is looking for some one, expecting some one—the friends of his youth, perhaps. But the most of them are dead, now. He always pokes about the old streets, looking lonesome, making his mark on a wall here and there, and eyeing the oldest buildings with a sort of friendly half interest; and he sheds a few tears at the threshold of his ancient dwelling, and bitter, bitter tears they are. Then he collects his rent and leaves again. He has been seen standing near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on many a starlight night, for he has cherished an idea for many centuries that if he could only enter there, he could rest. But when he approaches, the doors slam to with a crash, the earth trembles, and all the lights in Jerusalem burn a ghastly blue! He does this every fifty years, just the same. It is hopeless, but then it is hard to break habits one has been eighteen hundred years accustomed to. The old tourist is far away on his wanderings, now. How he must smile to see a pack of blockheads like us, galloping about the world, and looking wise, and imagining we are finding out a good deal about it! He must have a consuming contempt for the ignorant, complacent asses that go skurrying about the world in these railroading days and call it travelling. When the guide pointed out where the Wandering Jew had left his familiar mark upon a wall, I was filled with astonishment. It read: "S. T.—1860—X."

All I have revealed about the Wandering Jew can be amply proven by reference to our guide.

Solomon's Temple.

The mighty Mosque of Omar, and the paved court around it, occupy a fourth of Jerusalem. They are upon Mount Moriah, where King Solomon's Temple stood. This Mosque is the holiest place the Mohammedan knows, outside of Mecca. Up to within a year or two past, no Christian could gain admission to it or its court for love or money. But the prohibition has been removed, and we entered freely for bucksheesh.

I need not speak of the wonderful beauty and the exquisite grace and symmetry that have made this Mosque so celebrated, because I did not see them. One cannot see such things at an instant glance—One only finds out how really beautiful a really beautiful woman is after considerable acquaintance with her; and the rule applies to Niagara Falls, to majestic mountains and to mosques—especially to mosques.

The great feature of the Mosque of Omar is the prodigious rock in the centre of its rotunda. It was upon this rock that Abraham came so near offering up his son Isaac—this, at least, is authentic—is very much more to be relied on than most of the traditions, at any rate. On this rock, also, the angel stood and threatened Jerusalem, and David persuaded him to spare the city. Mahomet was well acquainted with this stone. From it he ascended to heaven. The stone naturally tried to follow him, and if the angel Gabriel had not happened by the merest good luck to be there to grab it, it would have done it. Very few people have a grip like Gabriel—the prints of his monstrous fingers, two inches deep, are to be seen in that rock to-day. "I suppose he just snaked that vast rock back to its place as easy and unconcerned as another person would nip a dough-nut."—Brown.

This rock, large as it is, is suspended in the air. It does not touch anything at all. The guide said so. This is very wonderful. In the place on it where Mahomet stood, he left his foot-prints in the solid stone. I should judge that he wore about eighteens. But what I was going to say, when I spoke of the rock being suspended, was, that in the floor of the cavern under it they showed us a slab which they said covered a hole which was a thing of extraordinary interest to all Mohammedans, because that hole leads down to purgatory, and every soul that is transferred from thence to Heaven must pass up through this orifice. Mahomet stands there and yanks them out by the hair. All Mohammedans shave their heads, but they are careful to leave a lock of hair for the Prophet to take hold of. Our guide observed that a good Mohammedan would consider himself doomed to stay with the damned forever if he were to lose his scalp-lock and die before it grew again. The most of them that I have seen ought to stay with the damned, anyhow, without reference to how they were barbered. What sort of use they can ever make of them in Heaven is much ahead of me.

For several ages no woman has been allowed to enter the cavern where that important hole is. The simple reason is that one of these was once caught there blabbing everything she knew about what was going on above ground, to the rapscallions in purgatory down below. She carried the thing to such an extreme that nothing could be kept private—nothing could be done or said on earth but everybody in hell knew all about it before the sun went down. It was about time to shut off this woman's telegraph, and it was promptly done. Her breath subsided about the same time.

But as I was about to remark concerning the small portion of the genuine King Solomon's Temple that still remains to chain the eye of the visitor, and provoke in him curious trains of thought—

MARK TWAIN.