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LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

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The Hard Road of Jordan—At the Dead Sea —More Disappointments—A Funny Bath —Bethlehem and its Sacred Places—The Discomforts of Eastern Travel.

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"Jordan's a Hard Road to Travel."

At two in the morning they routed us out of bed—another swindle—another stupid effort of our dragoman to get ahead of a rival. It was not two hours to the Jordan. However, we were dressed and under way before any one thought of looking to see what time it was, and so we drowsed on through the chill night air and dreamed of camp fires, warm beds and other comfortable things. We were sorry enough that the Jordan had ever become celebrated.

We reached the famous river before 4 o'clock, and the night was so black that we could have ridden into it without seeing it. Some of us were in a savage frame of mind. We waited and waited for daylight, but it did not come. Finally two of us went away in the dark and slept an hour on the ground, in the bushes, and caught cold. This act incensed the guard. It hurt their dignity to think that any pilgrim should scorn their protection in the worst Bedouin locality in Palestine. We let it go at that, though in reality we had forgotten about the Bedouins or we would not have been so reckless.

With the first suspicion of dawn, every pilgrim snatched off his clothes and darted into the dark torrent, singing:

"On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye
To Caanyan's fair and happy land,
Where my po-sessions lie."

But they did not sing long. The water was so fearfully cold that they suddenly throttled down their music valves and waltzed out again. They shivered on the bank, and were deeply chagrined. They had promised themselves all along that they would cross the Jordan where the Israelites crossed it when they entered Caanan from their weary pilgrimage in the desert. They would cross where the twelve stones were placed in memory of that great event. While they did it they would picture to themselves that vast army of pilgrims marching through the cloven waters, bearing the hallowed ark of the covenant and shouting hosannahs, and singing songs of thanksgiving and praise. Each had promised himself that he would be the first to cross. They were at the goal of their hopes at last, but the current was too swift, the water was too cold!

It was sad, very sad. Jack, the youth that was with me, did them a service, then. He got up and went and led the way across the Jordan, and all was happiness again. The pilgrims waded over and stood upon the further bank. I rushed over also, and rushed back, and now I shall never have to cross the Jordan any more in the night. I can always wait till daylight, hereafter. The main thing accomplished, the drooping, miserable gang sat down to wait for the sun again, for all wanted to see the water as well as feel it. But it was too cold a business. Some cans were filled from the historic river, some canes cut from its banks, and then the party mounted and rode reluctantly away to keep from freezing to death. So we saw the Jordan very dimly. The thickets of bushes that bordered its banks threw their shadows across its shallow, turbulent waters ("stormy," the hymn makes them, with a complimentary stretch of fancy), and we could not judge of the width of the stream by the eye. We knew by our wading experience, however, that a good many streets in America are double as wide as the Jordan.

Daylight came, soon after we got under way, and in the course of an hour or two we reached

The Dead Sea.

Nothing grows in the flat, burning desert around it but weeds and the poor Dead Sea apple the poets say is beautiful to the eye, but crumbles to ashes and dust when you break it. Such as we found were not handsome, but they were bitter to the taste. They yielded no dust. It was because they were not ripe, perhaps.

The desert and the barren hills gleam painfully in the sun, around the Dead Sea, and there is no pleasant thing or living creature upon it or about its borders to cheer the eye. It is a scorching, arid, repulsive solitude. A silence broods over the scene that is depressing to the spirits. It makes one think of funerals and death.

The little sea is about as large as Lake Bigler. Its waters are very clear, and it has a pebbly bottom and is shallow for some distance out from the shores. It yields quantities of asphaltum; chunks of it lie all about its banks; this stuff gives the place something of an unpleasant smell.

All our reading had taught us to expect that the first plunge into the Dead Sea would be attended with distressing results—our bodies would feel as if they were suddenly pierced by millions of red-hot needles; the dreadful smarting would continue for hours; we might even miserably be blistered from head to foot, and suffer for many days. We were infamously disappointed. Our eight sprang in at the same time that another party of pilgrims did, and nobody screamed once. None of them ever did complain of anything more than a slight pricking sensation in places where their skin was abraded, and then only for a short time. My face smarted for a couple of hours, but it was partly because I got it badly sunburned while I was bathing, and staid in so long that it got plastered over with salt.

It was a funny bath. We could not sink. One could stretch himself at full length on his back, with his arms on his breast, and all of his body above a line drawn from the corner of his jaw past the middle of his side, the middle of his leg and through his ankle bone would remain out of water. He could lift his head clear out, if he chose. No position can be retained long; you lose your balance and whirl over, first on your back and then on your face, and so on. You can lie comfortably, on your back, with your head out, and your legs out from your knees down, by steadying yourself with your hands. You can sit, with your knees drawn up to your chin and your arms clasped around them, but you are bound to turn over presently because you are top-heavy in that position. You can stand up straight in water that is over your head, and from the middle of your breast upward you will not be wet. But you cannot remain so. The water will soon float your feet to the surface. You cannot swim on your back and make any progress of any consequence, because your feet stick away above the surface, and there is nothing to propel yourself with but your heels. If you swim on your face, you kick up the water like a stern-wheel boat. You make no headway. A horse is so top-heavy that he can neither swim nor stand up in the Dead Sea. He turns over on his side at once. Some of us bathed for more than an hour, and then came out coated with salt till we shone like icicles. We scrubbed it off with a coarse towel and rode off smelling badly. Salt crystals glitter in the sun about the shores of the lake. In places they coat the ground like a brilliant crust of ice.

Bethlehem, Etc.

We looked everywhere, as we passed along, but never saw grain or crystal of Lot's wife. It was a great disappointment. For many and many a year we had known her bright, sad story, and taken that interest in her which beauty in misfortune always inspires. But she was gone. Her picturesque form no longer looms above the desert of the Dead Sea to remind the tourist of the doom that fell upon the lost cities, while at the same time it called painful attention to that unhappy trait of curiosity that takes up so much spare room in all her sex. The lowing herds wound slowly o'er the lea, sometime or other, and took her along with them, no doubt.

We stopped at Mars Saba that night and slept in the Convent. At 9 or 10 in the morning we reached the plain of the Shepherds, and stood in a walled garden of olives where the shepherds were watching their flocks by night, nineteen centuries ago, when the multitude of angels brought them the tidings that the Saviour was born. A quarter of a mile away was Bethlehem of Judea, and the pilgrims took some of the stone wall and hurried on.

In the huge Church of the Nativity, in Bethlehem, built fifteen hundred years ago by the inveterate St. Helena, they took us below ground, and into a grotto cut in the living rock. This was the "manger" where Christ was born. A silver star set in the floor bears a Latin inscription to that effect. It is polished with the kisses of many generations of worshipping pilgrims. The grotto was tricked out in the usual tasteless style observable in all the holy places of Palestine. As in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, envy and uncharitableness were apparent here. The priests and the members of the Greek and Latin Churches cannot come by the same corridor to kneel in the sacred birth-place of the Redeemer, but are compelled to approach and retire by different avenues, lest they quarrel and fight on this holiest ground on earth.

You cannot think in this place any more than you can in any other in Palestine that would be likely to inspire reflection. Beggars, cripples and greasy monks compass you about, and make you think only of bucksheesh when you would rather think of something more in keeping with the character of the spot.

I was glad to get out of there, and glad when we had trotted through the grottoes where Eusebius wrote, and Jerome fasted, and Joseph prepared for the flight into Egypt, and the dozen other distinguished grottoes, and knew we were done. The Church of the Nativity is almost as well packed with exceeding holy places as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre itself. They have even got in it a grotto wherein 20,000 children were slaughtered by Herod when he was seeking the life of the infant Jesus.

We went to the Milk Grotto, of course—a cavern where Mary hid herself for a while before the flight into Egypt. Its walls were black before she entered, but in suckling the child, a drop of her milk fell upon the floor and instantly changed the darkness of the walls to its own snowy hue. We took many little fragments of stone from here, because it is well known in all the East that a barren woman hath need only to touch her lips to one of these and her failing will depart from her. We took many specimens, to the end that we might confer happiness upon certain households that we wot of. Let the distressed apply to me, postage paid, and a stamp extra, for my sands of life are well nigh run out, and I would do good to my fellow man while yet I can.

We got away from Bethlehem and its troops of beggars and relic-peddlers in the afternoon, and spending very little time at Rachel's tomb and the Pool of Solomon, hurried to Jerusalem as fast as possible. I never was as glad to get home again in all my life before. I never have enjoyed rest as I have enjoyed it during these last few hours. The journey to the Dead Sea, the Jordan and Bethlehem was short, but it was an awful one! Such roasting heat, such oppressive solitude, and such dismal desolation cannot surely exist elsewhere on earth. And such fatigue! I think I can sleep now.

MARK TWAIN.

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