

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

[Number Fifty-Two.]

A Forbidding Picture—A Model Travelling Library—Sundry Exploded Delusions—On the Jordan Road.

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Palentine Scenery.

Of all the lands on earth for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince. The hills are barren, they are dull of color, they are unpicturesque in shape. The valleys are unsightly deserts fringed with a feeble vegetation that has an expression about it of being ashamed of itself. The Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee—mere lakes they are—sleep in the midst of a vast stretch of hill and plain wherein the eye rests upon no pleasant tint, no striking object, no soft picture dreaming in a purple haze or mottled with the shadows of the clouds. Every outline is harsh, every feature is distinct, there is no perspective—distance works no enchantment here. It is the most hopeless, dreary, heart-broken piece of territory out of Arizona. I think the sun would skip it if he could make schedule time by going around. What Palestine wants is paint. It will never be a beautiful country until it is painted. Each detachment of pilgrims ought to give it a coat, and build walls at short distances, so that one could not see too much landscape at once. The children of Israel wandered about the desert beyond those Mountains of Moab yonder for forty years, and then crossed the Jordan where we camped, and marched into Canaan with songs of rapture and rejoicing; and it is a wonder to me that they didn't pack up and march out of it again. That they refrained from doing it speaks volumes for the desolation of the wilderness. But then, all those that had seen Egypt were dead. That fact is mildly suggestive. I speak as if Canaan had never been a better country than it is now. I have much better judgment than to say that there is considerable evidence that it has not changed in any respect in four thousand years—evidence that there was not any chance for it to change for the worse—evidence that from the date of its creation the difference between it and a "wilderness" was not more perceptible than the difference between one Chinaman and another. I refrain from saying these things, not because they might not savor somewhat of truth, but because they could not be popular.

But the severest thing that has been said about Palestine was said here in Jerusalem. A pilgrim with his periodical ecstacy upon him (it usually comes in a flush of happiness after dinner) finished his apostrophe with, "O, that I could be here at the Second Advent!"

A grave gentleman said, "It will not occur in Palestine."

"What!"

"The Second Advent will take place elsewhere—possibly in America."

"Blasphemy!"

"I speak reasonably. You are in the Holy Land. You have seen the Holy Land once?"

"Yes."

"Shall you ever want to come here again?"

"Well—no."

"My friend, the Savior, has been here once!"

I hope I am not unjust toward the natural scenery of Palestine. And yet I have been so disappointed that such a thing is almost possible. Before the *Quaker City* left New York, the passengers were instructed to bring along an assortment of books. A list of the volumes they ought to have, in order to be posted concerning England, France, Spain and the many other countries they were to visit, was furnished to each, viz.: "Robinson's Holy Land;" "Pilgrim's Progress;" "Dusenberry's Researches in Palestine;" "The Plymouth Collection of Hymns;" "City of the Great King;" "Shepherd of Salisbury Plain;" "Tent Life in the Holy Land;" "Tupper's Poems;" "The Prince of the House of David;" "Whole Duty of Man;" "Jericho and the Jordan;" "Bradshaw's Sermons;" "Walks About Jerusalem;" "Salvation Through Grace."

It was the rarest library that ever was seen. Sixty-four copies of "Dusenberry's Researches," and all the other works in proportion. I shall always remember the first night we camped within the confines of Holy Land. The pilgrims had said on shipboard that we should not want for knowledge of the country we were about to visit—so they told a cabin boy to take a lot of books from the ship's library and pack them in Elder W.'s valise. The boy took them all from one shelf. That memorable night by the camp-fire the Elder got out this valise and said, "Now we will make a list of these books, by number and title, so that they won't get lost. I will pass each book to you and call its number; you set it down, and pass the book to Dan, calling its name; you keep the record, and let Dan take charge of the lot. Here, now, is Number One."

"No. 1—Salvation by Grace."

Dan—"No. 1—Salvation by Grace."

"Number Two."

"No. 2—Salvation by Grace."

Dan—"No. 2—Salvation by Grace."

"Number Three."

"No. 3—Salvation by Grace."

Dan—"No. 3—Salvation by Grace."

Nobody had laughed. But it was a trying time.

"Number Four," (hesitatingly).

"No. 4—Salvation by Grace."

Dan—"No. 4—Salvation by Grace."

"Number Five," (nervously).

"No. 5—Salvation by —"

Elder—"Silence, you infernal idiot! By everything that's sacred, if either of you ever mention this, it shall cost you dearly!" And then he rushed furiously about to tear up the ground or destroy somebody. It was a pity the cabin-boy took all the books from one shelf.

But, as I was going to say when this reminiscence intruded itself upon me, we had nothing much on board the ship to read but travels in Palestine, and very naturally we got Palestine drilled into us thoroughly. All these books of travels managed, somehow, to leave with us a sort of vague notion that Palestine was very beautiful—a notion that we were about to enter a modified form of fairy land. And so a bitter disappointment awaited us. The fairy land was modified too much. It was a howling wilderness instead of a garden. This has incensed us against all our Holy Land authors, and inclines us to say intemperate things about the land itself.

But that was a funny library. When we got to the Azores, not a scrap of paper could be found in the ship that referred to those islands. As we cleared Gibraltar we could hardly find out from any book on board whether Gibraltar was a rock, or an island, or a statue, or a piece of poetry. And without meaning any disrespect to the passengers, there were not a great many on board who could tell us. We were bound for France, England, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Greece, Turkey, Africa, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and many a noted island in the sea, and yet all our library, almost, was made up of Holy Land, Plymouth Collection and Salvation by Grace! Bear with us if we seem exasperated at Palestine, for we have suffered much.

We bathed in the Dead Sea, but that was only another infamous deception. It did not make our bodies smart as if ten million needles were thrust into them; it did not blister us; it did not cover us with a slimy ooze and confer upon us an atrocious fragrance. It was an aggravating disappointment. It did not hurt at all hardly; it was not very slimy; and I could not discover that we smelt really any worse than we have always smelt since we have been in Palestine. It was only a different kind of smell, but not conspicuous on that account, because we have a great deal of variety in that respect. We don't smelt, here on the Jordan, the same as we did in Jerusalem; and we didn't smelt in Jerusalem just as we did in Nazareth, or Jacksonport, or Steubenville, or any of those other wretched ancient towns in Galilee. No, we change all the time, and generally for the worse. We do our own washing.

We floundered around in the Dead Sea, but we could not sink. It is utterly impossible. When we stood up in two-fathom water, our heads, our shoulders, and fully one-half of our breasts remained out of the water; we could lie down and clasp our knees up to our chins, with our heads clear out, and nothing of us would be submerged but a portion of our bodies. A man might lie on his back and read or smoke very comfortably as long as he kept still; but the moment he moved he would flirt over on his face. I doubt if he could sink to his chin, however, even with a twenty-pound weight hung to his heels—thus wonderfully buoyant is the water. Do you suppose Sodom and Gomorrah are under there yet? They must have floated to the top. Poor Lot's wife is gone—I never think of her without feeling sad. The cattle must have got her. There is something infinitely touching in the thought. Hers was too sad a history to jest about. I might speak with levity of Lot himself, or of Goliath, or many other of the Patriarchs, but whenever I think of poor Lot's wife I feel no longer in a mood for flippant speeches. Peace to her sediment!

The Jordan is a hard road to travel, I believe. It is true. The road to the Jordan from any place, is a particularly hard one to travel. One cannot find worse—at least out of Palestine. And yet the road from Jerusalem down here to Jericho and the Jordan is the best in Palestine; I am ready to admit that. I always thought the river Jordan was four thousand miles long and thirty-five miles wide, and so I have been miserably disappointed again. It is only ninety miles long, and so crooked that a man don't know which side of it he is on half the time. In going ninety miles it don't get over more than fifty miles of ground. It is not any wider than Broadway in New York. How is it that such a creek as this has imposed itself upon me all my life as a mighty river? This is a country of disappointments. Nothing in it is as extraordinary as one expects it to be. There is that Sea of Galilee and that shabby Dead Sea—neither of them twenty miles long or thirteen wide. And yet all my life I thought they were sixty-thousand miles in diameter. Woe is me! MARK TWAIN.

NOTE.—This was written in place of No. 51, which was mislaid for a time, but was found subsequently.

M. T.