

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM 'MARK TWAIN.'

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

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Dyspeptic Sight-Seers—Local Disturbances— Some New Points about Lazarus—A Bedouin Raid—Ancient Jericho.

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Rebellion in the Camp.

We cast up the account. It footed up pretty fairly. There was nothing more at Jerusalem to be seen, except the houses of Dives and Lazarus of the parable, and "Moreover the dog;" the Tombs of the Kings; ditto of the Judges; the spot where they stoned one disciple to death, and beheaded another; the room and the table made celebrated by the Last Supper; the fig-tree that Jesus withered; a dozen of historical places about Gethsemane and the Mount of Olives, and fifteen or twenty others in different portions of the city itself. We began to see our way through. It was suggested that we might hire parties to visit these things for us and thus see them by proxy, but after some deliberation it was decided that such a course would be discreditable. Still, we had got altogether enough, for the present. There was open rebellion in the camp—undisguised mutiny. There was a strong disposition to lie around the hotel and smoke. A diversion must be tried, or demoralization would ensue. The Jordan, Jericho and the Dead Sea were suggested. The remainder of Jerusalem would keep till we got back. The journey was approved and the dragoman notified.

I have not overdrawn the picture. There were only two men in our party of eight whose sight-seeing enthusiasm did not thoroughly and completely wear out before we finished Jerusalem, and from what I can learn we held out longer than any other party of the whole army of pilgrims we brought into the Holy Land. The wild enthusiasm of Palestine sight-seers is to be found only in the books they write, I think—not in their actual experiences. One of our pilgrims went up and saw the sun rise on Olivet. I did not hear of any other that did it. One is always jaded, here, always languid and weary. His brain is so worn and racked with the day's accumulations of knowledge when he comes home at night, that it is like an overloaded stomach, and he feels as if it would be an unspeakable relief to take a mental emetic and throw up everything he ever learned in his life.

Dismal Rumors.

At nine in the morning the caravan was before the hotel door and we were at breakfast. There was a commotion about the place. Rumors of war and bloodshed were flying everywhere. The lawless Bedouins in the Valley of the Jordan and the deserts down by the Dead Sea were up in arms, and were going to destroy all comers. They had had a battle with a troop of Turkish cavalry and defeated them; several men killed. They had shut up the inhabitants of a village and a Turkish garrison in an old fort near Jericho, and were besieging them. They had marched upon a camp of our pilgrims by the Jordan, and they only saved their lives by stealing away and flying to Jerusalem under whip and spur in the darkness of the night. Another of our parties had been fired on from an ambush and then attacked in the open day. Shots were fired on both sides. Fortunately there was no bloodshed. We spoke with the very pilgrim who had fired one of the shots, and learned from his own lips how, in this imminent deadly peril, only the cool courage of the pilgrims, their strength of numbers and imposing display of war material, had saved them from utter destruction. It was reported that the Consul had requested that no more of our pilgrims should go to the Jordan while this state of things lasted; and further, that he was unwilling that any more should go, at least without an unusually strong military guard. Here was trouble. But with the horses at the door and everybody aware of what they were there for, what would you have done? Acknowledge that you were afraid, and backed shamefully out? Hardly. It would not be human nature, where there were so many women. You would have done as we did: said you were not afraid of a million Bedouins—and made your will and proposed quietly to yourself to take up an unostentatious position in the rear of the procession.

Lazarus.

This was all after we got beyond Bethany. We stopped at the miserable mud village of Bethany, an hour out from Jerusalem. They showed us the tomb of Lazarus. I had rather live in it than in any house in the town. And they showed us also a large "Fountain of Lazarus," and in the centre of the village the ancient dwelling of Lazarus. Lazarus appears to have been a man of property. The legends of the Sunday Schools do him great injustice; they give one the impression that he was poor. It is because they get him mixed up with that disreputable Lazarus who had no merit but his virtue, and that never has been as respectable as money. The house of Lazarus is a three story edifice, of stone masonry, but the accumulated rubbish of ages has buried all of it but the upper story. We took candles and descended to the dismal cell-like chambers where Jesus sat at meat with Martha and Mary, and conversed with them about their brother. We could not but look upon these old dingy apartments with a more than common interest.

But we went away from there with increased respect for Lazarus as a man of property. He must have stood high in the village. I love to think of Lazarus, now, as having been Mayor of Bethany at some time or other. If the ancient archives of the village could be found, no doubt they would prove that he had held that office in his time, and flourished gallantly at the head of torchlight processions when the firemen turned out. It is pleasant to me to cherish the harmless fancy that somewhere underneath that mountain of rubbish at Bethany there are stained and mouldering election tickets with "VOTE FOR LAZARUS" on them.

Bedouins!

We had had a glimpse, from a mountain top, of the Dead Sea, lying like a blue shield in the plain of the Jordan, and now we were marching down a close, flaming, rugged, desolate defile, where no living creature could enjoy life except, perhaps, a lizard or a salamander. It was such a dreary, repulsive, horrible solitude! It was the "wilderness" where John preached, with camel's hair about his loins—raiment enough—but he never could have got his locusts and wild honey here. We were poking along down through this villainous gorge, every man in the rear. Our guards—two gorgeous young Arab shieks, with cargoes of swords, guns, pistols and daggers on board—were leading ahead.

"Bedouins!" Every man shrunk up and disappeared in his clothes like a mud-turtle. My first impulse was to dash forward and destroy the Bedouins. My second was to dash to the rear to see if there were any coming in that direction. I acted on the latter impulse. So did all the others. If any Bedouins had approached us, then, from that point of the compass, they would have paid dearly for their rashness. We all remarked that, afterwards. There would have been scenes of riot and bloodshed there that no pen could describe. I know that, because each man told what he would have done, individually; and such a medley of strange and unheard of inventions of cruelty you could not conceive of. One man said he had calmly made up his mind to perish where he stood, if need be; but never yield an inch; he was going to wait, with deadly patience till he could count the stripes upon the first Bedouin's jacket, and then count them and let him have it. Another was going to sit still till the first lance reached within an inch of his breast, and then dodge it and seize it. I forbear to tell what he was going to do to that Bedouin that owned it. It makes my blood run cold to think of it. Another was going to scalp such Bedouins as fell to his share, and take his bald-headed sons of the desert home with him alive for trophies. But the wild-eyed pilgrim rhapsodist was silent. His orbs gleamed with a deadly light, but his lips moved not. Anxiety grew, and he was questioned. If he had got a Bedouin, what would he have done with him—shot him? He smiled a smile of grim contempt and shook his head. Would he have stabbed him? Another shake. Would he have quartered him—flayed him? More shakes. Oh! horror, what would he have done? "Eat him!"

That was the awful sentence that thundered from his lips. What was grammar to a desperado like that? I was glad in my heart that I had been spared these scenes of malignant carnage. No Bedouins attacked our terrible rear. And none attacked the front. The new-comers were only a reinforcement of cadaverous Arabs, in shirts and bare legs, sent far ahead of us to brandish rusty guns, and shout and brag, and carry on like a pack of lunatics, and thus scare away all bands of marauding Bedouins that might lurk about our path. What a shame it is that armed white Christians must travel under guard of wretched vermin like this as a protection against the prowling vagabonds of the desert who are always going to do something desperate, but never do it. I may as well mention here that on our whole trip we saw no Bedouins, and had no more use for an Arab guard than we could have had for patent leather boots and stove-pipe hats. The Bedouins that attacked the other parties of pilgrims so fiercely were provided for the occasion by the Arab guards of those parties, and shipped from Jerusalem for temporary service as Bedouins. They met together in full view of the pilgrims, after the battle, and took lunch; divided the bucksheesh extorted in the season of danger, and then accompanied the cavalcade home to the city! The nuisance of an Arab guard is one which is created by the Sheiks and the Bedouins together, for mutual profit, it is said, and no doubt there is a good deal of truth in it.

Ancient Jericho, etc.

We visited the fountain that the prophet Elisha sweetened (it is sweet yet); where he remained some time and was fed by the ravens. The ravens got tired of dividing up, perhaps, and left. None are there now. Ancient Jericho is not very picturesque as a ruin. When Joshua promenaded around it seven times, some three thousand years ago, and blew it down with his trumpet, he gave it such a terrific final blast that he hardly left enough of it to swear by. To re-build it has always been an unpopular move, on account of a curse that is still on record and in force against any speculator that may take a notion to embark in the enterprise. It has never been attempted but once, and then trouble followed. We camped near Jericho.

MARK TWAIN.