

# THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

## LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

(SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.)

[Number Eight.]

Como and Tahoe--The Lady of Lyons a Myth  
---The Barber of Seville and other Barbarous People---A Specimen of Brown's French-English---A Brief Essay on Old Paintings---A Yankee Serenade on the Lake of Como.

LAKE OF COMO, July, 1867.  
The Lake.

EDITORS ALTA: I did not like it yesterday. I thought Lake Tahoe was much finer. I have to confess now, however, that I was too hasty. I always had an idea that Como was a vast basin of water, like Tahoe, shut in by great mountains. Well, the border of huge mountains is here, but the lake itself is not a basin. It is as crooked as the Sacramento River, and not much wider. There is not a yard of low ground on either side of it--nothing but endless chains of mountains that spring abruptly from the water's edge, and tower to altitudes varying from a thousand to two thousand feet. Their craggy sides are clothed with greenest vegetation, and white specks of houses peep out from the luxuriant foliage everywhere--even perched upon jutting and picturesque pinnacles a thousand feet above your head.

Again, for miles along the shores, handsome country seats, surrounded by gardens and groves, sit fairly in the water, sometimes in nooks carved by Nature out of the vine-hung precipices, and with no ingress or egress save by boats. Some have great broad stone staircases leading down to the water, with heavy stone balustrades ornamented with statuary and fancifully adorned with creeping vines and bright-colored flowers--for all the world like a drop-curtain in a theatre, and lacking nothing but long-waisted, high-heeled women and plumed gallants in silken tights coming down to go serenading in the splendid gondolas in waiting.

A great feature of Como's attractiveness is the multitude of pretty houses and gardens that cluster upon its shores and on its mountain sides. They look so snug and so homelike, and at eventide when everything seems to slumber, and the music of the vesper bells comes stealing over the water, one half believes that nowhere else than on the Lake of Como can there be found such a paradise of peacefulness and repose.

From my window here in Bellaggio, I have a view of the other side of the lake now, which is as beautiful as a picture. A scarred and wrinkled precipice rises to a height of eighteen hundred feet; on a tiny bench half way up its vast wall, sits a little snow-flake of a church, no bigger than a marten-box, apparently; skirting the base of the cliff are a hundred orange groves and gardens, flecked with glimpses of the white dwellings that are buried in them; in front, three or four gondolas lie idle upon the water--and in the burnished mirror of the lake, mountain, chapel, houses, groves and boats are counterfeited so brightly and so clearly that one scarce knows where the reality leaves off and the reflection begins!

The surroundings of this picture are fine. A mile away, a grove-plumed promontory juts far into the lake and glasses its palace in the blue depths; in midstream a boat is cutting the shining surface and leaving a long track behind, like a ray of light; the mountains beyond are veiled in a dreamy purple haze that is unspeakably beautiful; far in the opposite direction a tumbled mass of domes and verdant slopes and valleys bars the lake, and here indeed does distance lend enchantment to the view--for on this broad canvas, sun and clouds and the richest of atmospheres have blended a thousand tints together, and over its surface the filmy lights and shadows drift, hour after hour, and glorify it with a beauty that seems reflected out of Heaven itself. Beyond all question, this is the richest, softest, dreamiest picture I have ever looked upon.

Last night the scenery was striking and picturesque. On the other side crags and trees, and snowy houses were pictured in the glassy lake with a wonderful distinctness, and streams of light from many a distant window shot far abroad over the still waters. On this side, near at hand, great white palaces, splendid with moonlight, glared out from the midst of dense masses of foliage, robed in the gloomiest of shadows, cast from the beetling cliff above--and down in the margin of the lake every feature of the weird picture was faithfully repeated.

To day we have idled through a wonder of a garden attached to a ducal estate--but enough of description is sufficient, I judge. I suspect it is the same place that the gardener's son roped in the Lady of Lyons with, but I do not know. You know the passage:

"A deep vale,  
Shut out by Alpine hills from the rude world,  
Near a clear lake margined by fruits of gold  
And whispering myrtles;  
Gleaming softest skies, cloudless,  
Save with rare and rosy shadows;  
A palace, lifting to eternal heaven its marbled walls,  
From out a glossy bower of coolest foliage musical with birds."

That is all very well, except the "clear" part of the lake. It certainly is clearer than a great many lakes, but how dull its waters are compared with the wonderful transparency of our Lake Tahoe! I speak of the north shore of Tahoe, where one can count the scales on a trout at a depth of a hundred and eighty feet. I have tried to get this statement off at par here, but with no success; so I have been obliged to negotiate it at fifty per cent. discount. At this rate I find some takers, perhaps you may as well receive it on the same terms--ninety feet instead of a hundred and eighty.

This lake is a little deeper than Tahoe, if people here tell the truth. They say it is eighteen hundred feet deep at this point, but it don't look a dead enough blue for that. Tahoe is 1,525 feet deep in the centre, by the State Geologist's measurement. They say the great peak opposite this town is 5,000 feet high; but I feel sure that three thousand feet of that statement is a good honest lie. The lake is a mile wide, here, and hence to its northern extremity--sixteen miles; hence to its southern extremity--fifteen miles--it is not over half a mile wide in any place, I should think--but it is excessively crooked and very picturesque. Its snow-clad mountains one hears so much about are only seen occasionally, and then, far in the distance, the Alps. Tahoe is ten to eighteen miles wide, and its snow-clad peaks enclose it at all seasons like a wall.

I am losing faith in all our pet traditions. Both here and in Lyons I have inquired around and around for the Lady of Lyons, but never a rascally citizen has ever heard of her. I am satisfied now that she is a swindle. After a good deal of worry and tramping under a roasting Spanish sun, I managed to tree the Barber of Seville, and I was sorry for it afterwards. With all that fellow's reputation, he was the worst barber on earth. If I am not pleased with the Two Gentlemen of Verona when I get there next week, I shall not hunt for any more lions.

Speaking of barbers reminds me that in Europe they do not have any barber-shops. The barbers come to your room and skin you. (I use that term because it is more correctly descriptive than shave.) They have a few trifling barber-shops in Paris, but the heaviest establishment of the kind we could find only boasted three barbers. There, as everywhere else in Europe, as far as our experience goes, they put a bowl under your chin and slop your face with water, and then rub it with a cake of soap, (except at Gibraltar, where they spit on the soap, and use no bowl, because it is handier;) then they begin to shave, and you begin to swear; if you have got a good head of profanity on, you see the infliction through; but if you run out of blasphemy, there is nothing for it but to shut down on the operation till you recuperate. The further I go, the worse the barbers get. Along, at first, it answered well enough to swear in English, but I do not think I could worry with another Italian shave unless I knew how to swear in seven different languages. My beard must grow now till I see America again.

I think they don't use soap, much, in these countries. They never put any in your room, and when you order it they put it in the bill. They don't even keep soap in the public bath-houses. This reminds me of Brown's note to the landlord in Paris. I thought it rather a gem of French composition:

"PARIS, le 7 Juillet.  
"Monsieur le Landlord--Sir: Pourquoi don't you mettez some savon in your dang bed-chambers? Est-ce que vous pensez I am going to steal it? La nuit-passee you charged me pour deux chandelles when I only had one; hier vous avez charged me avec glace when I hadn't any at all; tous les jours you are coming some fresh game or other on me twice. Savon is a necessary de la vie de cet h6tel or bust. You hear me. Apr6s cet avis, vous trouvez 6 votre int6r6t 6 go slow, anyways sur le savon question. Allons,  
BROWN."

I remonstrated against the sending of this note, because it was so mixed up that the landlord would never be able to make head or tail out of it; but Brown said he guessed the old man could read the French of it and average the rest.

Brown's French is bad enough, but it isn't much worse than the English one finds in advertisements all over Italy every day. For instance, observe the pointed card of this hotel where we tarry at present:

"This hotel which the best it is in Italy and most superb, is handsome locate on the best situation of the lake, with the most splendid view near the Villas Melzy, to the King of Belgid, and Serbelloni. This hotel have recently enlarged, do offer all commodities on moderate price, at the strangers gentlemen who wish spend the seasons on the Lake Come."

How is that, for a specimen? In the hotel is a handsome little chapel where an English clergyman is employed to preach to such of the guests of the house as hail from England and America, and this fact is also set forth in barbarous English in the same advertisement. Wouldn't you have supposed that the adventurous linguist who framed the card would have known enough to submit it to that clergyman before he sent it to the printer?

In Milan, in an ancient tumble down old ruin of a church, is the mournful wreck of the most celebrated painting in the world--"The Last Supper," by Leonardo da Vinci. We don't know any more about pictures than a kangaroo does about metaphysics, but of course we went there to see the wonderful fresco, once so beautiful, always so worshipped by masters in art, and forever to be famous in song and story. And the first thing that occurred was the infliction on us of a placard fairly reeking with rotten English. Take a morsel of it:

"Bartholomew (that is the first figure on the left hand side at the spectator,) uncertain and doubtful about what he thinks to have heard, and upon which he wants to be assured by himself at Christ and by no others."

Good, isn't it? And then Peter is described as "argumenting in a threatening and angrily condition at Judas Iscariot."

This paragraph recalls the picture. And now forevermore I am down on the old masters. "The Last Supper" is painted on the dilapidated wall of what was a little chapel attached to the main church in ancient times, I suppose. It is battered and scarred in every direction, and stained and discolored by time, and Napoleon's horses kicked the legs off most of the disciples when they were stabled there more than half a century ago. So, what is left of the once miraculous picture? Simon looks seedy; John looks sick, and half of the other blurred and damaged apostles have a general expression of discouragement about them. To us, the great uncultivated, it is the last thing in the world to call a picture. Brown said it looked like an old fire-board. The language was vulgar and irreverent, but it was wonderfully accurate in description. He seemed to regard the guide with an evil eye, and doubtless considered him a sort of impostor for bringing us to such a place. At last he said:

"Is this fellow dead?"  
"Who?"  
"That dobed this."  
"Da Vinci?" Oh, yes, Monsieur--three hundred year."

This information seemed to give Brown great satisfaction, and the gloom passed away from his countenance.

I recognized the old picture in a moment--the Saviour with bowed head seated at the centre of a long, rough table with scattering fruits and dishes upon it, and six disciples on either side in their long robes, talking to each other--the picture from which all engravings and all copies have been made for three centuries. I have never known an attempt to paint the Lord's Supper differently. The world seems to have become settled in the belief, long ago, that it is not possible for human genius to outdo this creation of Da Vinci's. I

suppose painters will go on copying it as long as any of the original is left visible to the eye. There were a dozen enshels in the room, and as many artists transferring the great picture to their canvases. Fifty proofs of steel engravings and lithographs were scattered around, too. And as usual, I could not help noticing how superior the copies were to the original, that is, to my uneducated eye. Wherever you find a Raphael a Rubens, a Michael Angelo, a Caracci, or a Da Vinci (and we see them every day), you find artists copying them, and the copies are always the handsomest. Maybe the originals were handsome when they were new, but they have got over it now.

I have got enough of the old masters! Brown says he has "hook" them, and I think I will shake them, too. You wander through a mile of picture galleries and stare stupidly at ghastly old nightmares done in lam-bloom and lightning, and listen to the ecstatic encomiums of the guides, and try to get up some enthusiasm, but it won't come--you merely feel a gentle thrill when the grand names of the old kings of art fall upon your ears--nothing more. Stowed away among the treasures of the Milan Cathedral they showed us a precious little Titian a foot square--value, 30,000 francs. Brown did not try to conceal his contempt for this thing. He told the priest there was a man in San Francisco who could paint pictures infinitely greater than that--some as much as forty feet long--dash them off in two weeks and sell them for a hundred and fifty dollars.

Well, Dan and the Doctor are going out in the lake to take a swim, and I suppose we may as well go along also. Boats were abroad in every direction, last night, filled with ladies and gentlemen who enlivened the tranquil scene with music, and to-night we propose to do some serenading on our own account. We have got an accordion. She is a little shaky on her upper notes and has lost a tooth or so on her bass ones; but I reckon she will do.

MARK TWAIN.