# THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

## LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

[Number One.]

### A Glimpse of a Strange Land---Out of the World. A Slumbering People---Curious Manners and Customs---Oddities and Curiosities---The Pains of Donkey Riding---"John Brown" at the Azores.

HORTA, FAYAL, June 19th.

**The Azores.**

EDITORS ALTA: After ten days of strong head winds that retarded our progress, and a heavy sea that kept about twenty of the passengers sea-sick all the time, we hove in sight of this almost unknown land this morning early.

The Azores Islands lie on nearly the same parallel of latitude as San Francisco and New York, and are 2,400 miles straight east of the latter city. They are nine or ten in number. The extent of this island of Fayal (pronounced Fy-all) is about 28,000 acres—too large for one farm and not large enough for two. The islands belong to the Crown of Portugal, and were discovered about four hundred and fifty years ago. They are composed of volcanic hills and mountains, and of course the soil is very rich. The hills are carefully cultivated clear to their summits, and so are the mountains up to an altitude of eight or nine hundred feet. Every farm is cut up into innumerable little squares, by walls of lava, built to protect the growing products from the rude winds that blow here, and this gives a hill-side the semblance of a vast checker-board. All the landscape is green and beautiful; but it is a quiet, pastoral sort of beauty, for there are no rugged features about the mountains—all their outlines are soft and gently curved. Even the Great Pico rises up out of the sea with a smooth unbroken swell to the height of 7,613 feet—a colossal pyramid of softest green, without break or breach of any kind to mar its exquisite symmetry.

There is a Civil Governor here, but, to use the language of the vulgar, there is a Military Governor who "holds the age" on him, and can retire him and suspend the civil law whenever in his judgment it is proper to do so.

**Going Ashore.**

This town of Horta sits in the lap of a cluster of cultivated hills, and its snowy houses peep out everywhere from a mass of bright vegetation which is almost tropical in its variety and luxuriance. A little stone fort, armed with a dozen small cannon, commands the harbor, but I suppose our navy could take it if it were necessary. Two of the guns are two hundred and fifty years old. If they ever touch a match to them they will explode and destroy the garrison.

The moment our anchor was dropped we were surrounded by a swarm of chattering, gesticulating, dark-skinned, piratical looking Portuguese boatmen, who could not make us understand what they wanted, and were as unable to understand what we said in reply. I thought there must necessarily be a Californian in the party, though, and so it proved. I found one, and then we were all right. He had served the devil in San Francisco, and could speak our language well enough for purposes of lying and swindling, and we engaged his boat and went ashore.

A crowd of bare-footed, patched and ragged and dirty vagabonds, of both sexes, received us on the wharf, and with one hospitable impulse held out their hands. With one grateful impulse we seized the hands and shook them. And then we saw that their hospitality was a vain delusion—they only extended their hands to beg.

**Noted Americans.**

We ploughed through, and like dutiful citizens went to pay our respects to the American Consul, Mr. Dabney. His house is commodious, and stands in the midst of a forest of rare trees and shrubs, and beautiful plants and flowers. The grounds contain eighteen acres and are laid out with excellent taste. The Dabney family are from New England, and have lived here and held this Consulship, father and son, for sixty years. They have grown to be almost the wealthiest people in the island, and are perhaps altogether the most influential and the best beloved. The common people reverence them as their protectors and their truest friends.

Two of the junior Dabney's married daughters of Professor Webster, who was executed in Boston twelve or fifteen years ago, for the murder of Dr. Parkman. The girls were very young then, but highly educated and accomplished. The Webster family removed to Fayal immediately after their great misfortune came upon them, to hide their sorrows from a curious world, and have remained here in exile ever since. I remember a print of that day which pictured the young Webster girls in [illegible] recognize them in the fine, matronly, dignified ladies we saw to-day. Their exile was well chosen. In no civilized land could they have found so complete a retirement from the busy, prying world. This island is almost unknown in America—and everywhere else, no doubt. There is scarcely anything about it in print anywhere, and when you ask a wise and well-read man what its condition and characteristics are, he answers with prompt decision that he don't know. The island exports nothing to speak of, and does not import more than double that much. Nobody comes here, and nobody goes away. News is a thing unknown in Fayal. A thirst for it is a passion equally unknown. A Portuguee of average intelligence inquired to-day if our civil war was over? because, he said, somebody had told him it was—or at least it ran in his mind that somebody had told him something like that! And when a passenger gave an officer of the garrison copies of the *Tribune*, the *Herald* and *Times*, he was surprised to find later news in them from Lisbon than he had just received by the little monthly steamer. He was told that it came by cable. He said he knew they had tried to lay a cable ten years ago, but it had been in his mind, somehow, that they hadn't succeeded!

**Slumberdom.**

It is a mighty slow place—slow and dull and sleepy. They plough with a wooden plough, such as old Abraham used; they only put one grain of corn in a hill, and don't make any hills, either; they have three holidays a week, and loaf the balance of the time; they scorn threshing-machines and all other unholy inventions with the true Jesuit wisdom, which says that ignorance is bliss and progress is sedition. So an ox tramps out their wheat on a threshing-floor, after the fashion of the time of Moses, when it was commanded that the ox that trod out the grain should not be muzzled. But altogether the slowest and funniest thing is the windmill they grind their corn with. It grinds about ten bushels a day; the shelled corn is put into a hopper, from which it flows down a trough and into the mill-stones—and a lazy lout of a Portuguee leans on those stones all day long, and keeps the corn back with his hand and permits only a proper quantity to fall upon the stones at a time. Now, how long do you suppose a Yankee would stand there before he would invent some way of making that trough shake, and feed the mill intelligently itself? Half the mill is stone—ten feet of it—and the upper half is heavy woodwork, and to it is attached the sails; when the wind don't blow right they hitch on some jackasses and slew that whole upper story around till the sails are brought in proper position! How is that for inspired stupidity? They don't even know enough to make the sails movable, instead of the house. I suppose if they were to build an observatory they would make the telescope stationary and turn the edifice to suit the position of the stars.

The only species of vehicle they have is a cumbersome cart with a great wicker-work body on it and solid wheels cut from the ends of logs, and the axle is made fast in the wheel and both turn together. They have no stoves and no chimneys. They build their fires in the centre of the single room a family occupies, and build it on the floor—some of the smoke escapes through channels built in the walls, and a good deal of it don't. Most freight transportation is done on little donkeys considerably larger than a cat, but not larger than an ordinary calf. The donkey and the balance of the family all eat and sleep in the same room. The grass intended for the donkey's breakfast is made into a pallet for him to sleep on, and if he gets hungry in the night he eats up his pillows, bolster, bedding and everything else. The donkey is not so ignorant as his master, has less vermin, is not so uncleanly, is better informed and more dignified, and is altogether the most worthy and respectable of the two. Neither are allowed to vote, and, doubtless, neither desire it. Laborers' wages are twenty to twenty-six cents a day, and those of mechanics from forty to sixty. It is enough to exist on, and that is all these people care for. Laborers do not get suddenly rich here, it is said.

**Jesuit Church.**

It is in communities like this that Jesuit humbuggery flourishes. We visited a Jesuit cathedral nearly two hundred years old, and found in it a piece of the veritable cross upon which our Savior was crucified. It was polished and hard, and in as excellent a state of preservation as if the dread tragedy on Calvary had occurred yesterday instead of nearly twenty centuries ago. But these confiding people believe in that piece of wood unhesitatingly.

In a chapel of the cathedral is an altar with facings of solid silver—at least they call it so, and I think myself it would go a couple of hundred to the ton—and before it is kept forever burning a small lamp. A devout lady who died, left money and contracted for unlimited masses for the repose of her soul, and also stipulated that this lamp should be kept lighted always, day and night. She did all this before she died, you understand. It is a very small lamp, and a very dim one, and I don't think it would set her back much if it went out on her.

The great altar of the cathedral, and also three or four minor ones, are a perfect mass of gilt jim-cracks and gingerbread, and reminded me of the tawdry trumpery of the Chinese Temple in San Francisco. And they have got more old rusty apostles standing around the filagree work, some on one leg and some with one eye out, but a gamey look in the other, and some with two or three fingers gone, and some with not enough nose left to blow—all of them crippled and discouraged, and fitter subjects for the hospital than the cathedral.

The walls of the chancel are of porcelain, all pictured over with figures of almost life size, very elegantly wrought, and dressed in the fanciful costumes of two centuries ago. The design was a history of something or somebody, but none of us were learned enough to read the story. The old father, reposing under a stone close by, dated 1686, might have told us if he could have risen. But which he didn't.

**Donkey Riding.**

As we came down through the town, we encountered a squad of little donkeys ready saddled for use. The saddles were peculiar, to say the least. They consisted of a sort of saw-buck, with a small mattrass on it, and this furniture covered about half the donkey. There were no stirrups, but really such supports were not needed—to use such a saddle was the next thing to riding a dinner table—there was ample support clear out to one's knee joints. A pack of ragged Portuguese muleteers crowded around us, offering their beasts at half a dollar an hour—more rascality to the stranger, for the market price is sixteen cents. Half a dozen of us mounted the ridiculous affairs, Brown among the number, though he inveighed bitterly against the indignity of being compelled to make such a figure of himself through the principal streets of a town of 10,000 inhabitants.

We started. It was not a trot, a gallop, or a canter, but a regular stampede, and made up of all possible or conceivable gaits. No spurs were necessary. There was a muleteer to every donkey and a dozen volunteers beside, and they banged the donkeys with their goad-stocks, and pricked them with their spikes, and shouted something that sounded like "*Sekki-yah!*" and kept up a din and a racket that was worse than Bedlam itself. These rascals were all on foot, but no matter, they were always up to time—they can outrun and outlast a jackass. Altogether ours was the liveliest and the queerest procession I ever witnessed, and drew crowded audiences to the balconies wherever we went.

Brown could do nothing at all with his donkey. The brute scampered zigzag across the road and the others ran into him; he scraped Brown against carts and the corners of houses; the road was fenced in with high stone walls, and the donkey gave him a polishing first on one side and then on the other, but never once took the middle; he finall came to[y]

the house he was born in and darted into the parlor, scraping Brown off at the doorway. After remounting, Brown said to the muleteer, "Now, that's enough, you know; you go slow hereafter." But the fellow knew no English and did not understand, so he simply said, "*Sekki-yah!*" and the donkey was off again like a shot. He turned a corner suddenly, and Brown went over his head. And, to speak truly, every mule stumbled over the two, and the whole cavalcade was piled up in a heap. No harm done. A fall from one of those donkeys is of little more consequence than rolling off a sofa. The donkeys all stood still after the catastrophe, and waited for their dismembered saddles to be patched up and put on by the noisy muleteers. Brown was pretty angry, and wanted to swear, but every time he opened his mouth his animal did also, and let off a series of brays that drowned all other sounds. Of course, this made Brown furious; but when he stooped down to pick up his hat and the donkey hit him behind, he just became a maniac. He waltzed into the midst of those donkeys and drivers, and in two minutes he had cleared a space around him large enough to review an army in, almost.

It was jolly, clattering around the breezy hills and through the beautiful cañons. There was that rare thing, novelty, about it; it was a fresh, new, exhilarating sensation, this donkey riding, and worth a hundred worn and threadbare home pleasures.

**Where the Russ Pavement Comes from.**

The roads were a wonder, and well they might be. Here was an island with only a handful of people in it—25,000—and yet such superb roads do not exist in the United States outside of Central Park. Everywhere you go, in any direction, you find either a hard, smooth, level thoroughfare, just sprinkled with black lava sand, and bordered with little gutters neatly paved with small smooth pebbles, (a counterfeit of the Central Park roads,) or compactly paved ones like Broadway. They talk much of the Russ pavement in New York, and call it a new invention—yet here they have been using it in this remote little isle of the sea for two hundred years! Every street in Horta is handsomely paved with the heavy Russ blocks, and the surface is neat and true as a floor—not marred by holes like Broadway. And every road is fenced in by tall, solid lava walls, which will last a thousand years in this land where frost is unknown. They are very thick, and are often plastered and whitewashed, and capped with projecting slabs of cut stone. Trees from gardens above hang their swaying tendrils down, and contrast their bright green with the whitewash or the black lava of the walls, and make them beautiful. The trees and vines stretch across these narrow roadways sometimes, and so shut out the sun that you seem to be riding through a tunnel. On each side of these Russ roads, also, is a little gutter, paved with small round pebbles. The pavements, the roads and the bridges, are all government work.

The bridges are of a single span—a single arch—of cut stone, without a support, and paved on top with flags of lava and ornamental pebble work. Everywhere are walls, walls, walls—and all of them tasteful and handsome—and eternally substantial; and everywhere are those marvellous pavements, so neat, so smooth, and so indestructible. And if ever roads and streets, and the outsides of houses, were perfectly free from any sign or semblance of dirt, or dust, or mud, or uncleanness of any kind, it is Horta, it is Fayal. The lower classes, in their persons and their domiciles, are dirty—but there it stops—the town and the island are miracles of cleanliness.

I think Horta was not built for a day, but for all time. The houses are made of thick walls of lava, plastered outside and whitewashed till they gleam among the green vegetation like snow—and they are roofed with imperishable tiles. There is nothing about them that can burn—even the floors are of packed earth or paved with stone.

**Back Again.**

Well, we arrived home again after a ten-mile excursion, and the irrepressible muleteers scampered at our heels through the main street, goading the donkeys, shouting the everlasting "*Sekki-yah*," and singing:

"We 'ang Jeffah Davis on sowlah applah tree,
We 'ang Jeffah Davis on sowlah applah tree,
We 'ang Jeffah Davis on sowlah applah tree,
So we go mollocking on!"

When we were dismounted and it came to settling, the yelling and jawing, and swearing and quarrelling among the muleteers and with us, surpassed any row I have listened to yet. One fellow would demand a dollar an hour for the use of his donkey; another claimed half a dollar for pricking him up, another a quarter for helping in that service, and about fourteen guides presented bills for showing us the way through the town and its environs; and every devil of them was more vociferous, and more vehement, and more frantic in gesture than his neighbor. Finally, we paid one guide, and paid for one muleteer to each donkey, and told the others to go to the hottest place they could find in the other world. They probably did not start then, but there is no question that they will some day.

MARK TWAIN.