

fountain, and said to his Pagan associate of the journey:—"I would I knew the name of this delicious fountain, that I might hold it in my grateful remembrance; for never did water slake more deliciously a more oppressive thirst, than I have this day experienced."—"It is called in the Arabic language (answered the Saracen) by a name which signifies the *Diamond of the Desert*."

Before proceeding to our tents, we visited the site of ancient Jericho; here, we saw nothing but the remains of a dry mud-wall and some low mounds of rubbish. Being now tired and hungry, we quickly made our way to modern Jericho, as it is called, being all that remains of the Jericho of the New Testament, a wretched and miserable collection of tumble-down huts. At the time, several hundred Russian pilgrims, accompanied by a regiment of Turks, were encamped outside the village, having just returned from bathing in the Jordan.

Our dragoman had pitched our tents, and everything in due order; we found, also, a capital dinner ready for us, equal in every respect to such as we had at the hotel. After wandering for some time among the Russian caravan, we were serenaded by a dozen Arabs, who sang and danced with great monotony, not forgetting the usual solicitations for *bachsheesh*, which we gave; and, retiring to our tents, we were soon asleep on our camp-bedsteads; I am very sure of this, tho' I have seldom slept so soundly as I did, under the tent, in front of Jericho, after the wanderings of that day.

Next morning we were early up, and soon on our way to the Jordan. The bridge-road, which leads to the banks, is very good, for these parts; so that we were able to canter along at a fair rate, and reached, without delay, this celebrated stream so often mentioned in Holy Writ. Tradition assigns to the spot, at which we had arrived, the passage of the Israelites, as well as the baptism of our Saviour by John, his forerunner. Here the Jordan is from sixty to eighty feet in breadth, very muddy, and runs as rapidly as a mill-slucice. We bathed in the stream, and did not omit to bring away some of the water.

The reader may probably expect some descriptive details of this celebrated valley and river, and it might be satisfactory to transcribe these from the best authorities; but such a task is hardly within the scope of the writer. It is sufficient to state, that the valley, in its full breadth, about ten miles, appears from our present position to be a long plain, inclosed on either side by bold and barren ridges, in the centre is the glen, through which the Jordan flows. This valley, once so noted for its fertility, for its palm-trees and balsams, has undergone a desolating change from long neglect and the fierce effects of a powerful sun on a locality so peculiarly situated, below the level of the sea. The Jordan itself flows through this glen at a depth of from fifty to eighty feet below the plain of the valley; and this glen varies from two hundred to six hundred yards in breadth, its sides being rugged and abrupt. The banks of the river are conspicuously marked with shrubs, willows and reeds. The stream gradually widens, as it approaches its entrance into the Dead Sea, where the width is about one hundred and eighty yards, but the depth only three feet; yet, owing to the soft and slimy nature of the soil, there is no practicable ford.

Striking across the plain from the spot where we had reached the Jordan, we arrived, after an hour's canter, at the shores of the Dead Sea, and rode fully a mile along this dull and dreary lake. Its length is stated at forty miles, and its breadth varies from five to nine, its depth being, in some places, upwards of two hundred fathoms! With Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Cities of the Plain, buried in its abyss—with its own muddy and slimy shores, surrounded by cliffs of naked rock, the Lake of Asphaltites reigns amidst a most desolate and melancholy scene. Its waters, though acrid and bitter beyond conception, are beautifully clear; and, in this respect, very different from those of the Jordan: their specific gravity is so considerably greater than that of the ocean, that it is not possible for the human body to sink in them.

The surface of the Dead Sea, as I have already indicated, is upwards of 1300 feet below that of the Mediterranean. Situated at such a depth, with cliffs of limestone rising immediately from its waters, on the south and west, and with the mountains of Moab on the opposite side, girding the scene as with a wall, this extraordinary monument of God's judgment against the Cities of the Plain, presents a most solemn picture of solitary desolation. No living object is discernible around;—no fishes float beneath, no birds fly over the surface of its waters. Yet the popular stories about the poisonous exhalations rising therefrom are of a mythic origin. The nature of the climate and the effect of the sun's rays, in so sunken a locality, cause an immense evaporation and an almost insufferable heat. The former effect will account for the

disposal of the water that enters the lake, and the latter for the habitual absence of animal existence in its vicinity. We were, however, favored on this occasion with a refreshing wind; and yet, from the shores of the Dead Sea to the Greek Convent of Mar Saba, whither we next proceeded, we had a very tiresome ride of four or five hours.

During the whole day, from the time we left Jericho till we reached Mar Saba, we did not meet a living creature, except one solitary camel without a rider. There were now, on our road to the convent, precipices so steep and chasms so vast, that it was at times frightful to contemplate their nature. I gave my horse the reins, and trusted entirely to his sure footing; but right glad were we to find ourselves, at length, within the extensive walls of the Convent of Mar Saba, which has been justly regarded, in the wild grandeur of its situation, as one of the most remarkable monastic institutions in Palestine. The large and irregular edifices of the convent cover an immense space of ground, and are inclosed in and protected by ranges of stone walls. There are rock terraces and patches of garden in every direction; chambers, natural and artificial caves, chapels, and other apartments, every here and there, upon ledges of rock and elsewhere, on this once most notable site of oriental anchorites and ascetics. The tomb of St. Sabas is shewn in a small chapel, as also the den, in which this chief of anchorites spent the greater part of his life; also several other cells consecrated by the odour of sanctity. The Reception Rooms are very good; and we passed the afternoon very comfortably in this secluded convent, so admirably situated for solitude and separation from the busy scenes of life. We were politely conducted to all the sites and objects worthy of inspection; and we certainly met with a most friendly reception.

After an early breakfast, on the following morning, with our hospitable entertainers, we started on our way towards Bethlehem. When we had continued our ride for an hour, we came upon some very large flocks of goats and sheep, which very naturally reminded us, on our approach to the birth-place of Jesus, of that simple and time-honoured hymn:—"While shepherds watched their flocks by night;" or, according to the more modern version:—

"While humble shepherds watched their flocks
On Bethlehem's plains, by night," &c.

On our way we had an excellent view of Jerusalem, which appeared in the distance as perched on a mountain. I remarked, that, in approaching the Holy City by the Jaffa Gate, one is apt to imagine, from the proximity of the Mount of Olives, that the city is on comparatively flat, level ground; but at the distance at which we now viewed it, the interval of two hundred feet between the walls and Olivet was not perceptible, so that the words of the Psalmist were brought forcibly to the mind:—"As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people from henceforth even for ever."—Psalm cxxv. 2.

We soon had Bethlehem in sight,—a beautiful village on the slope of a hill, surrounded by terraces and gardens,—and the immediate vicinity, which seemed to be, to all appearance, the most luxuriant part of Palestine that we had yet seen. The terraces appeared to be carefully cultivated and kept, and are abundantly adorned with olive-trees, fig-trees, and the vine. The great Convent, on the eastern side, from its vast extent and well-chosen site, has a very striking and commanding look. There are Latin, Greek and Armenian conventual communities in connection with the Church of the Nativity—a large and imposing edifice. We were most punctiliously conducted by a Monk over every spot of interest, and our guide shewed us every place connected with the life of the Redeemer, which tradition has assigned to the birth-place of our Lord. There is no doubt that the most beautiful part of the building was erected by the Empress Helena, in the early part of the fourth century; and it is, therefore, of great antiquarian interest. The Monk conducted us down a winding staircase to the Grotto of the Nativity, descending (as it were) into a vault hewn in the rock. Here he pointed out the identical spot, where our Lord is said to have been born. It is indicated by a marble slab fixed in the pavement, with a silver star in the centre, round which are the words:—"Hic de Virgine Mariâ Jesus Christus natus est."

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