

MAR SABA.

BY TREFOIL.

How glad we all were that we had no ladies in our party as we neared the grim old tower by the Kidron gorge that marks the entrance to Mar Saba ; for had there been any we must have camped outside the gate, and that would have diminished very greatly the pleasure of the visit. I fancy that the monks would rather admit a tribe of Mohammedans than a party of lady tourists.

It was the evening of a busy day. We had travelled on horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem in the morning ; and from there had made our way slowly and wearily down through the Plain of the Shepherds, so green and brilliant with flowers, through the Field of Boaz where a blue-robed Syrian girl would have done quite well for a Ruth had there been art enough or energy enough amongst us to make a sketch ;—down by a rough bridle path, now amongst sand-hills, now down a rugged ravine, now along the edge of an alarming precipice, down, still downward (how high Jerusalem must be !), the country growing wilder, more and more barren as we neared the Dead Sea region. It is indeed the 'wilderness of Judea.' There is little life to be seen in the valleys and what there is seems to make the desolation more deep,—now and then a shepherd playing tunelessly upon a reed while his mingled sheep and goats browse in a fertile spot between the rocks, now and then a wandering Bedouin, now and then a herd of camels. It was a tiring ride and right glad we all were when, after a stretch of more level country, our dragoman dismounted to knock at the door of the old Greek Monastery. He had to knock several times and loudly before the porter took the least notice, but at last the gates opened and we entered. Up to this none of us could have had any clear idea as to where the Monastery was. Nothing is to be seen from the outside but a tower and a wall along the edge of the valley, and when the gate opens one almost expects to see nothing but the great chasm. Once through the gate a strange sight broke upon us, for, on all sides of us stretched the buildings of the Monastery built upon a hundred ledges of rock in a hundred different ways. It looked quite like an ordinary walled convent that had been pushed over the edge and had stuck on all the projections. And now we must go down again ; down, down flights of steps, until we found ourselves in a square in front of the church. "At the bottom at last" one thinks as he looks up at all the overhanging buildings, yawning caves and bits of garden on the rock-shelves. But he is not at the bottom all the same, not nearly at the bottom, as he will see when he goes out behind the Church. The Church inside was like every other one belonging to the Easterns but the paintings upon the *iconostasis* looked older than those we saw in Greece and Egypt, though like them, they appeared

more devotional than artistic, the reverse of the pictures in Italy. Some people find S. Nicholas' Chapel, across the court, more interesting, for there in a cave behind a grating are heaped together the skulls of the monks who were slain by the Persians twelve hundred years ago ! Twelve hundred years ago, indeed, this quaint old gathering of odd-looking houses and chapels clung together among the crevices of the rock ; yes for thirteen hundred years pious monks have lived here in the caves that honeycomb the cliffs, that they may worship God apart from the world. Why should people laugh at them for seeking "freedom to worship God" in their own way especially people who laud to the skies the Pilgrim Fathers for professing to have done the same thing ?

All the caves and houses are connected together by steps and tunnelled passages that nobody without a guide need hope to traverse. Monks are seen in most unexpected places, here walking up and down a few feet of rock away up above, there another sitting sewing at the mouth of a cavern, further off a third hanging out clothes on a line stretched across a crevice,—one is puzzled to know how they will get down when the bell calls them again to their devotions.

When tourists arrive a thing that is never forgotten is the displaying for sale, as mementoes of Mar Saba, walking sticks, made of lemon-wood, crosses and medals of pewter with figures of S. Sabas and his companions stamped upon them by the Monks. We did not see the library which is supposed to be a most valuable one. I wonder where it is and why it is kept so jealously guarded. Nobody is ever let into it. When we had dined in the guest-chamber and night had come on it was suggested that we should retire so as to be ready for our onward journey in the morning. But two of us preferred to go out upon a sort of balcony behind the church to have time to look about and think a little. The bright clear light of the full moon streamed down into the gorge that yawned nearly six hundred feet below us, making dome and tower and crag stand out weird and white against their shadows on the cliff side. What silence ! what desolation ! Not a living thing to be seen but a tall sad palm-tree, the one S. Sabas planted, and now and then a jackal far down below in the valley. The full moon has looked down into the chasm more than seventeen thousand times since the time that S. Sabas lived and died in his hole in the rock. That was in the days when the Roman Empire shuddered and fell before the hardy men of the north, when Leo the Great from his throne on the Vatican ruled so much of the Church, when the error of Pelagius troubled the West and Eutychianism distracted the Eastern Christians, when Saxons began to settle in South Britain and S. Patrick preached the Gospel to the Irish. When the good Saint came to his cave the first difficulty he met with, was in the form of a lion that had taken up its abode in the cave. The hermit at first took no notice of him but went on with his prayers and then fell asleep ; when the lion dragged