

THE LORD'S LAND.

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THE ROCK IN HOREB.

ON Monday morning, March 16, we rose at six o'clock, and breakfasted at seven. The pack camels were sent around through Wady es Sheik, and our company took the path directly across Nagh Hawa, "the Windy Pass." We had to dismount and walk over, so rough and precipitous was the path.

After an hour and a half's climb through this romantic notch we emerged into Wady Abu Seileh,

and began the descent on the other side, with Jebel Abu Taubeneh on our left, and Jebel Abu Jerus on our right.

We now fairly entered the plain Er Rahah, or Wilderness of Sinai, and had very soon, riding on in a south-easterly direction, the whole Sinaitic mountains grouped before and about us. We were entering their very heart, the secret place of the Most High. Ahead of us, with its clean-cut, perpendicular form rising plumb from the plain at its farthest end, was Ras Sufsafeh, and the now-conceded Mountain of the Law, the true Mount Sinai; and around, at a respectful distance, loomed up Jebel Shushseh, Jebel Sona, Jebel el Deir, and other lofty peaks, standing as mute sentinels around the Mount of God.

As we advanced, the plain grew broader and smoother. Reaching its water-shed, midway, we found that it descends gradually from this point till it breaks squarely against the foot of Sufsafeh, falling just enough in its course to make it one of the grandest audience floors that could possibly be constructed. According to Mr. Palmer, from the water-shed to the base of Ras Sufsafeh two millions of people can be accommodated with standing room, allowing, by actual survey, a square yard to each person.

We were now all excitement. Eagerly pressing forward, our dromedaries seeming to catch the inspiration, we were overawed by the realisation of our most sanguine expectations. When the silence was broken, it was simply to say, as with one voice, "This is it!" "This is the true Sinai!" On gaining the end of the plain we turned up Wady ed Deir, leaving Harun (hill of the Golden Calf) on our left, and passing Jethro's Well (the burial-ground of the Khedive's soldiers) on our right. About noon we reached, in the little Wady Shu'eib, the famous Convent of St. Catharine. Here a cluster of walled buildings nestles under the sides of the mountain, clinging there, a thing of life, to the sterile rocks. It is the only approach to civilisation in the vast wilderness.

Received, as we entered, by a fat, good-natured looking lay brother, we wound about, through passage-ways and stairways, till we reached a verandah looking toward the interior of the building, and were shown to the reception room, furnished with large divans, where one of the monks welcomed us, and we were at once served with hot coffee.

The convent belongs to the Greek Church, and was founded by the Emperor Justinian A.D. 527. It reached its highest prosperity in the years when the conventual and anchorite spirit raged most vehemently. Since then, because of its great isolation, it has gradually declined in favour, until for a long time it has been regarded as a Botany Bay of the Greek Church, to which refractory monks are sent for punishment.

After lunch we visited the church. The entrance from the vestibule is through large wooden folding doors. There is a row of granite columns (now plastered) on each side of the nave; there are side-lights above; the ceiling is flat, with

blue ground, ornamented with stars; the side aisles are hung with pictures, most of which are a destitute of all merit except their age. Thence we entered, to the rear and adjoining the chancel, the chapel of the "Burning Bush." In imitation of the action of Moses, we were all requested to take off our shoes. We were, indeed, according to tradition, treading on holy ground. On the exact spot where the bush stood three lamps are kept burning day and night.

In the morning we again repaired to the convent for a jaunt to the mountains. We left it at twenty minutes before nine o'clock, under the escort of a Brother Jacobus, for the ascent of Jebel Musa. We took the usual path, lying back of the convent, which winds up the gorge between Jebel Musa and El Birell. The boulders, for quite a distance up, have been so placed as to form a rude stairway, which greatly facilitates the ascent. Once fairly in the gorge, the cliffs rise perpendicularly on both sides, the layers of granite lying mostly at an angle of 15 deg. A large spring of ice-cold water is passed, and then all along, for an hour, a beautiful stream gurgles and dashes through the opening rocks. About half-way up, a little Chapel of the Virgin stands on the left, and turning thence to the right, a pretty arched gateway opens through the solid granite, and a little farther on still another. These were the confessional gates, where, in days gone by, the monks received the confessions of the pilgrims as they ascended. Thence we emerged on a small plateau of green, where there is a fountain, a garden with a few fig-trees, and a tall cypress. At the head of this plain is the Chapel of Elijah and Elisha. From here the peak of Jebel Musa rose distinctly into view, only a half-hour away.

The sharpest climb is from the Chapel of Elijah and Elisha. We now passed several springs, full of icicles, and also patches of snow lying about in sheltered places. The little garden is the only sign of verdure, except a few tufts of thin grass. No tree or shrub, but utter barrenness, meets the eye. In wild confusion, more and more the jagged granite lifts itself in sternness and unyielding hardness. Far-away glimpses open to the west. Mount Serbal, with its pitchfork summit, is seen towering, up toward the sea, and the deep depression of Wady es Sheik sweeping away towards its base, with sandstone and dark porphyritic hills beyond. An awful stillness reigns around, except when one of our companions speaks, or sings, or shouts. Up and up we go, the rocks winding, twisting, shooting out in all manner of formations as the last great convulsion of nature left them, all bathed in glorious sunshine. My heart involuntarily exclaims at each step, Here it is where Moses was alone with God! Here is an audience-chamber of Jehovah's own making, worthy of the sublime prophet who was to speak his mind to all ages!

It was near noon when we reached the summit, so that we had been three hours and ten minutes in accomplishing the ascent. The Greek Chapel of the Transfiguration crowns the highest peak. It is very old, and in a forlorn condition. The lights, however, are kept constantly burning in it. Immediately below the chapel, the rock on which it stands has a slight cave-like appearance, with a crevice into which, tradition says, Moses was placed when the Lord God passed before him and proclaimed His name. The view from the flat roof of the chapel is as perfect as the positions of the surrounding mountains will allow. This, its highest point, is, according to the British Ordnance Survey, 7,325 feet above the level of the sea at Akabah, while the highest peak of Mount St. Catharine, south of it, is 5,336 feet.

After lunch, we hastened northward, through sharp openings and deep ravines in the very heart of the mountain, till in about one hour we came to another beautiful glen, where is a small chapel, a willow tree (from which the northern peak—Sufsafeh—takes its name), a few other trees, and a small stream. Just overhead, springing from the rock like a huge tower, is the Ras Sufsafeh—"Head of the Willow." The ascent to it was the steepest and most difficult yet encountered. On reaching the top of the gorge I found that there are really two heads, standing up distinctly from each other. From the depression between them a view of the plain of Er Rahah is first obtained. There was still another climb before the precise spot of the giving of the law was reached. Brother Jacobus conducted us around, near the top of the left peak. We did not go up to the very highest point, but clambered out on the farthest projection overlooking the plain.

This the guide affirmed to be the true site where Moses stood when, "on the third day in the morning, there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the