



CONVENT OF MAR SABA.

The Lord's Land.*

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VI.

THE ride from Jerusalem to Mar Saba is over hill and dale, and through wild and barren scenery. The dominion of sterility and weird desolation is complete and undisputed; lonely mountains and dark ravines, rough bleak spurs of rocks, sharp ridges, and awful chasms, with now and then a glimpse of the Dead Sea, with the purple cliffs of the Moab mountains looming up in the distant background. After three hours' ride from Bethlehem, the Convent of Mar Saba is reached. This convent stands on the west side of a deep gorge of the Kedron, whose precipitous rock walls rise hundreds of feet in height, and the monastery is one of the weirdest, most curious structures one was ever in. This lofty and extraordinary pile rises in terraces, on the sides of the precipice, which here takes the form of an amphitheatre, and, amid the bewildering labyrinths of caves and cells, winding stairs, corridors, natural cavities and constructed chambers, you can scarcely tell which is rock and which is dwelling. There is such a getting up and down stairs, such a winding through labyrinths and chapels, and through cells and hanging gardens—in one of which a solitary palm tree is shown that was planted by St. Saba, in the fourth century, and is now nearly one thousand five hundred years old. We first make a descent by vague and wild passages and stairs, down this convent castle, into a queer open court, in front of the church. The church, after the Byzantine order, is most splendid—blazing with gold and silver, and orna-

mental lamps, and covered with pictures, sacred banners, and Greek inscriptions. The founder of the convent was a native of Cappadocia, a man of great sanctity, who came to this spot of wild, weird grandeur—so perfectly adapted to the taste of an anchorite—founded his establishment about A.D. 483, drew around him thousands of followers, and lived and ruled within these walls for half a century. Here is a chapel in which are shown the skulls and bones of thousands of the monks of this order, who were slain by the Persian hordes. A ghastly array of skeletons are these bones of fourteen thousand martyrs. The seventy monks now here seem "jolly good fellows," but they must have a lonely time of it, burrowing in their holes, never eating meat, and subjecting themselves to the severest austerities. No woman is allowed ever to enter the convent. No female has ever seen the inside of these walls. Miss Martineau says: "The monks are too holy to be hospitable." But they have an outside building constructed for special emergencies, and when there is a woman in the party wishing to spend the night in the convent, she, poor creature, is forced to mount a high ladder into an upper window, when the ladder is taken away, and she is secure and secured for the night.

Passing out of the ponderous gates of the convent, we mounted our horses and rode a mile or two along the Valley of the Kedron, to our camping-place. Its deep and rocky sides are burrowed with holes and caverns, once filled with hermits, who were wont to retire from the world to fast and pray in imitation of Christ. No choicer spot for monks and hermits could be imagined than around the stupendous cliffs of this wild, deep gorge; and these abounding caverns—now the homes of owls and bats—were once alive with anchorites, who sought to escape the pollutions and degradations of the world around them, in a life of seclusion and poverty, simplicity and piety.

* Abridged from the Fourth Edition of the Author's "Toward the Sunrise." 12mo, pp. 459. Toronto: Wm. Briggs. Price \$1.25. This book should be in every Sunday-school library.