

Sketches from Palestine.

By REV. THOMAS CUMMING, TRURO.

EXCURSION TO HEBRON.

It was on the tenth of March that I drove from Jerusalem to Hebron in one of the few carriages of which the Holy Land can boast. I was accompanied on the occasion by three congenial fellow-travellers and a well-informed dragoman, all of whom contributed largely to the enjoyment of the excursion. The distance is twenty Roman miles, the direction being nearly due south. The road is rough and mountainous, but, unlike most of the roads of modern Palestine, it is quite passable for a wheeled carriage. As we drove along this part of the road we met large numbers of the fellahin, or peasantry, from the surrounding districts wending their way with their agricultural products to the holy city—some on huge, unwieldy camels, some on nimble-footed donkeys, and some on the tandem that Nature gave them. My sympathies were deeply stirred in behalf of these down-trodden peasantry groaning under the exorbitant taxation which the Turkish government imposes on them.

But I must hurry on towards Hebron. In the neighbourhood of Bethlehem we saw the town now called Beit-Jala picturesquely situated on the sloping hill-side. Our informant had no hesitation in identifying it with Zelah the home of Kish, and the site of the family sepulchre in which Saul and Jonathan were buried. It is at present a prosperous looking town surrounded by magnificent olive groves, and containing 3,000 inhabitants, all Christians of the Greek and Latin persuasions. The residences of the Greek and Latin Patriarchs are very conspicuous buildings. Two miles further south we reach the place which the natives call El-Burak. Here are the actual Pools of Solomon of which he says in Ecclesiastes:—"I made me pools of water to water the wood that bringeth forth trees." These pools, three in number, are enormous reservoirs hewn partly out of the solid rock, and partly built of great squared stones, all heavily lined on the inside with extremely durable, marble coloured cement. They are so located, one after the other, in the descend-

ing valley that the water which trickles down from the neighbouring fountains filters successively through each of them, and thus is three times purified before entering the aqueduct through which of old it flowed into the holy city. Over the principal fountain from which the water issues there are elaborately constructed chambers which were evidently designed to guard it from the gaze of the passing traveller. The reservoirs are, respectively, three hundred and eighty, four hundred and twenty, and five hundred and eighty-two feet in length—the largest of them when full being capacious enough, as Dr. Thomson of the "Land and the Book" says, to float the largest man-of-war that ever ploughed the ocean. They are still, after a lapse of three thousand years, in a remarkable state of preservation. Water is still conveyed from them as far as Bethlehem. Beyond this the aqueduct is so dilapidated that it is no longer of any service. Baroness Burdett-Coutts several years ago offered the Turkish officials £30,000 for the purpose of reconstructing it all the way to Jerusalem, as it existed in the days of Solomon. But the generous gift was rejected without thanks, on the ground that it would be unlawful to use the money of the Christian for the purpose of conveying the gift of God, water, to El Khuds—the Holy Moslem City!

The celebrated gardens and orchards of Solomon were situated in the vicinity of these cisterns and a little further down the fertile valley which here crosses our road at nearly right angles. The whole valley teems with historical associations and marvels of physical scenery of surpassing interest to the poet, or the preacher, who has an eye for the beautiful in nature and the tragic in human life. The twelve miles from El-Burak to Hebron may be briefly described as a succession of hills and dales with a rude khan, at which we stopped for an hour, and an occasional humble habitation of a native peasant. Yet the land, now comparatively dreary and desolate, is evidently very fertile, capable, particularly, of producing fruit in great abundance and variety.

Arrived at Hebron, we first walked a mile up the adjacent valley of Eshcol to see the Oak of Mamre which stands in an open