

Young People's Department.



ACROSS THE PATHLESS DESERT.

VERY often in the Bible is sin spoken of as "blotted out." Moses speaks of it, and David, and Jeremiah, and St. Paul, and St. John; but Isaiah uses an illustration, gives a little parable, about this great forgiveness, that, if we think of it a moment, makes it very much clearer. "I have blotted out," he writes, giving God's gracious message to His people, "I have blotted out as a *thick cloud* thy transgressions."

When we remember what a *cloud* means to Eastern minds, we shall see directly how full of comfort these words are. To us, very often, clouds simply mean gloom, a dull, black sky, a chilly air, a gray mist, rain and storm, when the earth yearns for sunshine. Clouds gather quickly over our fairest skies, and pour down upon us showers of rain.

But in the East it is very different. They are glad to see clouds there. When the heavens were "black with clouds," in Ahab's day, the glad sight made all shout with joy, and one of the greatest blessings to the Israelites in the desert was the pillar of cloud by day that went before them across the burning sand.

Can we picture to ourselves how hard it is to travel under the glare of a desert sun at noon-day? No "shadow of a great rock" is near, no large palm, not even a little juniper tree;

the patient camel plods silently on over the yielding sand, his tongue hanging from his mouth, for not even this "ship of the desert" can do without water any great length of time.

The air quivers with heat; brilliant lizards flash across the sand; stinging scorpions creep into places of shelter; bones at the roadside tell of travellers, or their beasts, that have perished on their way; not a breath of air seems to stir; the water is all gone; and the poor traveller knows that the next well is many miles away.

And all the time the scorching rays of the sun are a torment to eyes, and head, and skin; savage flies buzz, and bite, and sting; there is no possible escape from this agony of heat; it thrills, and throbs, and glares, around, beneath and above.

Imagine, then, what a glad sight a cloud would be that would come and *blot out* this burning heat. Cool and dark, and bearing promise of delicious rain, the cloud—so seldom seen in a desert—sails across the sky. Suddenly the fierce rays of heat are shut off; the sun ceases to "smite by day"; the awful, blinding glare is stopped. Life, and hope, and courage come back again, and while the welcome cloud lingers the pilgrim can press forward rejoicing.

Just so comes the gracious cloud of God's forgiveness, *blotting out* all our sins; for no scorching fire shall ever reach him over whom God has spread "a cloud for a covering."—*Selected.*