

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FATHERS OF THE DESERT.

IF the reader will look at the map of Egypt, a line drawn from Alexandria to Memphis will pass beside three parallel ranges of mountains running in a S.E. and N.W. direction. These mountain chains enclose two great valleys; the one towards the east is the Valley of the Natron Lakes; the westernmost valley is the desert of Sceté; both seem as if at one time they had formed the beds of other branches of the Nile. The Valley of the Natron Lakes is so called because of a chain of lagoons which seem to mark the ancient course of the river; the other valley still bears the name of the Dry River. These two valleys and the mountains which bound them were the scene of that wonderful development of the Christian life which Paula and Jerome and their companions had come so far to see.

They took the route between the sea and the Lake Mareotis, crossed the desert, and so entered the Nitrian Valley by its north-west opening. A thick salt fog filled the valley during the night, and seemed to solidify under the rising sun and fall in little crystals as of hail; sharp crystals of nitre pierced the shoes of the travellers and the sandals of the guides. They threaded their way among marshes, some deep

enough to swallow up man and beast, others breathing forth pestilential vapours when the thick mud was disturbed. The Nitrian mountain, standing detached from the Libyan chain, dominated all the valley. Its summit was crowned by a great church ; on its flanks were fifty great monasteries ; at its feet was the ancient town of Natron, with an indigenous population. To this aggregation of habitations had been given the name of the City of the Lord, or the City of the Saints. Each of the fifty monasteries was under the direction of its own superior, but they were all under the same rule, all under the government of one abbot, and under the episcopal oversight of the Bishop of Heliopolis. Either in the town or in the dependencies of the monastic establishments, were to be found butchers and bakers, confectioners, wine-merchants, physicians, and in short all that was necessary for the convenience of visitors or of sick members of the monastic community. A dozen miles south of the valley, in the ravines of the mountains, existed a population of 600 solitaries. They inhabited natural caves, bowers of branches, subterranean cells, so arranged that they could neither hear nor see one another, and they held no communication with one another. These cells were dependencies of the City of the Saints, and had no other church than that upon the summit of the Nitrian mountain.

At a distance of a day and night's journey across the dividing range of hills was the Valley of Sceté. Its monastery was probably situated on a terrace of the hills. Nitria was an Eden compared with the utter desolation of this arid valley, enclosed by barren

hills. Not a drop of water, not a blade of verdure was to be seen; the blinding glare of the Egyptian sun poured down upon it all day long, and all the year round. It needed a fierce ardour of devotion to enter upon its life, a firm resolution to persevere in it.

The Bishop of Heliopolis had been informed of the visit of Paula and her company. He had himself gone to the mountain with a number of his clergy to welcome them, and had prepared a great reception for them. As the travellers began to ascend the mountain the bishop began to descend in order to meet them, surrounded by his clergy, by a multitude of monks, and by a company of the hermits. All ranged in order, the procession descended the mountain singing psalms and hymns. The bishop saluted Paula, who modestly replied, "That she rejoiced in his welcome to the glory of God, but felt herself unworthy of such honour." The bishop placed his distinguished visitors beside him, and the procession wound up the mountain-side to the great church at its summit.

The church was large enough to contain the whole number of cœnobites and solitaries, who all attended divine worship here every Saturday and Sunday; if one was absent, some of the brethren went directly after service to see what had happened to him, for nothing but death or some great sickness prevented their attendance. Eight priests, assisted by deacons and subdeacons, were attached to the service of the church, but the chief of them alone said mass, gave the exhortations, and decided upon all spiritual questions. If any one had received a letter which he

thought interesting to the brethren, he showed it to this priest first, who decided whether it should or should not be read to the assembly. Jerome admired this perfect order, so much beyond that of the monasteries of Syria. Near the church they noticed three palm-trees, every one with a stick hung from one of its branches. The visitors were told, in reply to their questions, that, according to the rule of Macarius, the founder of the community, these trees served for whipping-posts for those who merited such punishment. The first was reserved for monks convicted of any breach of rule, the second for robbers if any should be found in the country, the third for fugitives from justice.

While walking around the plateau of the mountain they saw seven mills employed in grinding corn for the convents. They saw also a house where there seemed to be a great confusion. They were told that it was the Guest-house, where the community entertained visitors. The rule was, that strangers might live there as long as they liked, weeks or months or even two or three years; but at the end of the first week they had tasks assigned them for the service of the monasteries; one was sent to the bakery, another to the garden, another to the kitchen. To educated people a book was given to read, and they were requested not to speak before noon.

The interior rule of the monasteries, which they could not witness, was explained to them. "These men, so strictly imprisoned," they said, "place their happiness in their sequestration, so that when the affairs of the community make it necessary to send

one of the brethren on an errand, each tries to excuse himself, and he who accepts the commission does it as an act of obedience."

Bidding adieu to the City of Saints, our travellers journeyed on to the suburb of the Cells, the abode of the anchorites.

The reader will have observed how the narrative has led us through all the stages of the ascetic life, beginning with the elegant asceticism of the *salon* of Marcella, whose noble ladies led a life of abstinence and study and contemplation in gilded saloons, surrounded by troops of servants, retaining possession of princely wealth; then to the mild celibacy of the monasteries of Epiphanius, in the delicious scenery and climate of Cyprus; so rising to the ruder life and greater privations of the monks of Chalcis and of the neighbouring solitaries; but there, it will be remembered, the monks ran gossiping from monastery to monastery; and Jerome himself had scribes in his cell with whom he prosecuted his studies, and received visits from neighbouring solitaries, with whom he carried on theological and literary conversations. In the City of the Saints we have perhaps the most fully organized type of the monastic constitution; but it is in its dependent cells that we arrive at the highest ideal of the ascetic life. It is here that we find the men who have gone to the very limits of human endurance, in the endeavour to get away from the world, to subject the flesh, and to place the soul habitually alone face to face with God. Here human enthusiasm revels without restraint, and exhibits the wildest eccentricities of fanaticism. Every cell has its own

character, and every hermit indulges his own ideas of devotion. One has built his hut among the rocks of a projecting peak, another has excavated his cavern in the bowels of the earth ; one exposes himself without shelter under the blazing sun, another has excluded himself altogether from the light of day ; one has walled himself up in his cell and never leaves it, another wanders about without any settled abode. Their costumes are as various and as wild as their habitations. One is wrapped round with the skin of a beast, and with his shaggy uncombed hair and blackened meagre countenance, looks himself like a wild beast ; another wears from neck to heel a tight garment of platted water-flags ; one a rough shapeless sack of haircloth, another nothing but a cloth about his loins.

Jerome and Paula visited among the cells, seeking out especially those famous hermits, the heroes of this spiritual warfare, whose names were spoken with reverence throughout the world. Antony, and Paul, and Pachomius, indeed were dead, but Serapion, Arsenius, Macarius, were still alive.

Serapion inhabited a cavern situated at the bottom of a chasm, to which they descended by a steep stair amid a thicket of bushes. The cavern was hardly large enough to contain a bed of dry leaves ; a plank wedged in a crack of the rock formed his table ; an old Bible laid upon this table, and a cross, clumsily carved, hanging against the rock, formed all the furniture of the dwelling. The tenant of this den looked more like a browned skeleton than a living man. His hair covered his face and shoulders, his

body looked like that of some tawny beast ; his only clothing was a piece of cloth wound about his body. This strange person had known Rome in former days, spoke Latin well, and took pleasure in conversing about the patrician families with whom he had been acquainted. His history was not less extraordinary than his present appearance. During his youth, while he lived in the Eternal City, he had conceived a great pity for two comedians, a man and woman, who were living in all the licence of their profession, and resolved to restore them to a better life by means of the true faith. With this view he sold himself to them as a slave, and plunged in their train into this disorderly life, from which he desired to withdraw them, as one casts one's self into the sea in order to save a drowning person. The holy enterprise was crowned with success. Thanks to his remonstrances, his counsels, his prayers, his masters abandoned their dishonourable mode of life ; they became Christians, and were baptized. They desired to enfranchise the slave who had converted them, but Serapion would not accept this favour. He presented himself before them with some pieces of money in his hand. " My brethren," he said to them, " before quitting you in search of such other adventures as God may call me to, I bring you this money ; it is the price you gave for me ; it belongs to you : as for me I carry away the gain of your souls." After long consideration he resolved to remove to Egypt and bury himself in the awful solitude of the desert.

They heard the stories of some of the old hermits who had passed away to their reward. Pambon, who

had been visited by Melania a few years before ; it was related, that when she entered his cell she caused her servants to lay at his feet a quantity of silver vessels as a gift. Pambon, without even looking at them, bade the disciple who waited on him " Carry these to our brethren of Libya and of the Isles, who are poorer than we are." Melania said, " Do you know, my father, that these vessels contain three hundred pounds weight of silver?" He cast a glance of rebuke upon her, and replied, " God, who weighs the mountains and forests in His balance, needs not that you should tell Him the weight of your silver ; and as for me, I have nothing to do with such things. Do not forget, my daughter, that God reckoned the two mites of the widow a greater offering than all the gifts of the rich." They showed the travellers the cell where this and that great hermit lived, the tree planted by one, the tool used by another : they told them of their sayings, their visions, their miracles, which the one told and the other heard with equal good faith and entire credence.

" With wonderful enthusiasm," says Jerome, " and a courage hardly credible in a woman, forgetting their sex and their weakness, she had a desire to settle with her young nuns among all these monks (for female convents, and even female solitaries, were not unknown in the desert), and perhaps she would have done it had not the love of the holy places had a still greater attraction for her." Accordingly, they returned to the port of Pelusium, there took ship for Maiüma, the port of Gaza, and thence returned to Bethlehem.