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The Land of the Gospel:
Notes of a Journey in the East
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(p. 140) NABLOUS (ANCIENT SICHEM),
April 2nd.

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Nablous is situated in a very paradise at the foot of two mountains, in a plain all murmuring with the music of running waters, and bordered with gay gardens. We are encamped in a grove of olive and mulberry-trees; a sparkling rivulet meanders round our domain. Nablous is the ancient Sichem which, after being distinguished in patriarchal story, became the centre of that strange Samaritan worship, so inimical to Judaism, and so constantly at issue with it. The sect of the Samaritans is not extinct even in our own days, though reduced to a petty remnant. There remains but a shapeless ruin of the Temple at Gerizim; here the adherents of the sect keep their passover festival, according to the ancient rites. Being at Nablous on the Sabbath day, we were fortunate enough to be present at the Samaritan worship. The High Priest received us with the utmost cordiality, and even offered us hospitality under his roof for several days. He is a fine man, with a white beard; indeed all the Samaritans whom we saw were remarkably handsome; as they intermarry entirely among themselves (p. 143) they have preserved the type of their race, which is very noble. There are only a hundred and twenty five in all. They celebrate religious service in a low vaulted room, which serves them as a synagogue, and has no other furniture than carpets. A great veil hides from all eyes the holy place in which is preserved the famous manuscript of the Pentateuch, which is their glory, and the sole portion of Scripture recognized by them. They showed us this manuscript, certainly one of the most ancient extant, even if it be of later date than the Hebrew text, as it is pronounced by competent judges. It has been, indeed, proved that the copyists have substituted explanatory renderings or paraphrases for particularly difficult passages. The text of the Decalogue itself is altered, and the tenth commandment has been replaced by these words;— "*Thou shall build a temple to the Lord upon Mount Gerizim.*" The Samaritans consider themselves the authentic representatives of the Mosaic dispensation; they charge David and Solomon with being impious innovators because they transferred the centre of worship to Jerusalem. They also vow inveterate hatred to Ezra as the restorer of the second Temple. It was a strange sight for us, that of these last (p. 144) representatives of a dead faith, celebrating this kind of posthumous worship. They are all clothed in white, and bow their faces to the earth every moment. The service consists in prelections of a part of the Pentateuch made by a priest, and in prayers and litanies vociferated in the Oriental manner. Beside this, there is the faithful observance of the

universal rites of that religion of vain forms so widely diffused throughout the churches of all lands. It is but a phase of the art so largely cultivated of stifling thought and feeling under a weight of ceremonials, of turning prayer into a rhythmical recitation, and the reading of the Holy Scriptures into a ridiculous melopoeia. On leaving the synagogue we went into the house of one of the influential members of the sect, who, taking us for Europeans of high medical attainments, brought to us all the invalids of his family and household, beginning with his young wife, whose beautiful features bore the stamp of far advanced consumption. The bad weather prevented our ascending Gerizim, from which there is a magnificent view on a clear day, extending from the Mediterranean to the snowy heights of Hermon. The ascent would have been perfectly useless in face of the furious blast of (p. 145) wind, massing the clouds together. This evening the stars re-appeared. I mean to believe in my kind star for the coming week, for we shall need it much.

April 3rd.

Last night torrents of rain inundated us in our tent, and gave us a supererogatory bath. Unhappily, a whole day's captivity under soaked canvas followed. However, the time passed well. I read over again with an entirely new interest the great Bible narratives, the scenes of which we have lately visited. About four o'clock the sun shone out, and we were able to take a run through the populous and lively town. It contains finer houses than are to be found in Jerusalem; we were delighted with the fresh and fragrant gardens surrounding them; they display a luxury of vegetation most rare for Palestine. All the trees of the south grow freely beside the running waters. Nablous forms a green and balmy oasis between its two mountains. Unfortunately, it produces more thieves than orange-trees. Its population has an ill-repute only too well earned. We were obliged to have three or four sentinels all night, and one of these turned thief and robbed me.

(p. 146) *April 4th.*

A glorious day! The clouds all vanished, the sky of a transparent purity; the rain has replenished the springs, and blossoming fields, refreshed by the showers, send up a tribute of sweet odours. The country becomes more and more agreeable; olive-trees abound, and their silvery foliage trembles in the morning breeze. The valley beyond Nablous is a perfect garden of fruit trees. A short ascent brings us to Sebaste, the ancient Samaria. We admire first, the imposing ruins of a basilica, raised by the Crusaders; one nave remains entire, with some beautiful relics of the apsis. The spring vegetation sports among the *debris*. The male population of the village surrounds us in picturesque groups. The chief comes up to us: we notice the grace of the salutations exchanged. The Arab in his woollen mantle, is a gentleman in rags; he possesses a certain native nobility which nothing can take from him, and which the first opportunity calls forth.

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