



RUINS OF THE CHURCH OF ST. GEORGE AT LYDDA, THE ANCIENT LYDDA.

The nave and north aisle have been recently restored and converted into a Greek church; the south aisle is destroyed, and the remainder is used as the court of a mosque.

## LYDDA AND RAMLEH.

THE traveller who, on arrival at Ramleh at sunset, can forget his fatigue and accomplish the ascent of the lofty tower overlooking the plains (see page 144), will be amply rewarded for his exertions by the magnificent view spread out before him (see page 148).

Though yet early in the year, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. "The flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land. The fig-tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grapes give a good smell." The fragrance from the orange-groves is wafted on the breeze, the last lowing of cattle and bleating of sheep returning to their folds fill the air with a pleasant sound—darkness and quiet are spreading over the land. The soil is still moist with the winter rains, not yet licked up by the dry easterly winds, and lagoons and sheets of water flash back the splendour of the setting sun. Abundant verdure, both corn and weeds, covers the rich loam, and when swayed by the breeze displays glints of crimson from the millions of anemones, the roses of Sharon, which lie shrouded among the lengthening grasses.

The whole goodly plain of Sharon is visible—from Mount Carmel on the north down to Lydda, from the eastern hills to the blue sea, now bathed in gold—a wilderness of weeds and thorn brakes, and yet a very paradise of colour and ever-varying beauty. Sharon was lovely in days gone by, when every acre was cultivated and teeming with an abundant population; it is yet lovely during the land's long holiday, at this time of year, before the fervid summer heat has parched up the land and reduced the plain to a barren waste.

Yet ascend the tower once again in the autumn and a different prospect presents itself. Far and wide the olive-groves have become dull and lustreless from the accumulation of dust, the mulberry leaves have disappeared, used as food for the sheep. The soil is parched up and dry, all verdure has departed, even the stalks of corn have cracked up and fled away on the wind, and there is left a sky of brass and earth of iron. Trees and houses quiver in the heated atmosphere, camels in the distance are seen with their bodies separated from their legs, in grotesque confusion, and there are sudden glimpses of oases in stony places, beautiful sheets of water and green trees where it is known to be only parched-up land. The villages, which so few weeks ago were thronged with mountaineers assisting in the lowland harvest, are now denuded of their normal inhabitants, who in their turn have ascended the hills to assist their neighbours. The corn has long since been harvested, thrashed, winnowed, and heaped up; the Government has taken its share, the landowners have taken theirs, the money usurers theirs, and what is left to the villages is now safely housed in the boxes made of cow-dung which serve for barns, and the people know what are their slender means for the coming year. They are a frugal race, who do their best to keep body and soul together—with very moderate success, for they are not only preyed upon by their own Government officials, but also by the Bedawin of the desert, who constantly make inroads from the south country and carry off the corn as it lies on the threshing-floors. They are probably descendants of the ancient inhabitants of the land, and their traditions go far to prove this. It was on these pasture lands that the royal herds of King David were wont to graze, and their excellence is referred to by the prophet Isaiah (xxxv. 1, 2): "The desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon."

The desolation of the plain of Sharon is at present due to want of a stable and organized government. It is still well watered, it still counts its forests, and the sea-sand has not greatly encroached upon its borders; its soil is most fertile, and its people are able and willing to till the land, were they not ground down and hindered by the rapacious officials who are sent periodically to take from them their gains, under one pretext or another. These people are a rural race whose sympathies are evidently not with their Turkish rulers, but rather with the Egyptians, with whom, as in days of yore, they still keep up a close connection, not a few having been down to work on the Suez Canal. Like the Egyptians, they have raised the fruitful groves surrounding their habitations by the sweat of their brow. Irrigation is necessary to keep them in a flourishing condition, and this is kept up by means of water ever flowing from wells nearly one hundred feet in depth, the water-wheels (see page 138) of which are worked by contributions of animals, camels, horses, mules, oxen, donkeys, from the families in the villages, according to their wealth and breadth of lands.

Let us descend the tower and visit Ludd, the ancient Lydda, by moonlight. Passing over fields of ranunculus, anemones, saffrons, and other wild flowers now closed, we burst through a line of tall bushy reeds and grasses, startling a heron into flight, and see in front of us, on a flash of water, the beautiful ruins of Lydda, the city of our patron saint, St. George, held in honour both by Muhammedans and Christians. The church, the ruins of which were until lately so picturesque, has passed through many vicissitudes (see page 145). As early as A.D. 315 we know it to have existed here, the site of a bishopric, and dedicated to St. George, whose remains are said to be interred beneath. This church was destroyed in the eighth century by the Saracens, and again rebuilt by the Crusaders, again destroyed by Saladin and rebuilt by Richard Cœur de Lion.

But it is not only as a Christian site that Lydda is of interest—unlike the modern Ramleh, Lydda can lay claim to our interest as an ancient site; not, however, rendered conspicuous until the time of the apostles. Here it was that Saint Peter healed the paralytic one, and here he was staying when he was sent for to Joppa (see page 137), nine miles distant, at the time of the death of Tabitha. It assumed the name of Diospolis (City of Zeus) about the time of Hadrian, and only gradually, through the lapse of centuries, regained its original name.

Forcing our way over vast quantities of segs or flags, and scarcely escaping the thorns of the prickly pear, we ascend the swelling hills and find ourselves among the ruins of 'Amwâs (the ancient Emmaus, afterwards called Nicopolis), with Latrôn in the distance (see page 152).

Emmaus is mentioned in the book of Maccabees, and also by F. Josephus as being a place of note in the time of the Asmoneans, and it was in sight of this city that Jonathan Maccabæus defeated the Syrian army. It must not, however, be confounded with Emmaus of Luke xxiv. 13, though Dr. Robinson was in favour of this supposition. (Réfer to pages 198 *et seq.*, vol. i., where the subject of the site of Emmaus is fully treated.) 'Amwâs is now merely a squalid village with a ruined church. From here we can see the new carriage road winding up the highlands to Jerusalem.



THE PLAIN OF SHARON FROM THE TOWER, RAMLEH.

This tower, shown on page 144, was the minaret of a mosque called Jami'a el Abiad. It has a winding staircase of one hundred and twenty steps. Its eastern windows overlook the town of Ramleh and the plain beyond, bounded by the hills of Judæa.