

CHRISTMAS AT BETHLEHEM.

By the late LORD KITCHENER.¹

ON Christmas Eve of 1875 we rode from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to be present at the ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church.

The road, so well known to all travellers in the Holy Land, passes the Well of the Magi, where tradition relates that the three kings from the East again beheld the guiding star. A little farther on is a still more ancient site, the Tomb of Rachel, now an ordinary Mahomedan tomb without any appearance of remote antiquity; yet this spot has been venerated by Christians, Mahomedans, and Jews from the earliest times as the burial-place of the mother of Benjamin. It agrees so well with the Bible narrative of the death and burial of Rachel on the way to Bethlehem, that it seems hard to find objection to the genuineness of its position, and yet there are many difficulties to be reconciled before it can be accepted without any doubts.

On our arrival at Bethlehem we found the inhabitants returning from Beit Jala, where they had been to meet and bring the Latin Patriarch to their town. Any honoured person is thus met in Palestine by the inhabitants before arriving at the town, and conducted the rest of the way with great rejoicings, the mounted portion of the escort performing fantasia in front, galloping wildly about, shouting, and firing their rusty old flintlocks into the air. On returning from Beit Jala they had started on the Jerusalem road in order to meet the French Consul, who arrives in great state as the representative of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Bethlehemites are well-to-do people, earning a good deal from their speciality of carving religious subjects in mother-of-pearl which they sell to pilgrims and travellers; they are mostly Christians, and their women have a well-deserved reputation for

¹ [This article, together with another, was found among reports and other papers of the late Lord Kitchener, in his handwriting and over his signature. So far as is known it has never been printed or otherwise used, and, in fact, the MS. was not finally ready for the press. Some adjustments that were necessary in the way of punctuation, paragraphing, and the correction of oversights, have been made by Miss Estelle Blyth, the temporary Assistant Secretary.—ED.]

good looks which is enhanced by their rather peculiar costume. It consists of a dress of red and blue woollen stuff, open at the throat, and with long hanging sleeves, a mantle of the same hangs down behind, and a long white veil, sometimes embroidered, and held up by a high cylindrical bonnet, forms their headdress; this resembles the ancient oriental headdress worn by female figures representing Syrian towns seen on coins. The lower part of the bonnet is ornamented sometimes by strings of coins closely packed together, and necklaces of silver coins are worn with full dress. A Bethlehem woman might almost start a money-changer's shop with the amount of coins she wears; some are old family heirlooms, and it is their great ambition to put on as many coins as possible. This desire is fraught with some danger, as several of these women were murdered for their ornaments in the short time we were at Jerusalem. Nothing is prettier than a crowd of these women in their long white veils, bright dresses, and sparkling jewellery. The men delight in very rich and full turbans of all colours, and very bright oriental dresses.

We went first to the Church of the Nativity, built by St. Helena over the Grotto mentioned by Justin Martyr in the second century as being then the venerated place of the birth of Christ. This Church has passed through all the subsequent troubles of the country undestroyed, and stands a magnificent example of the Christian zeal of the mother of the first Christian Emperor.

A small low door forces even Mahommedans to bow as they enter the church. The grandeur of the interior is now sadly marred by a modern wall built by the Greeks, cutting off the apse and transept from the nave and double aisle; four rows of eleven monolithic columns support the roof; the nave is much higher than the aisles. The clerestory windows are the only windows of the church, and around them the wall was formerly covered with mosaics representing the most important early Councils of the Church; large patches still remain, the rest is whitewashed. The roof is of wood, and was restored by Edward IV of England. Passing through the central door in the modern wall the great apse is seen, partially hidden by the gilded Greek screen which hides their altar; to right and left, at the ends of the transepts, are other apses. Thus the form of the Latin cross seems to have been given to one of the earliest purely Christian churches existing.

The Grotto is reached by marble stairs descending from the

right and left of the central apse ; one flight belongs to the Latins, the other to the Greeks. Fortunately, the Greeks keep a different calendar, but when, as sometimes occurs, both Christmasses fall on the same day, a sanguinary fight takes place over the spot where the Prince of Peace was born. The Grotto is rich with hangings and marble, a silver star marks the exact spot of the birth of Christ, and a short distance off is the Manger ; numbers of lamps are continually kept burning, some belonging to each sect.

Leading from the Grotto of the Nativity are a number of other grottos cut out in the rock, and marking different traditional sites. The most interesting of these is the cell of St. Jerome, where he lived and wrote his famous works. The cell is cut out of the rock on three sides, it is lighted by a small window on the northern side. Close by is the saint's tomb. The Latin chapel of St. Catherine is separated from the basilica by a wall ; it is a poor narrow, vaulted, chamber, and is entered from the cloisters ; it has also an entrance to the subterranean grottos. When we entered, the Patriarch was saying a mass on his arrival.

We returned to the entrance of the town and visited the Well of David. A Bethlehem girl drew water for us. The well is an ordinary rock-cut cistern, famous for the episode in the Bible which relates that when David was besieging the place he longed for some water from this well, which was procured for him by the three mighty men anxious to fulfil his slightest wish.

While at the well the noise of the firing of guns announced the approach of the French Consul. First came the Bethlehemites, who had gone out to meet him, on all sorts of animals, horses, mules, donkeys, shouting, and galloping their poor steeds about, then six kavasses in red and blue oriental uniform embroidered with gold, and carrying silver-headed sticks—they were well mounted ; after them came the Consul in uniform surrounded by his staff, and then a motley crowd of all sorts who had gone out to meet him, or had followed from Jerusalem.

At 9.30 p.m. we went to the Latin chapel where there was already a crowd of natives. At 10 o'clock the service commenced ; the Patriarch, in splendid vestments and with mitre and crozier, was seated on a throne to the left, while numerous priests went through the ritual of the Roman Church.

The crowd was by this time so dense that it was hard to keep one's place, and the noise of scuffling and fighting for places was

such that nothing could be heard of the service. Turkish soldiers with fixed bayonets were placed at intervals down the church, and one could not help remembering that a few years ago, on a similar occasion, a frightful amount of blood was shed in this place. Some ladies were very much disturbed by the crowd, and would have been seriously injured, if not trampled under foot, had we not come to their rescue and by a free use of our hunting-crops kept the crowd back. A measured tapping announced the approach of the French Consul, and the six kavasses appeared shortly, hitting the ground with their sticks to warn people to get out of the way. After a good deal of squeezing they managed to reach the chair prepared for the Consul; he was in uniform, wearing several orders, and was accompanied by his staff. The kavasses formed a ring round the Consul, and by a good deal of pushing we managed to get the ladies into this charmed circle. The atmosphere of the small vault without any ventilation was most oppressive, and the turmoil going on gave one no peace. I saw several men faint and be carried out.

At midnight the "Gloria in Excelsis" was very beautifully sung, a centre candle was lighted on the altar, and the wax image of a child was displayed. At 2 a.m. a procession was formed of all the priests bearing candles and, lastly, the Patriarch carrying the wax figure. Close behind him came the French Consul and his staff, carrying candles, and guarded by his kavasses. The procession wound its way through the cloisters into the great basilica, and down the steps into the Grotto, which was almost entirely filled by the priests. Here the Gospel was read, and the image was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the Manger. The procession then reformed and returned to the church, where, after some more ceremonies, the Patriarch was unrobed, and said Mass himself in ordinary priest's vestments.

We left while this was going on, as it was 4 a.m., and rode back to Jerusalem with the dawn, not sorry to be out of the stifling atmosphere and in the fresh morning air. That Christmas morning ride to Jerusalem with all its associations, and after the night we had gone through, is one of my cherished remembrances of the Holy Land.

After a short rest we were able to attend our own Church at Jerusalem, where the Bishop conducted the service.

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