

ELIZABETH BUTLER

LETTERS
FROM THE
HOLY LAND

Elizabeth Butler

Letters from the Holy Land

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Letters from the Holy Land

PREFACE

THESE letters, written to my mother, and published chiefly at her request, can lay no claim to literary worth; their only possible value lies in their being descriptive of impressions received on the spot of that Land which stands alone in its character upon the map of the world. But the reader will more easily excuse the shortcomings of my pen than, I hope, he will ever do those of my pencil!

I will make no apologies for the sketches, save to remind the reader that most of them had to be done in haste. They are necessarily considerably reduced in size in the reproduction, so as to suit them to the book form.

It was a happy circumstance for me that my husband's appointment to the Command at Alexandria should have enabled us to realize this journey. A four-weeks' leave just allowed of our accomplishing the whole tour. The wider round that includes Damascus and Palmyra would, of course, necessitate a much more extended holiday.

The time of year chosen by my husband for our visit was one in which no religious festivals were being celebrated, so that we should be spared the sight of that distressing warring of creeds that one regrets at Jerusalem more than anywhere else. Also the spring season is the healthiest and most agreeable, and we timed our journey so as to begin and end it with the moon which beautified all our nights.

We are chiefly indebted to Mr. Aquilina, the very capable and courteous agent for Messrs. Cook and Son at Alexandria, for the perfect way in which the machinery of the expedition was managed for us. Without such good transport and camps one does not travel as smoothly as we did. To the Archbishop of Alexandria we owe a debt of gratitude for his kind offices in helping to render our way so pleasant.

ELIZABETH BUTLER.

Government House, Devonport,
Christmas Day, 1902.

LETTERS FROM THE HOLY LAND

In the Adriatic, 28th February 189-.

My... – I am out on the dark waters of the Adriatic. It is late, and the people on board are little by little subsiding into their cabins, and I shall write you my first letter *en route* for the Holy Land.

If all is well I shall join W. at Alexandria, and we shall have our long-looked-forward-to expedition from thence. Venice has given me a memorable “send-off,” looking her loveliest this radiant day of spring, and were I not going where I am going my thoughts would linger regretfully amongst those lagoons already left so far behind. I watched to the very last the lovely city gradually fading from view in a faint rosy flush, backed by a blue-grey mist, and as we stood out to sea all land had sunk away and the sun set in a crimson cloud, sending a column of gold down to us on the perfectly unruffled waters. Later on the moon, high overhead, shining through the mist, made the sea look like blue air, and quite undistinguishable from the sky. The horizon being lost we seemed to be floating through space, and the only solid things to be seen were the moon and our fellow planets and the stars, so that I felt as though I had passed out of this world altogether. Indeed one does leave the ordinary world when shaping one’s course for Palestine!

Port Said, Sunday, 5th April 189-.

My... – We are moored at Port Said on board the large Messageries steamer, having left Alexandria at 5.30 P.M. yesterday on our way to Jaffa. What a hideous place is this! And this is the Venice that modern commerce has conjured up out of the sea. Truly typical! As I look at the deep ranks of steamers lining the Canal mouth, begrimed with coal-dust and besmirched with brown smoke, I might be at the Liverpool Docks, so much is the light of this Land of Light obscured by their fumes. On the banks are dumped down quantities of tin houses with cast-iron supports to their verandahs. When my mind reverts to the merchant city of the Adriatic and compares it with this flower of modern commerce I don’t feel impressed with, or in the least thankful for, our modern “Progress.” Last night, when we arrived, a barge of Acheron came alongside full of negroes in sooty robes, one gnawing a raw beef bone by the light of the torch in the bows. They were coming to coal us. And, being coaled, we shall draw light out of darkness, loveliness out of hideousness, and this evening we shall be taking our course to the Long-promised Land!

Where shall I finish this? Is it possible that my life-long wish is now so soon to be accomplished?

No two people, I suppose, receive the same impression of the Holy Land. None of the books I have read tally as to the feelings it awakens in travellers. How will it be with me?

Ramleh, on the Plain of Sharon,

6th April.

At sunrise this morning the throbbing of the screw suddenly ceased, and as I went to the port-hole of our cabin I beheld the lovely coast of the Land of Christ, about a mile distant, with the exquisite town of Jaffa, typically Eastern, grouped on a rock by the sea, and appearing above huge, heaving waves, whose grey-blue tones were mixed with rosy reflections from the clouds. Here was no modern harbour with piers and jetties, no modern warehouses, none of the characteristics of a seaport of our time. Jaffa is much as it must have looked to the Crusaders; and we approached it, after leaving the steamer, much as pilgrims must have done in the Middle Ages. The Messageries ship could approach no nearer on account of the rocks, and we had to be rowed ashore in open boats – very large, stout craft, fit to resist the tremendous waves that thunder against the rocky ramparts of Jaffa. How often I have imagined this landing, and have gone through it in delicious anticipation!

Everything was made as pleasant as possible to us, Mr. – coming on board to direct the proceedings, and a Franciscan monk also boarding the steamer with greetings from Jerusalem, at the request of the Archbishop of Alexandria.

As our boat was the last to leave the steamer I had time to watch the disconcerting process of trans-shipping the other tourists who all went off in the first boats, and nothing I have ever seen of the sort could compare with what I beheld during those breathless moments. The effect produced by brawny Syrian boatmen tussling with elderly British and American females in sun-helmets and blue spectacles, and at the right moment, when the steamer heaved to starboard and met the boat rising on the crest of a particular wave, pushing them by the shoulders from above, and pulling them into the boat from below, was a thing to remember. (To go down the ladder was quite impossible, so violent was the bumping of boat against ship.) To miss the right moment was to have to wait till the steamer which then rolled to port, and the boat which then sank into the trough of the sea, met again with the next lurch. The poor tourists said nothing; they hadn't time given them for the feeblest protest, but they looked quite dazed when stuck down in their seats. Thanks to our kind friends we had a boat to ourselves and we were not worked off so expeditiously, being thus able to submit with something more approaching grace. We had a large crew of rowers, and being only ourselves, the monk, and Mr. – , we went light. Three or four times the helmsman had to be extra vigilant as a huge roller, which hid everything behind it, came racing in our wake, and lifting us as though we were so much seaweed, carried us forward with dizzy swiftness. Woe betide that boat which such a wave should strike broadside on! At each crisis the "stroke oar" sang out a warning, and redoubled his work, the perspiration coursing down his face. The whole crew sang an answer to his wild signal in a barbaric minor. Nothing could be more invigorating than this experience; one moment when hoisted on the crest of a wave one saw Jaffa, the Plain of Sharon, and the hills of Judea ahead, and astern the Messageries steamer and small craft riding at anchor, and the next moment nothing between one and the sky but jagged and curling crests of wild billows! On landing at the rocks we were hoisted up slippery steps in more iron grips. On such occasions it is useless to hesitate – indeed they don't let you – and as you don't know what is best for you, you had much better at once surrender your individuality and become a passive piece of goods if you don't want a broken limb.

We immediately found ourselves in such a picturesque crowd as even my Egypt-saturated eyes took new delight in, and we passed through the Custom-house with the agent obligingly clearing all before us, and got into a little carriage after climbing on foot the steep part of the town. What a town! No description I have yet read does full justice to its tumble-down picturesqueness. Those black archways like caverns, those crooked streets filled with people, camels, and donkeys – all this to me is fascinating. I am too hurried to pause here long enough to try and define the difference between life here and life in Egypt. There is not here the barbarism of the latter's picturesqueness, and one feels here more the beauty of the true East. I don't see the abject squalor of Egypt, and the people's dresses are more varied. All this stone masonry is very acceptable after the brick and mud of Egyptian hovels. Here is the essence of Asia – there, of Africa. I am afraid these remarks are crude, but I think the definition is a just one.

As we drove to the little German inn in the outskirts of the town, we noticed the air getting richer with the scent of orange-flowers, and soon we passed into the region of the orange-orchards. The trees were creamy white with dense blossom, and the ripe fruit was dotted about in the masses of white. The honey they gave us at breakfast was from these orange-flowers. Here our dragoman, Isaac, met us. I made my first sketch – the first, I trust, of a series I marked down before leaving Alexandria. It was of Jaffa, seen over the orange-trees from the inn garden, and charming it was to sit there in the cool shade, with birds singing overhead as never one hears them in Egypt. Fragments of classical pillars stood about and served as seats under the chequered shade of flowering fruit-trees along the garden paths. The Mediterranean appeared to my right, and overhead sailed great pearly

clouds in the vibrating blue of the fresh spring sky. I must say I felt very happy at the reality of my presence on the soil of Palestine!

At 2 P.M. we started in a carriage like our dear old friend, the “Vetturino,” for Ramleh, our halting-place for the night. How can I put before you the scenes of loveliness we passed through? The country was a vast plain of rolling wheat, bordered in the blue distance with the tender hills of Judea. This land of the Philistines far surpassed my expectations in its extent, its grand sweep of line, its breadth of colour and light and shade. It was some time before we came out on the Plain of Sharon, and we drove first a long way between orange-orchards bordered along the road by gigantic hedges of prickly pear. Our Vetturino was drawn by three horses abreast, all with bells, and it was exhilarating to set out at a fast trot along the easy road in company with other jingling and whip-cracking vehicles, and escorted by horsemen in brilliant Syrian costumes dashing along on their little Arabs, and carrying their long ornamental guns slung across their backs. I had just one horrible glimpse (of which I said nothing, as of some guilty thing), just as we started, of a railway engine under some palm-trees. It is waiting there the completion of the line to Jerusalem to puff and whistle its beauty-marring career to the Holy City. I am thankful my good luck has brought me here just in time to escape the sight of a railway and its attendant eyesores in this sacred land. Why rush through this little country, every yard of which is precious? An express train could run in two hours “from Dan to Beersheba” – and what then?

Before emerging on the Plain we passed a white mosque-like building placed between two cypresses by the roadside, which is supposed to stand on the site of the place where Peter raised Dorcas to life. Be that as it may, the white dome and the black-green cypresses are charming. The soil of the country, now being ploughed in all directions between the green wheat-fields, is of a rich golden colour, like that I noticed with such pleasure around Sienna, and makes a pleasing harmony with the vivid green. The dear olive-tree, beloved of my childhood, is here in its very home. I hailed its pinky-grey foliage and its hoary old gnarled trunk. And now for those wildflowers that all travellers who are so well advised as to come here in spring have told us of. Well may they speak of them with rapture! As we proceeded they increased in variety, and so abundant were they that they made tracts and wide regions of colour over the land. Come here in spring, O traveller! and not in the arid, dusty, burnt-up autumn. On entering the Plain of Sharon we saw to our left the town of Lydda, with St. George’s Church gleaming in the sunshine. Never have I seen, even in Ireland, fresher effects of cloud shadow and sunlight over rolling spaces of waving green corn, and even the sky was typically West of Ireland. Yet lo! in the foreground strings of camels, mules, and wild Bedouins and caracoling Bashi-Bazouks! The ploughing was done by tiny oxen, two abreast, and sometimes a tall camel stalked as leader. On arriving at Ramleh we walked to the great tower, some distance out of the town, from the top of which I had my long-looked-for view of the whole of Philistia – northward to Carmel, westward to the sea, eastward to the mountains of Judah. As the sun sank the tints deepened on that lovely plain, and nothing on earth could be more beautiful than that immense view. I made a hasty water-colour sketch up there, but what can one do in a few minutes with such a scene? A sad spectacle awaited us as we reached the German inn. As we walked I had become absorbed in the contemplation of the limpid sky, where the last lark was carolling to the sinking sun, and of the mountains whose rosy flush was fading into the cool greys that already veiled the plain, when my eyes sinking lower, I beheld in the cold grey of the narrow street, ranged along a stone wall, a row of lepers waiting for alms. Life has no sadder detail than the leper. As I approached them with a coin the nearest of these poor creatures put out a fingerless palm on which I placed the money, and having only hollow sockets in the place of eyes it handed it to its neighbour, who, being also eyeless, passed it on to one in whose fleshless face there lingered the remnant of an eye. This one’s hand lifted the coin to its fragment of eye to see its value, and deposited it in the recesses of its fluttering rags that only half veiled the decaying body. A low wail passed along the line, and bony arms were stretched out in gratitude. And

then we go to our *table d'hôte* and comfortable beds, and they – where do they sleep? Do they lie down on those bare bones?

Jerusalem, 7th April 189-.

My... – We left Ramleh early this brisk, fresh morning, the air full of scent from the wildflowers. Frère Benoît, the Flemish Franciscan who met us on board the steamer, came with us, and an English lady who had all but broken down the day before through the jolting of a shandrydan that had been palmed off on her and her husband at Jaffa. So with the friar and Mrs. G – inside, W. on the box, and Mr. G – following in the aforesaid shandrydan with Isaac, we set off in the usual whip-cracking, shouting, and prancing manner for

JERUSALEM!

The first point of interest I was looking for was Ajalon. As we dipped down from one of the hills traversed by the road in steep zigzags it unfolded its fresh loveliness on our left, but we could not see the actual site of Joshua's battle, as it was too deep in the folds of the hills. This view was, perhaps, the loveliest of all, and nothing could be fresher than those cornfields and rich spaces of ploughed earth in the light that streamed down from so pure a sky. Now and then a single horseman with the well-known long gun inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and with his Arab all over tassels, dashed past us, doing "fantasia" to impress us strangers. The proceeding was never without success as far as I was concerned.

At 9.30 we left the plain and at once entered the hills of Judea, which are much more uniformly stony than one would suppose them to be from a distance. We soon stopped at a wayside khan, about half-a-dozen Vetturinos being assembled in the yard, and all the horses were rested. We then began the ascent of the dear Hill Country, fragrant with memories of Mary on her journey made in haste from Nazareth. I did not expect such a long and high ascent, having failed to realise from description the immense altitude of the height of land that holds Jerusalem. "Things seen are mightier than things heard." The wildflowers increased in beauty and variety, chief, I think, amongst them being the crimson anemones with black centre which tossed their gay heads everywhere in the mountain breeze. Olives and stones, stones and olives on all sides. Here and there a carob tree or a clump of tamarisk at a tomb. As we crested the first pass and looked back we saw the plains of Philistia, with Ramleh white in the sunshine and the sea beyond shining in a long flash of silver. Before us to the right soon loomed against the clouds the great tombs of the Maccabees, and away to our left on a high cone appeared, remote and awful, the "Tomb of Samuel," a dominating feature over all the land.

As we descended on the other side of the pass we came in sight of Ain Kareem, the reputed birthplace of John the Baptist, on the side of a high hill. The words of the Magnificat sounded in one's mind's ear. It is a grand situation and most striking as seen from the road. At the bottom of the valley formed by the hill we were descending and the hill of Ain Kareem runs the dry bed of the brook from which David chose his smooth stone for Goliath. W. went down and selected just such a smooth white stone as a memento. At the bottom of the valley we halted at a Russian khan and I took a little sketch of a bit of hillside and a pear-tree in blossom. You must have seen this land with "second sight," for you have always seen a flowering fruit-tree in your mental pictures of it at Eastertide and Lady Day. Palestine is essentially the land of little fruit-trees.

On leaving the Russian khan, where we beheld chromo-lithographs of the late and the present Czars on the walls, and were interested in the high Muscovite boots of our host, we had another great ascent, and soon after reaching the top my feelings became more and more focussed on the look-out ahead. I saw signs that we were approaching Jerusalem. There were more people on the road, and a detachment of the Salvation Army was marching along with a strangely incongruous appearance. Yet only incongruous on account of the dress, for, morally, those earnest souls are amongst the fittest to

be here. I stood up in the carriage, but W. from the box saw first. He raised his hat, and a second after I had the indescribable sensation of seeing the top of the Mount of Olives, and then the Walls of Zion! It was about three o'clock.

We left the carriage outside the Jaffa Gate, for no wheeled vehicle can traverse the streets of Jerusalem, and we passed in on foot.

We had first to go to the hotel, of course, a very clean little place facing the Tower of David. Thence we soon set out to begin our wonderful experiences.

I had what I can only describe as a qualm when we reached, in but a few hundred steps, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It was all too easy and too quick. You can imagine the sense of reluctance to enter there without more recollection. I had a feeling of regret that we had not waited till the morrow, and I would warn others not to go on the day of arrival. We reached the Church through stone lanes of indescribable picturesqueness, teeming with the life of the East, and there I saw the Jerusalem Jews I had so often read of – extraordinary figures in long coats and round hats, a ringlet falling in front of each ear, while the rest of the head is shaved. They looked white and unhealthy, many of them red-eyed and all more or less bent, even the youths. No greater contrast could be seen than between those poor creatures and the Arabs who jostle them in these crowded alleys, and who are such upstanding athletic men, with clear brown skins, clean-cut features, and heads turbaned majestically. They stride along with a spring in every step. There are Greeks here, and Russians in crowds, and Kurds, Armenians, and Kopts – in fact samples of all the dwellers of the Near East, wearing their national dresses; and through this fascinating assemblage of types and costumes, most distracting to my thoughts, we threaded our way to-day, ascending and descending the lanes and bazaars, up and down wide shallow steps, till we came in front of the rich portal of the Church of churches. With our eyes dazzled with all that colour, and with the sudden brilliance of the sunshine which flooded the open space in front of the façade, we passed in! Do not imagine that the church stands imposingly on an eminence, and that its proportions can strike the beholder. You go downhill to it from the street, and it is crowded on all sides but the front by other buildings. But its gloomy antiquity and formlessness are the very things that strike one with convincing force, for one sees at once that the church is there for the sake of the sites it encloses, and that, therefore, it cannot have any architectural symmetry or plan whatever, and its enormous extent is necessitated by its enclosing the chapels over Calvary and the Holy Sepulchre and many others besides, which the Empress Helena erected over each sacred spot whose identity she ascertained with so much diligence. It is very natural to wish that Calvary was in the open air, – lonely, under the sky that saw Christ suffer on the Cross. But already, in the year 326, St. Helena found the place of execution buried under mounds of rubbish purposely thrown upon it; and where would any trace of it be to-day had she not enclosed it – what with man's destroying acts and the violence of the storms that have beaten against this rock for nineteen centuries and more? It was, to begin with, but a small eminence close outside the walls. On entering the church you discern in the depths of the gloom of the tortuous interior the rough steep steps cut in the rock that lead to Calvary, on your right hand. On climbing to the top, groping in the twilight, you find yourself in a chapel lined with plates of gold and hung with votive lamps. The sacred floor, which is the very top of Calvary, is entirely cased in gold, and under the Greek altar is shown the socket of the Cross, a hole in the rock. Our altar stands to the proper left of the Greek, which has the post of honour. Descending from Calvary there is a long stretch of twilight church to traverse before we come to the sepulchre. Again I had not realised, from the books I have read, the great distance that separates the two, and, indeed, many writers in their scepticism have done their best to belittle the whole thing. I confess that before to-day I was much under the influence of these writers, but I have now seen for myself, a privilege I am deeply thankful for. It was an overwhelming sensation to find the spaces that separate the sites so much vaster than I had expected, and to have, at every step, the conviction driven home that after all the modern wrangling and disputing the old tradition stands immovable. It certainly would be hard to believe that when St. Helena came here the

dwellers of Jerusalem should have lost all knowledge of where their “Tower-hill” stood in the course of three centuries. She was commissioned, as you know, by her son the Emperor Constantine, that ardent convert to Christianity, to seek and secure with the utmost perseverance and care all the holy sites, and to her untiring labours we owe their identification to this day. The great central dome of the church rises above the chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, which chapel stands in the vast central space, a casket enclosing the rock hollowed out into Our Lord’s Tomb and its ante-chamber. You enter this ante-chamber and, stooping down, you pass on your hands and knees into the sepulchre itself. On your right is the little low, rough-hewn tomb, covered with a slab of stone worn into hollows by the lips of countless pilgrims throughout the long ages of our era. A monk keeps watch there, and beside him there is only space enough for one person at a time. I have made many attempts to tell you my thoughts and feelings during those bewildering moments of my first visit, but I find it is impossible, and you can understand why.

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