



**The First Miracle**

## **Chapter IV**

### **En Route**

JERUSALEM! There is no word so familiar to us, and none that conjures up such scenes. Jerusalem is a disappointment to the traveller when seen at a distance. True, it is throned on hills like that other eternal city – Rome - but to me, my imagination aflame with the significance of its history, the impression of grandeur came not when I saw the city for the first time afar off, and I said no word albeit many babbled round me. The first feeling of disappointment is soon dispelled, however, by a walk through the streets of the city, where one finds stories in stones and history in everything.

The principal street in Jerusalem is not much more than fourteen feet wide, and is vaulted over. At one end of the street, by the Jaffa Gate, are large iron bars to prevent camels from entering the street. Donkeys are allowed to wander about freely but camels never. The shops are just like boxes, with openings from fourteen to sixteen feet wide and twenty feet high.

The narrow streets, in which two people could not walk abreast, and where the shoulders of a tall man were all the time knocking against articles hung up for sale, delighted me by reason of their picturesqueness. Then, too, there were the tables of the moneychangers, the tops covered with web wire underneath which the money was displayed. Among the most interesting figures were those of the public scribes, some sitting in the courtyards under the shade of the fig-trees waiting for clients and others busily writing in doorways, but all displaying the same imperturbable gravity whether the subject was a love-letter or a petition to the Sarai. Next to these my interest was intrigued by the engravers plying a trade of much importance in a country where seals take the place of signatures.

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For six *métalliques* an engraver will cut your name in Turkish or Arabic upon a seal of brass.

Not the least picturesque aspect of the streets is furnished by the fruit-sellers. Arab girls with baskets of mulberry leaves, which are a favourite dish in the East; and men sitting by apricots piled up in thousands side by side with dusky mounds of mulberries and plums flanked by scarlet masses of tomatoes. All the time passing up and down the streets, the Jews; some stately, some squalid, but all in gaberdines of plush in every hue, their heads covered with curious caps fringed with fur. One of the strangest things about the Jews of Palestine is that they all, men and boys, wear a huge curl on each side of the face. Into the midst of them a Bedouin from the desert, with a Zannar full of weapons, will shoulder his way with insolent carelessness, for the sons of the desert have a large contempt for the dwellers in the city. No conveyance on wheels goes about the streets of Jerusalem, but you can hire a carriage at the Bethlehem Gate and be taken at a gallop to Bethany, to Bethlehem, or to Colonia.

And then there are the dogs, the inevitable dogs, roaming the streets at night and making it necessary for those walking to carry lanterns. I have often seen a Jew, with staff in one hand and lantern in the other, wearing his long gaberdine and curious cap, who would have made a far finer figure of Shylock than anything I have ever seen.

One of the first things I did on arriving in Jerusalem was to meet the company, all the members of which received me with the utmost cordiality. From beginning to end my relations with them were most happy. They were an interesting group, keen and full of enthusiasm. Jack Clark, who played John, told me he had hoped that he would be allowed to portray the Christ, but congratulated me warmly on the honour afforded to me. He said that he would gladly have given five years' salary for such a privilege. Such was the spirit pervading the company. I was taken to see the studio. This had been built on a plot of ground acquired by Olcott. Here a number of men were busy completing one of the Temple scenes modelled on the plans left by the late Dr. Schick, who had spent nearly all his life in Palestine in an endeavour to make a model of the Temple. His widow gave us every assistance and was often at the studio to consult the brilliant young architect who had accompanied Olcott from America and was responsible to him for the building of all necessary sets. This young architect was a charming fellow, modest and capable. I regret that his name has escaped my memory.

Olcott told me it would be a week before he started taking any of my scenes, so I had a chance to look round Jerusalem, to study the scenario -- and meditate on the colossal task in front of me. One of my first visits was to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Constantine built a church over the Holy Sepulchre, but it was destroyed by the Persians and then restored by Heraclius in or about 628. Constantine was always associated in my mind with the frescoes of Raphael, but now he took on another aspect.

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More than once has the Church of the Holy Sepulchre been razed to the ground by Oriental sects, but always there have been hands to build it up again. When I visited the church Turkish soldiers were on guard just inside the low doorway, and it took one a little time to become reconciled to such a strange anomaly.

Under the great dome twenty different religionists worship. Each sect has a right to its turn of service before the shrine, and strange services they are with their candles, chants, clouds of incense and incantations in ancient and mystic tongues. The Copts were just finishing their service when I arrived, and the Armenians had gathered in numbers round the choir humming airs and hissing the Coptic priests, who retaliated with frowns. As the time approached for the Copts to leave, the Armenians began to push and jostle: the one side trying to remain a minute beyond the prescribed time, the other elbowing them away a second before they were bound to retire. I thought that the priests and worshippers would come to blows, but nothing serious happened because, I suppose, the Turkish guard was not quite forgotten.

The pilgrims to the Holy Sepulchre presented a very different picture. Their devoutness and fervour were really impressive. Access to the shrine of shrines under the great dome is so low that all men and women have to stoop to enter; an idea possibly borrowed by the architect who designed the tomb of Napoleon, where everyone must bow his head if he wishes to look on the resting place of the Emperor.

### THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE

Grave pilgrims from all places of the world  
Have sought this shrine, and seek it every day  
With nought of riches but a hope upcurled  
In their strong hearts to feed them on the way.  
Have I not seen them stand with streaming eyes  
With minds aflame with thoughts of paradise,  
Before the holiest of holy shrines among?

Yes, I have seen them, and have wondered much,  
Seeing how strong the spirit is if faith,  
As with a finger, some faint heart but touch.

I struck up a friendship with an antiquarian named Hilpern, whose knowledge of Jerusalem and Syria in general was very extensive indeed. He had known General Gordon, of whom he told me most interesting stories, and had also met Lord Kitchener when he was making his survey of Palestine. Holman Hunt he knew very well indeed, and was instrumental in finding models for that artist during his sojourn in Jerusalem. He had a shop where he sold antiques, many of which he told me had found their way to the British Museum. One afternoon a caravan came in from Damascus, and two merchants arrived at Hilpern's place with a collection of antiques. The doors of the shop were locked; Hilpern got me some coffee and a nargileh, and I sat and watched with keen interest the transactions between those three men. Near the end of the proceedings one of the merchants who was sitting

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on the floor produced a soft leathern bag and emptied in his lap a collection of uncut gems. It was like a scene from the Arabian Nights. Not a word of English was spoken, and the great gravity of manner displayed by these Eastern merchants was matched by their grave tones. Laughter as we understand it is very seldom heard in Syria. I cannot recall one instance of hearing a Syrian laughing heartily.

At night I often went with Hilpern to a roof by the Damascus Gate to smoke and chat. We were frequently joined by several blind sheiks who would sit and propound the Koran at great length.

### THE DAMASCUS GATE

I would that I were sitting  
By the old Damascus Gate;  
On the roof where boys are flitting  
With nargilehs soon, and late  
With you, old friend, to tell  
The stories of the place,  
While your charcoal glowing well  
Keeps the smoke about your face.

If the smoking and the joking  
I knew 'neath Syrian stars  
Could happen through invoking  
The spirit thought unbars,  
Would I not call the night through?  
Or in dreams those hours renew?