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THE RUINS OF PETRA.

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PETRA.

BY ROY PETRAN LINGLE.

"It seems no work of man's creative hand,
By labor wrought as wavering fancy planned;
But from the rock as if by magic grown,
Eternal, silent, beautiful, alone!
Not virgin white, like that old Doric shrine
Where erst Athena held her rites divine;
Nor saintly grey, like many a minster fane,
That crowns the hill and consecrates the plain,
But rosy-red as if the blush of dawn
That first beheld her were not yet withdrawn;
The hues of youth upon a brow of woe,
Which man deemed old two thousand years ago.
Match me such marvel save in Eastern clime,
A rose-red city half as old as Time."
—From Burgon's "Petra".

PETRA, or Wady Musa, was until recently one of the three "forbidden" cities of the world; the others being Mecca, also in Arabia, and Lassa in Thibet. It is the most extensive of the rock-cut cities like Machu Pichu in Peru and the cliff dwellings of China and the southwestern United States. Among these Petra is unique in its contacts with ancient civilizations and with the leading western oriental religions. Cave-dwellers and sun-worshippers, priests of Baal and Hebrew prophets, Greek pagans and Roman patriarchs, Christian iconographers and Mohammedan iconoclasts have in turn shared its glory or menaced and massacred its inhabitants and destroyed their works.

With an origin before the dawn of history, with an impregnable location, in its transition from wealth and power to utter desolation, in mystic beauty, fearful prophecies, strange legends—Petra is matchless. Yet, hidden away and lost to civilization for over a thousand years, it has been almost forgotten because of this delitescence.

On a straight line half way between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Akaba, the northern finger of the Red Sea, in the wildest part of the Arabian desert, rise the Sacred Mountains of Edom. Their peaks first appear as a castellated mass of minarets, domes, turrets and other fantastic outlines, like an oriental Garden of the Gods. Yet even the pinnacles are smooth and round, softened by a diaphanous veil of light. The colors range from snow white to purple, yellow, and rose—the predominant hue. In the crimson heart of this glowing mass lies the ancient city.

The rocky ramparts, abrupt on the outer edges, are further guarded by a natural barbican of rugged pinnacles and deep fissures surrounding the stronghold. From the east, through the bewildering maze, winds a stream fringed with wild-fig trees and oleanders, leading past the rock-cut tombs of the valley to the labyrinthine entrance of the city. Plunging past the octagonal portals, the waters rush under the ruins of an arch through a hidden entrance in the towering cliff. This is the Sik, a narrow *crevasse* in the mountain. Away back in the remote past some great cataclysm, or convulsion of Nature, must have split this passage. Through it flows the water from the spring Ain Musa. Tradition links this fountain with the name of Moses. The Koran calls it the "water of strife" or "well of judgment", where Moses struck the rock. Another Mohammedan version, doubtless arising from the crimson coloring of the stream bed, identifies it as a fountain flowing with blood which Moses miraculously changed to water. According to this legend, the cleft itself, several miles in length and in places almost a thousand feet deep, was opened by a single stroke of the magic rod. Hence the name Wady Musa, or watercourse of Moses. It forms the most original and tortuous approach to any city in the world.

Down through this narrow Sik, or shaft, the only natural entrance to the impregnable mountain fortress, men came before the dawn of Time. The population in 2700 B. C. has been estimated at a quarter of a million. Forty thousand people were said to live in one rock wall, like bees in a honey comb. Traditionally first were the Horites, or cave dwellers. Then in historic times came the Edomites—the sons of Esau—a proud and warlike people. Red Edom, under its great Duke Iram, was a terror to the ancient world thousands of years before the modern "Reds". The Children of Israel, seeking the Promised Land through the Wilderness, were refused passage by the Edomites. (Deut. ii, 4-8). The

Hebrews buried Aaron on Mount Hor, fifteen miles away, (Numb. xx, 23-29) and the forced detour protracted their wanderings many years. During the wars of that ruthless strategist, Joshua, the Edomites remained unconquered. Joshua's power over the sun failed to daunt the Sun-worshippers, and the priests of Baal defied the Israelites from the High Places. But one Biblical account records the slaughter of ten thousand of the children of Seir, flung by order of Amaziah from the cliffs to the plain below. (2 Chr. xxv, 12-13). The city itself is mentioned at least eleven times in the Old Testament, usually under the name *Sela* or the "rock-cleft." (Cf. 2 Kings xiv, 7; Isaiah xvi, 1; and in revised version Isaiah xlii, 11; Judges i, 36; 2 Chr. xxv, 12-13; Obad. 3). The region was cursed by the Hebrew prophets with hearty unanimity.

These prophetic denunciations, in retaliation for the churlish inhospitality of the Edomites and their aversion to Hebrew rule, are among the most savage vaticinations in the Bible. Joel, Amos, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Malachi and Isaiah predicted its utter desolation. Obadiah wrote "The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee—thou that dwellest in the clefts of the Rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, who shall bring me down to the ground? Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord." (Obad. 3). And in time, conquered by David and other Hebrew warriors, the proud and powerful Edomites disappeared forever from history.

Their remnants were supplanted by the Nabatheans, originally a nomadic Arab tribe. The newcomers encouraged commerce with outside nations. As traders they were world-famed. The Greeks called the region Idumea and re-named its chief city Petra or the "Rock". Petra became the center of caravan trade, a metropolis of the desert, with routes leading to Egypt, Eastern Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and Palestine. The rock city formed a safe deposit vault for priceless treasure. Caravans from Petra to Leuce Como on the Red Sea were vast as armies. Camels filed through the narrow gorge laden with frankincense, myrrh, silver—all the spices, incense, dye-stuffs, fabrics and precious stones of the Orient. One may imagine the relief of the desert travelers, plashing safely through the cool waters of Wady Musa, in the deep shadow of the cliffs, after escaping the burning heat and roving pirates of the desert.

For centuries fabulous wealth poured into this narrow valley, scarcely a mile square even with its lateral clefts. Kings, queens and conquerors entered to gaze upon the rock-cuttings and inscriptions of the Nabatheans and to revel in their pomp. The King of Arabia issued from the gloomy gorge at the head of fifty thousand men to lay siege to Jerusalem. Secure in power and wealth, the Nabatheans forgot the curse hovering over Mount Seir, or only laughed at the fanatical Hebrew prophets.

Again came a change. The Romans, relentlessly pushing back their boundaries, attained the utmost confines of their domains. Under the Emperor Trajan, in 106 A. D., Cornelius Palma, Governor of Syria, conquered and organized the province of Arabia Petræa. Petra reached the zenith of its glory. The Romanized population is said to have numbered two hundred and sixty-seven thousand. The indomitable Romans pushed three additional roads over the ramparts through rock portals into the heart of the city,—one leading south to Egypt and two north to Palestine and the Hellespont. In lines sweeping grandly and imperturbably over Syria, the basaltic blocks and milestones still remain as monuments to the engineering skill that joined Arabia and Britain, the farthermost limits of Imperial Rome. Aqueducts conveyed the water down the now-paved Sik. On the plain arose temples, a forum, baths, palaces, arches of triumph, in all varieties of classic architecture. Taking their cue from the Nabatheans the Romans continued the rock-cuttings. Tombs, temples, palaces and treasure vaults grew in the marvelously colored rock walls. These still remain, long after the structures in the valley have toppled and crumbled into ruin. The most beautiful mural monuments of Petra date from the Roman occupation. An altar niche in Al Deir—"The Convent"—gives proof of Christian worship. Evidences of the strength of Christianity in these regions are remarkable. Presumably the persecutions of Diocletian drove many exiles from Rome to the provinces. But again the veil of mystery covers the possible greatness of Petra as a Christian outpost.

As a center of wealth and luxury, however, the city could scarcely be surpassed. Rome and Athens, in their days of grandeur as world capitals, rest secure in fame by their contributions in art, law and philosophy. Petra, remote and unsung, shared in the classic culture. A Greek amphitheatre, seating five thousand persons, is carved at the base of a cliff in strata of rose, purple and saffron sandstone. Around and above are hewn the tombs of the

dead. In this appropriate setting an audience might witness the tragedies of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides and solemnly meditate upon the immanence of death; or riotously applaud the comedies of Aristophanes, Plautus and Terence to forget the tragedy of life and the inexorable fate that overhung the city.

After the Second Century A. D. the history of Petra is shrouded in obscurity. No written records from the Third, Fourth and Fifth Centuries have survived. Priceless manuscripts must have been lost or destroyed during the abandonment. Judging by sculptural and architectural remains, a literature and philosophy second to none may have been denied the world. As for the final calamity, in the words of John Masefield, "None knows what overthrew that city's pride." (Sonnets in "Enslaved").

From comparative history we may conjecture the bare outlines of Petra's fate. With Goths, Vandals and Huns ravaging the Empire, the Roman legions were withdrawn, as they were from Britain, to protect the Eternal City. The incense-route had shifted. Palmyra had become the objective of caravans. Lacking protection and commerce, the Romanized inhabitants were harassed by the fierce Arab tribes. Their ultimate fate is veiled in a terrible mystery. *Not even the relics of the dead remain.* The desolation may have been gradual. But possibly a sudden catastrophe overwhelmed the population. The absence of written records supports the latter hypothesis. Ingenious besiegers may have cut off the water supply from above. The very strength of the city may have proved its weakness. Caught like animals in a trap, starved and thirsting in the midst of wealth and splendor, the survivors may have been wiped out or captured in a final desperate battle. Probably not all were lost. Traditions account for descendants in Syria and Italy, thence scattering through Europe. Fascinating and fantastic, as the city itself, is the theory that with the decline of power and the encroachment of enemies, came a Great Fear, born of the Biblical curse. The Christianized inhabitants may have fled in panic terror. Whatever the cause, we only know that "they are gone; ay, ages long ago."

How the shade of grim Isaiah must have exulted, after the lapse of long centuries, to recall his curse on Idumæa:

"From generation to generation it shall lie waste. . . . He shall stretch out upon it the line of confusion and the stones of emptiness. . . . All her princes shall be nothing. . . . And thorns shall come up in her palaces, nettles and brambles in the

fortresses thereof; and it shall be an habitation of dragons and a court for owls." (Is. xxxiv, 10-13).

Daniel might also be pardoned a complacent chuckle for his prediction of the transitory Roman dominion: "And he shall plant the tabernacles of his palace between the seas in the glorious holy mountain; yet he shall come to his end and none shall help him." (Dan. xi, 45). The "glorious" land of Daniel included Edom and Moab. (Dan. xi, 41).

The Abomination of Desolation had come to pass. For over thirteen hundred years Petra was almost utterly lost to civilization. Only the Crusaders, battling Saladin around Kerak and Shobek to the north, for a time occupied this strategic point. The attitude of Islam supplemented that of the Hebrew prophets. The Koran recognized Petra as a sacred and mysterious, if not a holy city. The most solemn interdictions against habitation seem to have been placed upon it by the Mohammedans. Nomadic Arabs, discovering the hidden entrance, gazed in awe upon the ancient wonders. Once outside, the more intrepid were often baffled in attempts to return. Legends grew of a wondrous enchanted city, appearing and vanishing like a mirage. (Iliowizi, *The Weird Orient*). Coupled with these were awe-inspiring tales of the dire fate of beholders. A religious or superstitious veneration hallowed the place. It was known, but not inhabited, by the desert tribes. It become a city of mystery—a City of Dreadful Beauty,—like a desert Medusa, itself turned to stone. It meant death or worse to the profaner. Even today the bolder guides will offer to show only by night what they dare not reveal by day. There are legends of treasure still buried or hidden among the ruins. Petra has never been thoroughly explored.

In 1811, Burckhardt, a Swiss traveler, crossing the desert wilderness, stumbled weak and weary upon this refuge. He immediately knew it for the long lost city. The fierce and greedy Arabs stole even the rags that bandaged his bleeding ankles. Burckhardt escaped with his life,—to die only a few years later. Following him came Irby and Mangles; then Laborde and Linant, who made a hasty survey-map but were driven out. John Stephens, an American with a special permit, was the first to spend a night among the ruins. He died shortly afterward. Other travelers, misinterpreting the prophetic words of Ezekiel, "Thus will I make Mount Seir most desolate, and cut off from it him that passeth out and him that returneth," (Ezek. xxv, 7) were deterred from

the journey by what they considered a divine threat. Then, too, the route over the desert was long and dangerous. The Arab tribes were fierce, fanatical and extortionate. The indomitable Kitchener, with Hull and Armstrong, failed to penetrate the valley in 1883, but viewed its beauties from the ramparts. Undaunted by prophecies and perils, perhaps twenty white men and six white women have left records of visits to Petra during the nineteenth century. The number who perished in the attempt is unknown. Colonel Libbey of Princeton was one of the last desert travelers to force his way past the threatening guardians of the Sik.

In 1904 the Hedjaz Railroad to Maan, constructed by German engineers, part of the Turkish-German dream of a pan-Islamic Empire, brought petra within thirty miles of civilization. In 1917 General Allenby also opened up the region with an Egypt-to-Palestine road. Now Petra is comparatively accessible. Under a friendly King of the Hedjaz, travelers may be assured protection in the future.

Those fortunate few who have visited Petra say that its strange beauty can never be pictured or described. The Roman roads, High Places, Citadel Rock, sandstone walls honeycombed with tombs and temples are all cut in strata of the most marvelously variegated colors. Such monuments as the Rainbow Temple, Corinthian Tomb, Al Deir, and the Amphitheatre are matchless combinations of the handiwork of Nature and of man. Of the Khaznah Firaun, or Treasury of Pharaoh, its hundred foot sunlit façade looming up through the darkness of the Sik, John Stephens wrote:

"Even now . . . I see before me the façade of that temple; neither the Coliseum at Rome, grand and interesting as it is, nor the ruins of the Acropolis at Athens, nor the Pyramids, nor the mighty temples of the Nile are so often present in my memory." *(Arabia Petræa).*

William Libbey describes this rock-cut cameo in the gateway of the mountains of mystery: "Carved with matchless skill, after the conception of some master mind; gathering the beauties of the stream, the peerless hues of the sandstone, the towering cliffs, the impassable ravine, the brilliant atmosphere and the fragment of the blue sky above,—it must have been enduring in its effect on the human mind. We saw it in its desolation, a thousand years after its owners had fled, after a cycle of storm, tempest, flood and earthquake had done their worst to mar and disfigure it, and

we must confess that its impression upon our hearts and memories is deathless." *(The Jordan Valley and Petra,* Vol. ii, p. 94).

Petra has been almost neglected in art and literature. Even Jules Guerin's richly tinted paintings from Egypt and the Holy Land fail to include the Khaznah Firaun. Literary men and artists never visited Petra during the nineteenth century. A few have heard of the place. Edgar Allen Poe mentions the glories of Petra in his critical review of Stephens' "Arabia Petræa". And another American poet, Whittier, celebrating "The Rock in El Ghor, writes:

"Dead Petra in her hill-tomb sleeps,
  Her stones of emptiness remain;
Around her sculptured mystery sweeps
  The lonely waste of Edom's plain.

From the doomed dwellers in the cleft
  The bow of vengeance turns not back;
Of all her myriads none are left
  Along the Wady Musa's track.

Unchanged the awful lithograph
  Of power and glory undertrod,—
Of nations scattered like the chaff
  Blown from the threshing-floor of God."

This place may have been the inspiration of Kipling's City of the Desert in the words of Dick Heldar:

"What do you think of a big red dead city built of red sandstone on honey colored sands? There are forty dead kings there, each in a gorgeous tomb finer than all the others. You look at the palaces and streets and shops and tanks and think that men must live there. Then evening comes and the lights change until it's just as though you stood in the heart of a King Opal. Then the night wind gets up and the sands move, and you hear the desert outside the city singing 'Now I lay me down to sleep.' And everything is dark till the moon rises." *(The Light that Failed).*

John Masefield must have had in mind the cities of the Arabian desert, perhaps Petra, when he wrote the sonnets in *Enslaved.*

It is strange that so little is known of a spot so intimately connected with the history of mankind and of Christianity. As the Abomination of Desolation it was denounced, shunned and hidden for ages. But there was a glorious promise for the future. Isaiah also wrote of Idumæa, "The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose; . . . and a highway shall be there, and a way." (Is. xxxv, 1, 8). Its further destiny may be hinted in Matthew and Mark at the time when "The abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place." (Matt. xxiv, 15) (Mark xiii, 14). The holy cities of Rome and Jerusalem have been justly famed in hymn and story. Petra needs no praise but knowledge. It stands absolutely alone and incomparable, as the strangest, most mystically beautiful place in the world: "a rose-red city, half as old as Time."