

SEMILASSO IN AFRICA.

ADVENTURES IN ALGIERS,

AND

OTHER PARTS OF AFRICA.

BY PRINCE PÜCKLER-MUSKAU,

AUTHOR OF

“THE TOUR OF A GERMAN PRINCE.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET,

Publisher in Ordinary to His Majesty.

1837.

Semilasso in Africa,
Volume 3, 1839

pages 91-149

The colonel and the mamaluk rode on, early in the morning, to deliver the letters of introduction in Sfax, and to prepare our quarters. I made a lateral excursion to the ruins of Caraga, where there are two large Roman cisterns, nothing inferior to those of Carthage [92] and Utica, but of quite different construction. Both are circular, the vaulted roofs resting on lines of columns intersecting the circle, and connected by arches; the whole built of freestone. Though very little injured, they are more than half filled with rubbish, which evidently must have been intentionally conveyed thither; as it is not easy to conceive how it could otherwise have got there. These cisterns, it is said, formerly supplied with water, not only Caraga, but Thisdrus; and certainly they are large enough to do so. We fired off a pistol in these subterranean vaults, the report equalling that of a cannon, and then crept out into daylight again through the opening broken in the side. We had no time to lose, having before us a day's journey of eight German miles, and it was already past nine o'clock. With my mule, which the horses keep pace with only at a smart trot, I can easily go one of our post miles in an hour; but on so long a journey, it requires a few hours' rest on the way, and we knew that the gates of Sfax were closed at seven o'clock. Not far from the cistern was a hole, in which lay the trunk of a female statue of remarkable beauty. Strange to say, a deep and narrow opening had been made in the left breast, in which a colony of ants had formed a [93] settlement, which produced the revolting effect of a dead body devoured by worms.

We had never yet passed through a more melancholy country: it was worse than the desert; for the singed and stunted olive-trees, scattered here and there, which stood like so many birch-brooms, combined with the deep sandy soil, partly covered with innumerable small stones, without a single hill or any other kind of variety, produced an impression of extreme desolation. The only living object we saw was a gigantic tarantula, whose disgusting appearance harmonized perfectly with the country. I caught it for my friend the naturalist in Bamberg, but afterwards lost it again through the negligence of one of my people. We afterwards found, among some filthy weeds, the recently cast skin of a snake, five feet in length, but already too much injured by the ants to be of any value. While we were dining under a parched olive-tree, we were joined by some Arabs travelling on horseback, who without ceremony claimed our hospitality; and, as soon as they had laden themselves with the remains of our meal, they pursued their route without halting. Shortly afterwards, we perceived that they met a man with an ass carrying figs, which he was taking from Sfax, [94] to sell in the market of Keruan, and of which they bought some. Immediately one of them turned back, and brought us half a dozen of the finest, in return for our liberality to them.

We were still sixteen *miglie** from Sfax, when, in the midst of an unfathomable depth of sand, we found our carreta had a wheel broken, and the horses enjoying themselves in a neighbouring stubble-field. This was a most disagreeable accident, for no assistance was to be had except from the town. I left my secretary, with the rest of the escort, to protect our baggage, and pushed on with the dragoman and Mustapha. The road soon assumed a different and almost European character, for it was straight, of equal breadth, tolerably even, and regularly inclosed between ditches, with an uninterrupted line of gardens on each side; the soil thrown up out of the ditches, when planted with Indian fig-trees, forming excellent and solid fences. This sudden contrast between a high state of civilization and [95] total neglect is of frequent occurrence; and it is generally not the soil that changes, but the degree of care bestowed upon it. Even in the dreary waste which we had this day traversed, we found occasional spots, where the dark colour of the ground announced the presence of water at a trifling distance from the surface; and to judge from the general formation of the subsoil, artesian wells might probably be sunk in all parts of the country, with the most brilliant success. I am surprised that none of the European speculators here have ever acted upon this idea.

As far as the eye can reach, Sfax appears surrounded by gardens, the number of which, as I had afterwards an opportunity to ascertain from official reports, reaches the almost incredible number of fifty thousand; of which, fourteen thousand are joined to dwelling houses, and more than thirty-five thousand are without. Independently of other fruits, upwards of six thousand hundred-weight of almonds, and two thousand hundred-weight of pistachio-nuts, the produce of these gardens, are yearly exported. The trade of Sfax is decidedly flourishing and on the increase. Independently of oil, wool, and fruits, which form the staple commodities, the various treasures of [96] the Gerid,—partly natural products, such as dates, henna, ostrich-feathers, natron, honey, excellent wax, &c,—partly manufactures, as soap, the finest bernoos, stuffs formed of a mixture of silk and wool, variegated blankets, plaited rushes, remarkably durable earthen vessels from Gherbi, which are not made of so large a size in any other place, and several minor articles,—find here their chief market.

Immediately before the lofty walls of the city, we rode through a large open place, where hundreds of men, horses, and asses were busily employed threshing corn. This was effected not merely by the hoofs of the cattle, but also by a kind of carriage with twelve or sixteen broad rollers under it, drawn by four horses harnessed abreast, as in a triumphal car, and proudly driven round the circle by the charioteer perched up on high. The chief inconvenience of this system of threshing is, that the straw is completely destroyed. At the gate we found the interpreter of the Neapolitan vice-consul, Don Angelo Advicato, to whom I had letters. Here also I was received with that kindness and hospitality, of which I have already so often had occasion to make honourable mention; and, as the Caïd was not at hand, M. Guetta, a very jovial Israelite [97] from Trieste, offered me two rooms in his house, where, surrounded by some of the little comforts of home, I reposed quite at my ease after the fatigues and privations of the journey. M. J—— was not destined to participate in all these delights till the following day; for when he arrived at Sfax, with the people I had sent to his assistance, he found the gates shut, and had to spend the night under the canopy of heaven. It is a remarkable fact, that, on this occasion, the horses had travelled forty leagues without a drop of water, as none was to be had after leaving the Arab camp, until their arrival at the city gates.

My original intention was to have made this the term of my journey, and to have returned by the direct road over Susa to Tunis; but, finding myself so much better than I had expected, and having so valiantly endured heat, fleas, and Arab fare, I resolved, if possible, to see the whole kingdom, and for that purpose sent a courier to the Bardo, to request a more extensive Amrha and a more numerous escort, the latter being indispensable, owing to the marauding tribes in the interior. This obliged me to make a stay of several weeks in the neighbourhood. A part of the time was [98] consumed in writing or in making little country excursions, and the remainder was devoted to a journey to Susa.

I took much pleasure in visiting the gardens. Here the phenomenon is again witnessed, of nearly every kind of European fruit-tree, figs, almonds, olives, pomegranates, the most beautiful grapes, and even flowers, growing luxuriantly in a deep sand, which of itself would produce no kind of vegetation, and this with scarcely any rain, and without watering;— while the thermometer in the shade is ranging between 25 and 30 degrees (90° and 100° Fahrenheit). I am at a loss to account for the possibility of such a degree of fertility. The general productiveness of the kingdom is chiefly attributed to the quantity of salt and salpêtre contained every where in the soil, and which gives, at the same time, such a disagreeable brackish taste to the water of so many rivers and lakes. Still the impregnation of the deep sand with particles of salt can scarcely suffice to explain the extraordinary luxuriance. The apple and pear trees were literally bending under the weight of their burden, as in the most fertile districts of the Rhine; and, what is not the case there, every visitor is here allowed to pluck as much as he [99] likes. Our Mussulmans were so unbounded in abusing this indulgence, that I thought it ray duty to restrain them. Oranges only cannot be made to thrive in this parched soil. On the other hand, a grove of palm-trees shades the gardens. These trees do not indeed

produce ripe fruit, but a very cooling and agreeable beverage is extracted from them: this ferments in about four-and-twenty hours, and is then used for the fabrication of a strong and intoxicating liquor. The liquid is obtained, not like our birch-juice, by incisions in the trunk of the tree, but by the more ruinous process of cutting off the entire crown, when the juice continues to exude for months. The tree itself is destroyed if the juice is allowed to run out so long; but while it runs, fifty quarts a day (Berlin measure) is the average produce. If the tree is to be preserved, the wound must, after a short time, be carefully bound up, whereupon the trunk continues to grow, forming a broad smooth ring in the place where it has been cut. After a few years the operation may be renewed, and I have seen trees of a great height, on which five or six of these rings could be distinctly traced. In its fresh state the juice is called *Lägmi*; when fermented and converted into a spirit, *Bocka*.

[100] In the Caïd's garden we found some beautiful exotics. There were large pepper-trees, with their finely pointed and pendent foliage, producing a most striking effect: also a kind of dwarf palm, often seen in our hot-houses, and here called the palm of Christendom; with us it never blossoms, whereas here it bears one of the most beautiful flowers, two feet high and more than half a foot in diameter, formed by a multitude of small white calices. The jasmine here, quite different from ours, has nearly the same and quite as powerful a scent as our tuberose, so that a very small bouquet is sufficient to perfume a room for several days. The essence of jasmine made here is considered the best in the world, and forms by no means an inconsiderable article of trade in the east.

On my return, this day, from my promenade, I found two Moors at M. Guetta's. They had just arrived from the Soodan, where they had penetrated to within fifteen days' journey from Tombuctoo, to purchase various articles of the country, particularly gold dust. I bought some of the latter, which is very inappropriately denominated gold dust, since it consists rather of little jagged fragments, some of them large enough to be worth a louis d'or, but for the greater part of about the size of a [101] pea or half a pea. These people wore handsome sandals inlaid with feathers, and embroidered shirts of neat workmanship, which they had purchased in the country they had visited. They had proceeded fifty-two days' journey, but had observed so little, that it was impossible to obtain much information from them. They praised very highly the horses of the interior, which the natives value at extravagant prices, and will not allow to be exported. Since the murder of Laing, with which they were acquainted, and which is here still attributed to European intrigues, no European has entered those districts.

Mr. Blanchenay, the English consul, a most agreeable and worthy man, whose politeness towards me was uninterrupted, gave me an interesting account of a prince from Morocco, who had arrived here by sea two months before. His intention was to have performed a pilgrimage to Mecca, but, being deterred by the appearance of the plague in Egypt, he had returned to this place. He had several horses with him, and among them were two, than which Mr. Blanchenay maintained he had never seen finer; they were from the interior of Africa, not from Morocco, and probably of the Tafilet race, already frequently mentioned; [102] their character varied altogether from that of the Arabian, for they were sixteen hands high (English measure), strong-boned, and of remarkably beautiful and regular form; their necks were long and their heads small; and they were so vicious, that though six years old, they had never been mounted by their owner, but had only been led by the hand, and then they were held in check with great difficulty. Mr. Blanchenay doubted whether he had ever seen, even in England, a more strongly built hunter, certainly none of full blood. The prince, for particular reasons of his own, offered one of these horses to the Caïd for fifteen hundred piasters, which we should consider a very low price, but which the Caïd thought too high, probably because he feared he might be obliged to make an involuntary present of it to the Bey. How much I regretted not to have been here! The introduction of such a stallion might have proved an epoch in the history of our studs, and an opportunity for such an acquisition may seldom occur again. The prince had many articles of value with him, and being detained by the governor an unusually long

time, he began to entertain apprehensions as to his safety. Under the pretext of going to Tunis, he suddenly left Sfax with [103] his whole train, since which nothing has been heard of him, though he is supposed to have returned to his native country by the difficult and dangerous, but most direct road over Keff and Constantine.

One of the most agreeable amusements here is the fishery in the sea, which has many peculiarities. As there is a tolerably strong ebb and flood at Sfax, the latter is used for this purpose. The water on the coast is so shallow, that a man can wade out for about half a league into the sea, in which an enclosure is made, in the form of a semicircle, by a kind of fence constructed of palm-branches stuck in the sand. Within this fence, at intervals of about a hundred feet, are nets and large baskets, to which the fish are led by a kind of lane, while anxiously in search of an exit. As soon as the ebb-tide begins, some fifty men jump into the sea, and commence a regular battue, beating the water with broad shovels, and so driving the fish before them. When they have nearly reached the fence, the boats row conveniently along on the other side, and receive the contents of the nets and baskets. We seldom caught large fish, but continually all sorts of little monsters, as, for instance, electrical flat-fish, the mere touch of [104] which benumbs the hand; sea-devils, with a long venomous sting ten inches in length; sea leeches, covered all over with small bristles, like so many needles; a quantity of crabs, &c. The most delicate were then selected, and fried in the boats over a charcoal fire, or roasted in the ashes. Don Angelo, who most agreeably combined, with enormous corpulence, the usual jocularly of fat people and the facetious humour of an Italian, chiefly contributed to enliven our piscatorial repast with his tales and jests, which often kept us in an uninterrupted roar of laughter. These cachinnations, however, sometimes resounded at his expense, particularly when, on our landing, two of our people, having to carry this ponderous mass through the water, were several times on the point of foundering, which extorted the most marvellous grimaces from the delicate cargo, who, sometimes exclaiming, sometimes calling on Santa Maria, drew himself together like a shapeless mass, in his anxiety to avoid the unwelcome salt-water bath.

The view of the city from the sea is beautiful. The flat shores covered with their verdant gardens and palm-trees, and the walls and battlements of a dazzling white, seemed to [105] swim upon the dark violet-coloured water. Opposite are the two islands formerly called Great and Little Cercina, and still known to the Arabs under the name of The Kerkinas, a circumstance that tends with many others to strengthen me in my belief that the ancient Romans pronounced their c as we our k. These islands are equally flat, covered with still larger forests of palm-trees, but in other respects not remarkably fertile. The fishery which I have just been hastily describing, seems to have been carried on in precisely the same manner since the earliest ages, for Strabo relates something very nearly similar.

I found in Sfax some French newspapers of a tolerably recent date, from which I learned something of the current events of Europe, of little general interest just now; I also found the English Athenaeum, wherein, singularly enough, I read, here in Africa, the first review, and that in English, of my German book with an Italian title.

On the 7th of July, I commenced my excursion to Susa, after having taken care to provide myself, in Sfax, with a field-bed, a table, and a chair, which proved of great convenience to me during the rest of my journey. Mr. Blanchenay awaited us, half a league [106] from the town, with his greyhounds, to run down a few hares on the way: but our hunt immediately became a chasse monstre: for, in the first place, we did not catch our hare; secondly, while my mule was in eager pursuit of the game, the accursed rutabaga (saddle) slipped under the belly of the ill-girthed animal, and threw me into the sand; thirdly, Mr. Blanchenay was thrown, and, in jumping up again, received so violent a kick from his horse on the back of his head, that he reeled to the ground several times, and occasioned us for a while great uneasiness: on being bled, however, he soon recovered. The fourth misfortune was, that Diana, a pretty greyhound bitch, who had attached

herself to me in Sfax, and whose master, a French merchant, had lent her to me for the journey, sprained her leg, and continued lame during the rest of the excursion.

We dined among the ruins of Inshila. It was long since we had found so beautiful a resting-place as the cool temple in which we encamped, and which was a ruin in a double sense. The Roman freestone walls, half a foot in thickness, had been lined by the Arabs, within and without, with walls of their own construction, but of these the greater part [107] had already fallen again. The interior arches and columns had been torn down, and replaced by Moorish arches, that now reposed on pillars of beautiful Italian marble. These had also received many injuries; and the ground, filled, as usual, with rubbish and cow dung, presented a singularly heterogeneous whole. The whole neighbourhood is filled with ruins, but they are of little importance. After a few hours, we met a long procession, in which were seen several horsemen, handsomely dressed in red and yellow, and their horses painted yellow with henna: in their centre was a waggon, not much better than my carreta, in which sat a "turban'd Moor." This was the Caïd of Sfax, returning from a journey on business, and here, accordingly, I made his acquaintance. I found him a man of expressive countenance and polished manners, joined to all the dignity of oriental repose: he appeared kind and good-humoured, though they do tell some monstrous things about him. During our short interview he made me a present of a beautiful gazelle, which one of his people had just caught: I shall keep the animal till I leave the country, for gazelles make delightful pets, but unfortunately they cannot live in our climate. [108]

In Gebibiana we encamped for the night in an olive-grove. This is a scene which every time affords me new pleasure, and indeed none can well be more animated. Here some of my people, with a dozen Arabs, are busily pitching the tent; while five or six others, crouching in the sand, look gravely on, without stirring a hand: there the emancipated mules roll themselves on the ground with cries of joy. A little further off they are ranging the horses in a long line, by means of a cord, and throwing before them the miserable broken straw by way of fodder, which the poor animals, nevertheless, attack with eagerness. On one side a diminutive fire is flaming up, at which the dragoman's first business is to boil coffee for himself and his companions. There the Colonel is amusing himself with his skittish white nag, that, freed from the bridle, is jumping about like a foal, and, with its ears thrown back, is playing all sorts of gambols. J throws his gun over his shoulder, in hopes of snatching a few shots; and I sit down on my carpet under a tree to take hasty notes of my experience of the day. During the night, noises of one kind or other continue without interruption, but on this occasion they became quite intolerable, in consequence of a particular [109] piece of civility on the part of the Arabs. They had posted two of their party by the side of my tent, to summon the faithful to prayer, which they did every hour with most stentorian voices; and one, peculiarly devout, went on repeating his orisons uninterruptedly during the whole night. They, no doubt, took me for a Mussulman, from my dress; and I had patience and politeness enough to let them have their own way, though it prevented me from closing an eye the whole night.

... (p109-p131) ...

On my return to Sfax I again passed through Monasteer, where by the light of the moon and three lanterns, I climbed a rock in the sea, and visited the grotto in which M. Manietto, who at that time farmed the tunny-fishery, gave a splendid banquet to Count Philippi during the fishing-season. I was sorry to have come too late by a few weeks, to be myself a witness of the spectacle.

There are three places in the kingdom where the tunny-fishery is carried on; at Cape Zebib, Cape Bon, and at Monasteer. The first outlay, including the rent paid to government, amounts every year to three hundred thousand piasters: sometimes the profit is large, but generally very precarious. The instinct of these animals is of a strange kind: every year they quit the ocean, run in between the pillars of Hercules, and, passing along the coast of Africa, make the complete round of the

Mediterranean, till, after severe losses, they arrive again at their original point of entrance. The way of taking them is also curious: a plaited fence planted in the [132] shallow water, and right across the course which they are known to take, forces them to swim into inclosures out of which they are not able to find an exit: there they are left swimming about in the greatest trouble, until a sufficient number is collected, when a larger inclosure, ominously called the *Death-Chamber*, is opened by means of a slide which is drawn up. As soon as the foremost of the crowded fish swims through the opening, all the rest immediately follow: but sometimes the leader, as if he had a foreboding of the fate that awaited him, declines the invitation; in which case, one of the fishermen strips himself, dives down, and swims through the opening; whereupon, the fish, taking him for one of themselves, never fail to follow his example.

When there are as many victims in the death-chamber as can well be managed at once, the slide is closed, and a linen-cloth, stretched over the bottom, is slowly drawn up, which brings the fish to the light of day, where they are leisurely put to death: this is not, however, effected without some resistance. The blood of the fish streams,

Ein Schlachten ist 's, nicht eine Schlacht zu nennen!

No part of the fish, as they tell me, is [133] thrown away; even the bones form excellent fuel.

From Monasteer I took another road, which brought me back to Sfax in three days, through a monotonous, stony, barren waste, sometimes through long stunted olive-groves, the property of the governor,—a fact that sufficiently explains their wretched condition. The first night, we encamped at Xurseff, where we could discover very little of the ruins of Sursura. The next day we breakfasted about noon in the sun, the thermometer at 50 degrees (146° Fahrenheit) while the unshaded soil was so hot, that without carpets it would have been impossible to endure it.

On the third day, my dandy Hamba made himself so drunk with six bottles of spoiled wine which we had abandoned to him, that I almost despaired of getting him home alive. His tactique on the occasion was quite exemplary: he would dash on with his excellent horse in advance of us till he tumbled out of the saddle, and then, without letting go the reins, he fairly fell asleep. Three or four times we found him in this position; and as soon as we had roused him and replaced him on his horse, which at length laid itself down by the side of its master, the same manoeuvre was recommenced.

[134]

The Bedouins are generally supposed to be very moderate: perhaps they are so when they have nothing; but, as far as my experience goes, there are no more thorough tipplers nor gormandizers either, when it costs them nothing. The food which my suite have consumed upon this journey, by day and by night, surpasses every thing that I had till now thought possible: if I had them in Europe, I think I could have made money by showing them.

During the whole of this trip, I drank nothing but milk and water, and found it agree with me extremely well, though I rode during the most violent heat of the day, and slept at night in the open air. My two companions stood it scarcely so well, but neither of them fell sick; and our repose at Sfax, where there are few fleas and no gnats, soon restored them completely.

I found at the house of my extraordinary original of a landlord, besides a costly consignment of European beer and Italian aleatico, (for which by-the-by the charge was none of the most reasonable,) new Amrhas from the Pacha, to the governors of all the provinces which I could possibly visit during my journey, enforced by extra commands from the minister, [135] to supply me abundantly and promptly with horses, camels, escorts, tents, water-skins,—in short, with every

thing I might require, to gratify whatever wish I might express, and to treat me in every respect with more than usual consideration. The Dutch consul-general, through whose medium the Amrhas were sent me, wrote me, that he had been sixty-three years in Tunis, but had never seen done for a stranger what the Bey was doing for me; and I must say, I was myself as much surprised at such magnificent generosity, as I felt grateful to his highness for the favour shown me.

As I did not use all the Amrhas sent me, it may be of interest to you to see one, together with a translation: I therefore hand you one, from which you will perceive, if you compare it with the former, that my interest at court had materially increased.

TRANSLATION.

"Praise be to God!

And may God bless our Lord Muhammed,
his family and friends!"

To our magnanimous and sublime sons Soliman Ben Hayad, governor of the city of Jerbi, and to all other chiefs there.

"Peace be with you, and the mercy of God!

[136] There will arrive with you, coming from the sea, the &c. &c, with the view of seeing Jerbi, and the antiquities of all nations to be found in its vicinity. I recommend to you to receive him well, to treat him with more than usual veneration and respect, as is due to his exalted rank.

You will then be careful to conduct him to Gabbes, honoured, respected, and esteemed.

And this you are punctually to execute, without acting against it in the smallest particular.

Our salutation from the poor before God, Mustapha Pacha Bey, whom may it please God to direct!

The 14th of the month Rabih, the first and sublime, in the year 1251.

As soon as he had received the Amrha intended for him, the Caïd came to me, in *pontificalibus*, to bid me welcome, and to offer me whatever was in his power. On my returning his visit, he presented me with a beautiful pipe, which I acknowledged subsequently by giving him an English telescope. The father of the Caïd of Sfax is the wealthy Jelluli of Tunis, whose fortune is estimated at three millions of piasters, and who, accordingly, is considered a very great man. I found his [137] son's house, the liveries of his servants, and his whole establishment, upon a very fashionable footing for this part of the world. His kindness added, moreover, two pretty gazelles and a tame white vulture to my household; and these, with Diana, who on no account would leave me, often made more noise in the house than a dozen riotous children would have done; but during the week of repose that we spent here, they afforded us much amusement.

... (p137-p140) ...

In all Sfax there is not a single cellar! nor any means of cooling liquid, except by letting it down to the bottom of the house-cistern; but as the water in this is never cold, but at most cool, one can only very imperfectly quench one's thirst, which at length becomes a regular torment. I would often gladly have given a hundred franks for a pail-full of ice, if I could have got it. The grandees in Tunis procure ice from Sicily, but here such a luxury is unknown.

This, however, was my only cause of complaint against the climate, which is, after all, [141] less in fault than the indolence of the inhabitants. The heat is certainly more intense than in Europe; and yet, even when the temperature has been lower, I have felt it more oppressive at home than here, where it has never yet annoyed me. This, perhaps, is owing to the greater purity and elasticity of the air; but I see that upon the Europeans resident here, as well as on my companions, the effect of the heat is much more disagreeable. The general temperature in my chamber has hitherto been from 24° to 26°, (87° to 91° Fahrenheit,) and this only by carefully excluding the sun, and keeping up a continual current of air.

As neither wolf nor fox showed himself, we ran down a few hares, and were back at our quarters by nine o'clock. I was not in the best humour; for, on the way back, they had lost me a valuable shawl, and a costly English knife, which I had carried about me since 1813,—articles, that no doubt have been a source of great delight to the honest finder.

On the evening before my departure, my comical host procured me, at my own expense, a Moorish concert. The performers were three members of the deposed Dey of Tripoli's band. One of them was of very pleasing [142] exterior, and played extremely well on the guitar; the second sang like a mad bacchanal, and, Arab fashion, through his nose; while the third danced in the costume of a coquetish girl, with naked feet, which were small and pretty. You may imagine that neither the words of the song nor the attitudes of the dance were very decent; but the whole group—actors and spectators—offered a characteristic picture. In one corner of the room sat I, with a pipe four yards in length, at a round table, on which were standing my tea equipage and two wax-lights. Opposite me, in a cool Moorish costume, i.e. linen jackets and trousers, the colonel and my secretary had planted themselves; and at their side, on a sack of wool, in his shirt-sleeves, fisherman's trousers, and thick shoes, our host lay stretched out at full length. Next came the two musicians, in jackets embroidered with gold, and naked feet with red slippers: each had carefully deposited his left leg on the right thigh. Further on were squatted two Maltese servants, leaning against the wall; and these, with two open doors, formed the first half of the circle. On the other side, next to me, sat five dignitaries of the city, who, in their white costume, looked like the ghosts of the bastion, and were [143] scarcely distinguished from the wall against which they sat; while on the fourth wall, three half-naked negroes had fixed themselves, in various attitudes; where, with their long shadows, with which they could themselves scarcely avoid being confounded, they presented most grotesque outlines at the back-ground of the picture.

Motionless, the spectators fixed their looks upon the pseudo-maiden, who was dancing in the middle of the room, where a space had been left free for her: in each hand she carried a shawl, and her dress was of black and red silk: one moment she turned about like a tetotum; then at once she remained standing still, simply moving the whole body, or parts of it, in lascivious quiverings, accompanied most expressively by the music. Sometimes a shout of laughter, or a sudden burst of applause, would interrupt the melody, while blueish clouds of smoke continually rose from the floor, joining in picturesque curls over our heads.

Here follow a few verbal translations of the unconnected dithyrambic verses sung by the quivering beauty; and I only regret that our fastidious notions oblige me to omit by far the best; but Siegwart himself cannot be more tender than the following:—

[144]

"In the whole course of my life only one moment was happy—that when love was near me! Since that fire is extinguished, life has no longer a charm for me; and I only wish that my ashes may soon be borne away by the wind!"

Another.

"When the sun rose fiery and beaming, I saw in the valley a maid yet more beautiful. I called to her with passion, but she fled! Then all the blood in my veins curdled! The morning and the evening, and again the morning, I stood motionless there, her picture alone before my eyes! Since then, no pleasure approaches me!"

The following is somewhat less sentimental:—

"O heavenly maid! houri of the blessed! In my rage I bit into thy coral lip, and sucked thy blood, till a drop reddened thy pillow: then I flung my arms round thee, pressed thee wildly to my bosom, and, overwhelmed by insupportable ecstasy, as by the lightning, I sunk down senseless in a trance. O, what enjoyment, that at the same moment seemed to have annihilated, not only the body, but the soul also!"

[145]

I wonder whether this Arab manner of courtship would edify our European fair. I will not myself be guilty of the folly of attempting to answer that question.

Living in towns and keeping quiet does not suit me at all; and as for some days past I had felt very unwell, I was the more unwilling to put off my journey into the interior to the true Bedouin country as far as Gassa, Kassarin, and Keff. After taking leave of my Sfax friends, from whom I had received so many civilities, I set off on the first of August at dawn of day: the want of halting-places and of water on the direct road obliged me to take the route over Keruan again; and it was odd enough to find our carriage, which had broken down at our first coming, still lying in the same place in the sand: to get a new wheel made in Sfax, or Susa, was out of the question, and the old patching-up would hold out no longer. I left Mr. J with the dragoman behind, sent forward an Arab of the escort to the Caïd, to procure mules for the transport of the baggage, and then rode on with the rest of the party. We struck into another road, somewhat less desert than the former, which we found broken up in many places by yawning chasms: they afforded a lively representation [146] of the desolation caused by an earthquake, but appear to be occasioned by subterranean springs, which are very numerous here, without however coming above ground. As we rode round the chasms, we came upon a troop of gazelles, who were so little shy, that we approached them quite close: I made Mustapha single out one, and follow it for some time, without bringing it once to a quick run: as if it knew that it was in no danger, and that we only wanted to look at it, the creature cantered round us and directly before my servant's horse, till it joined the troop again on the other side. One can imagine nothing more graceful than these pretty creatures in the full enjoyment of their freedom: it would be really barbarous to kill them, if their flesh were not so very delicious. I could not, however, bring myself to use my pistols, though the little harmless animal offered so tempting an aim.

At nine o'clock in the evening we reached El Dschemm, where as the baggage had not arrived, and the heat and the fleas rendered the huts quite unbearable, I was obliged, unwell as I was, to pass the night upon a carpet under an olive-tree: the dew was so heavy, that in the morning the water dripped from my cloak. After sunset the pack-asses made their [147] appearance; and a little rest under a tent, cuscussu in mulled wine, and camomile tea, set me pretty well to rights again, by throwing me into a violent perspiration: to this operation the temperature in my tent was not a little favourable; the thermometer on the table stood at 29° Reaumur (98° Fahrenheit.). On the morning after this necessary rest, we went before daybreak to the amphitheatre, and, as the sun rose, drank the health of our king on his birth-day with right good will in palm wine: in however many places, and with whatever love and respect the exalted ruler's name might be uttered, it was perhaps the

first time that here, under the cloudless sky of Africa, in the midst of the sublimest memorials that antiquity has left us, (except those of Egypt,) a vital for him rose to heaven. We made all our Arabs join us in our "three times three," and easily explained to them that this ceremony was coupled with a wish for the well-being of our Sultan: a small present increased their zeal considerably, and the venerable walls gave back our blessing with imposing effect. The remainder of the day I passed under the thick foliage of the fig-tree, which I had also hung round with mats, and found this resting-place far more supportable than the tents, in spite of the excessive heat. [148]

When I am in health, I find it much easier to bear 29 or 30 degrees of heat, Reaumur, (99 Fahrenheit) even when exposed to the sun, than 60° (168°) in the shade without air: in the open air there is always more or less of a faint current, and even the strengthening effect of the light on the muscles balances in some measure the enervating influence of the heat. One great inconvenience of our bivouac was the neighbourhood of a cactus hedge, from which, although we could pluck their excellent and just-ripened figs, the wind dispersed the thorns as fine as hairs and all but poisonous: every moment we felt their pricks in the skin, which gave no small pain and inconvenience till they were removed with tweezers. The Arabs, who know nothing of such refined instruments, made use of a remedy which I saw applied with perfect success, to my great admiration: my negro had as many as a dozen of these little thorns at once in his arm, and they were all pulled out in two minutes, the operators being green flies, that are found in abundance on the cactus itself: the person who catches them holds the fly fast by the wings on the part affected, and the incessant scratching and rubbing together of the insect's legs extracts the thorns more safely and with [149] less danger of breaking than any other method. I doubt whether Gräfe or Dupuytren ever heard of this operation.

A swarm of wild bees from the surrounding trees also gave us a good deal of trouble: both at breakfast and dinner they swarmed around like flies: they were creatures of a very good disposition however; and some pots of sweetmeats which we abandoned to them, and which were immediately filled to the brim with hundreds, seemed to be looked upon as a satisfactory tribute for them to offer us no further molestation. A third and unusual addition to our experiences was the remarkable cry of a locust of a peculiar kind, which resounded from the leafy canopy under which we had spread our carpet. I took it at first for the cry of a large wood-bird, and there are very few with us whose note is louder: it is scarcely conceivable how an animal so small, relatively speaking, can produce so sustained and piercing a tone. I gave myself a great deal of trouble to capture the musician, but he eluded me; I saw, however, plainly enough, that it was only a locust of very moderate size.

Semilasso in Africa

Adventures in Algiers, and other parts of Africa,

By

Prince Pückler-Muskau

In Three Volumes

Volume III

London

1837