

THE  
COUNTRY OF THE MOORS,

*A Journey from Tripoli in Barbary  
to the City of Kairwán.*

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MAP AND ILLUSTRATIONS.

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## CHAPTER XV.

(pp.161-179)

*Arrival at Sfax—Gale—A Mistake—A Deaf Mute—The Quarters of Sfax—Mosques—A Caravan of Dates—The Bazaars—Gracefulness of Sfaxins—Environs—The City of Twelve Thousand Gardens— Slave Caravans—Street Auction—Costumes—The Great Mosque— A Tragedy—The Silversmiths—Bakkoush at Home—An Eccentric Dervish—A Modest Marabout—Buins of Lebda.*

We slipped away from our anchorage just before dawn. The wind had risen, and blew a heavy northerly gale. We dared not try the inner passage, but made our way outside the Sponge Islands, and dropped anchor in the roads of Sfax, three miles out from the shore. The anchorage is good but shallow, and in such weather the captain thought well to keep out. Sfax, El Sfakkus, Asfax, or Asfachus, is said to owe its name to the quantities of water melons, Fakkus, abounding in its neighbourhood. It is of origin subsequent to Roman times.

Squalls came at times, with drifting rain: two hours passed, and, though it was still early morning, the prospect of landing seemed remote. Sulking in the cabin, or pacing about on deck in the moist whistling wind, did not kill the time very fast. The insidious Perruquier was sent to the captain to intimate that if a few men could be spared with one of the boats, they should be rewarded with gold. The captain told Perruquier that the sea was heavy enough to swamp a small boat, and that he could not let us have one. We asked some of the Moors what they would do if the steamer sailed for Tunis without landing them. Maktoub, they said, good-naturedly. It is written. When Ali Bey landed in this neighbourhood, his boat was swamped, while the ship rode quietly at anchor.

At length we saw a boat with a small white sail, beating out, and our spirits went up 10°. But when it came alongside, with difficulty, in the fierce wind— pitching as if the four drenched natives would be flung into the sea: when we saw it was half full of water, ballasted with a heavy stone, kept afloat only by constant baling, the rudder attached by a piece of string only—our spirits fell 15°. It was a miserable boat, worth about three mahboobi and a half, and it did not seem very sensible to venture on three miles of sea in it, with the same necessity of getting back: but Perruquier and I slipped down a loose rope, three or four Moors followed us, and we shoved off, very nearly capsizing in doing so.

The stone and our weight made the boat so heavy that the waves washed over her sides. We had gone a mile or two, the water came in too fast to bale and rose steadily, gusts came faster than ever; when gradually a sense of satisfaction stole into our spirits. If the boat should capsize or sink, Perruquier and I should get out and walk. We remembered the long

shelving shore, and guessed that there would be little more than five or six feet of water, a mile and a half out from the town.

To right and left of the city and its cream-coloured walls—which lie on flat ground close by the water— stretch miles of gardens, with little houses scattered among them. The signal tower of Sfax and the red dome of the Catholic church are the only conspicuous objects standing above the white houses.

A number of people came together to see us land— strangers not being plentiful in Sfax. I had asked a pleasant Italian in the boat if he knew Mr. Cardona of Sfax. Mr. Carton, you mean, he said : he is the English vice-consul: and we went together to the viceconsulate. A tall white-haired man rose as I went in. I have a letter for you, I said, from the captain of the Circe steamer. Circe, he said, Circe—I don't know the Circe. An English steamer, I explained, which came here just a year ago. I was absent, sir, he said, at that time. I was disappointed to see him throw his acquaintances over so readily, and said I understood he was Mr. Cardona. He laughed. No, I am Mr, Edward Carleton, and very much at your service. Mr. Cardona was a neighbour of his.

We had a long chat over a cup of coffee. I beg your pardon, he said, interrupting himself: here is a poor dumb man I want to speak to. Somebody had come behind my chair. I looked round and rose slowly: the mute started back, then seized my hands and gibbered at me inarticulately. It was our old friend Bakkoush, the Bey's buffoon. The vice-consul was much surprised, and Bakkoush made signs to him that we were old friends. It was four years since we had met: the storms of life had impaired his raiment, and poor Bakkoush was both thinner and seedier. I told him that he was thinner, and he explained that he had been ill. We set out to see the city. Mr. Carleton sent his dragoman, Perruquier came, and Bakkoush would not leave my side.

There are two quarters in Sfax—one within the old walls, for the Mohammedans, and the other without, down by the harbour, for the Christians. The gates of the Moorish city are closed after sunset to Christians. We entered the Arab quarter by an old gate with horseshoe arch, and close by it found the mosque of Sidi Ali Aziz. Within a few yards of it stands that of Sidi el Bahhri— Sidi the Sailor. Can it be the last resting-place of our old friend Sindbad the Sailor? It had marble work delicately carved and arabesqued in text, and a curious brick minaret.

At many angles of the streets and gateways were columns and capitals of marble brought from Roman ruins. Many doorways were carved in a beautiful pink or salmon-coloured stone of Gtaabs, closely resembling marble: in fact a kind of marble. Across the streets at many points were flying arches of horseshoe form. The mosque has a new gateway with minute arabesques in stone and alternate bands of tiles. Almost every doorway had carved jambs and lintels.

We met a caravan just arrived from the Djerid—the camels laden with dates packed in skins, the Arabs tired and dusty—and arriving, poor fellows, to find the dates they had brought from so far almost unsaleable. Such is the plenty of dates this year that they are barely worth the trouble of picking, or of transporting from the interior. The finest dates of Tunisia, or indeed of Africa—the deghla—can be bought in Tunis for thirty five shillings the hundredweight: in the Djerid for perhaps ten shillings. There are dates in Djerba, known as bilahh and as b'sir, but they are far behind the deghla. In Morocco is a date also known as bilahh. On the flat islands of Kerkeneh there grows a soft dark date, called ertotib, cheap, and not very good.

The Tunisian pound, the rotal attari, is just equivalent to our lb. avoirdupois: the oke contains two rotals, and the kantar fifty okes. The Tunisian measures for corn, flour, &c. are the sah, equal to four and a half imperial pints: the ouiba, containing twelve sdh, and the kafis<sup>8</sup> sixteen ouibas. There is a second scale of weights for precious metals. The coinage begins with the karoub or farthing, which is nominally equivalent to six and a half bourbe. The silver piastre is worth sixpence: the bouhamsa or inahboob, half-a-crown. There are ten, twenty-five, fifty, and hundred piastre pieces in gold: of which the most common are the twenty-five piastre pieces, representing just fifteen francs. We can now start fairly, and the reader can accompany Bakkoush and the rest of us into the bazaars without fear of being taken in.

Camels carrying water for sale move about the bazaars of Sfax. The green turbans of the scherifs simply swarm: the Friday's market place, or Soukh el Djemma, was alive with them. The Prophet's family is indeed handsomely represented: more are to be seen here in half an hour than in Cairo or Damascus in a day. They were very inquisitive, the Sfaxins, and Bakkoush was steadily employed in thrusting them aside as they stood gaping at us. Some he pushed with furious gestures, but none seemed to take offence: they all knew the privileged buffoon of the Bey.

In the Turkish bazaar were groceries of all kinds: in the corn market were great esparto baskets full of grain. We came to the Djemma '1 Hammam, or Mosque of the Baths, and saw the piles of pearwood for burning in [167] the baths: came to the shoe bazaar, where the canarycoloured leather is made into picturesque shoes, passed the harness makers who embroider the red leather: and everywhere a crowd of a dozen or twenty Moors hung on our heels to see what we were about, only dispersing momentarily when Bakkoush turned upon them.

It is a very general and pretty custom among the Sfaxins and many of the Tunisian Moors to carry, under the turban and above the ear, a small bouquet— sometimes a couple of lovely rosebuds, or a rosebud in a ring of orange blossoms. The contrast with the snowy white, straw-coloured silk, or green cotton turban is very telling. There is among the Moors of Tunisia grace both of dress and manner which does not characterise the Egyptians or Syrians, and which recalls their ancestors, the refined Moors of Granada and Cordova. There are no bazaars where such delicacy of taste in dress and colour are to be seen as in Tunis. The people seem tasteful by instinct, and it is a positive treat to sit and watch them. They reflect the polish and good breeding of the Spanish Moors, and are noted for their intelligence. Reading, writing, and the Scriptures are ordinary acquirements among them. The turbans of Sfax are larger than those of the chief Eastern cities, and approach those of the extinct Janissaries of Constantinople.

We saw beautiful mules—those of Sfax and Djerba are considered the best in the Begency. The greyhounds of Sfax are noted. A gentleman here has one, for which the Arabs have offered him forty sheep in exchange.

We watched them make the curious rude pack saddles for camels—generally from wood which had a natural fork. We came to the outer city through an old arched gate, and entered a foudouk where dyers had established themselves. Here deep crimson and blue stuffs were hanging up to dry: while camels were waiting to transport them to the Djerid, and devouring grass to pass the time. Bakkoush's raids upon the crowd were capital: mumbling and gesticulating, he fell upon them as if to devour them alive.

We passed the mosque of Djemma '1 Bou Shouisha, —an aged building, where the whitewash of centuries had so encrusted and accumulated, that it looked as if thickly sugared, or covered with pure white snow. Stalactites of whitewash hung from each brick moulding and projection. Near this were blacksmiths and sickle makers, beating those thin crescent-

shaped blades out of glowing iron. The high old city walls have machicolated battlements and square turrets at intervals. Above the forts floated the blood-red flag which is hoisted on the Mohammedan Sabbath.

Near the walls is a village of blacks, similar to that described near Tripoli, and very African looking. Prowling dogs bang about the traveller's ankles, and he is fortunate who has Bakkoush for an escort. This extraordinary man explained with incredible facility the features of the surrounding country. He drew my attention to the numerous marabouts' tombs—to the great plain extending ever so far to the south—to the Sahara, in fact. He described to me the figs, almonds, peaches, olives, and pistachio nuts with which the environs of Sfax richly abound. How the country for half-a-day's journey round is full of gardens and fruits, till you reach the pasture lands of the Bedouins. This was all in dumb show, but there was no misunderstanding it. Wine is made here from excellent grapes: cucumbers are plentiful, and so are bananas. As to olives, which are taxed by the tree—every third tree being exempt—the district has paid to the Bey's government at the rate of a hundred and sixty thousand piastres a year.

The extent of the gardens of Sfax is immense: there are no less than twelve thousand of them about the city. There is not a really poor man in Sfax : each one has his 'garden' outside the walls, if only containing a fig tree and half-a-dozen olive trees. The man who comes to beg for bread has his country seat, though it may be only a dozen yards square.

Bakkoush told me he had lately returned from Ghabs or Tacape. T'habh, curiously enough, was about the only sound he could utter. Here he had found, in digging among the ruins, old engraved stones and a beautiful statue of a woman. Bakkoush and I formed plans for an expedition to T'kabh. The Arabs of the country are unspoiled and uncorrupted, being honest, peacefid, and hospitable—coming rarely into contact with the Europeans and coast races.

It is not twenty-seven years since caravans used to arrive in June regularly at Tunis from Tomboukto, Ghadames, Wadai, and the interior, via Sfax and Susa, bringing slaves, ivory, gold dust, and ostrich feathers. The English Envoy, however, using his influence with Ahmed Bey, who was himself a humane man, obtained the emancipation of all slaves within reach: and slaveholders were compelled to issue them teskeras, or letters of discharge. Mr. Carleton received at one time in his house sixty poor creatures thus released, but left without means of

support. Only a few months ago a black slave was brought to Sfax, but he was set free by the governor at the instance of our vice-consul.

As we passed through one of the city gates, we had to make room for a caravan of camels coming from the interior. Every few weeks caravans depart for the towns of Toozr in the Djerid, Nafta, and Tebessa in Algeria, carrying English manufactures, and returning with dates, blankets, burnouses, wool, wax, &c. From [171] Ghadames they come no longer. Some attribute the change to the impolicy of the Beys, others to the suppression of the slave trade. Within the inner gateway, among the shops of the wool carders, was a lively scene—a street auction. Men were striding to and fro, and crying: Fine shawl for sale! who will buy? Excellent silk, and going for an old song! Boots! Is no one prudent enough to buy of me these admirable boots? A ring! In the name of the Prophet! Of the very purest silver, and beautified with a costly carnelian stone! Offered for six piastres! I seized the merchant by the arm and took the ring, which was old silver of Mecca work. How much? I asked. Six piastres. I told Perruquier to stay and buy it for five piastres. Monsieur can't do that, he said: the auction price is six piastres, and a slight augmentation has to be made. So Perruquier and I bought the ring for six piastres and one karoub; and it now adorns the scarf of a popular and estimable member of society, who imagines that it is worth at least a golden twenty-five-piastre piece.

We watched them spin the silk and wool for haiks and for the djubba—a garment of singular picturesqueness, common to the Barbary towns, but I believe originating in Sfax. It is a plain, square-cut loose robe, like the abbah of Egypt, but open only at the breast, and there ornamented, as well as round the neck, with silk embroidery.

The material—often in alternate bands of silk and delicate wool—is generally of an indigo blue, faced with amber-coloured embroidery, or of a deep chocolate red faced with green.

The bazaars proper are cool, and vaulted with round arches, while the little shops are recessed in the whitewashed walls.

We came to the Djemma '1 Kebir—one of the finest mosques in Barhary. It has a great court paved with marble: but, standing in a poor and crowded quarter, it makes no appearance externally. Horseshoe arches of pure white marble contain doors beautifully carved. Its floors are covered with straw-coloured matting. It was the Mohammedan Sabbath. In the huge vaulted prayer chamber—of which the great doors were open on to the street—knelt hundreds of Moors, with white and green turbans, in ranks as even as soldiers. As the

Imaum's voice resounded, Oh ye who believe, bless and greet our Lord Mohammed! they fell upon their faces, chanting after him the praise of Allah and their Prophet. Their prostrations were as even as their ranks. The sight was interesting and impressive, but the Moors about us showed some impatience and displeasure, so we sauntered on.

Why has the Englishman come to Sfakkus? Perruquier was asked constantly in the bazaars, and what is he writing in the book? Oh, true believers, Perruquier would say, do not marvel if there arise from his visit a bdboor in the midst of your city—a swift fire carriage which shall be as the Prophet's carpet to you, and shall transport you to Tunis in a twinkling.

When Perruquier confessed to this story, which went all through the bazaars, I asked him to subdue his natural aptitude for untruth, as I had no wish to come to the country of the Moors as an impostor.

In the vegetable market we saw baskets full of date seed on white stalks, exposed for sale. Beyond this quarter is the fish market, near which stands the prison. There is a small mosque adjoining the prison, so we could not enter. There are but few prisoners now: one is there under singular circumstances. A rich Moor owed a Christian of Sfax three thousand piastres. A poor Jew, clerk to the Christian, went two days ago with a receipt to the Moor's house to ask payment. Come into the house, and I will pay thee, said the Moor: and taking him into the room, he fell upon him with a knife, and stabbed him repeatedly.

On the day of my arrival at Homs, a shocking murder took place: on the day of my return to Tripoli a second: immediately before I reached Tunis another: and on the eve of our arrival at Sfax, a fourth. I hope that nothing unfair will be inferred from these circumstances.

Outside of the bazaars, which are decent enough, are squalid open streets, below the average in cleanliness of ordinary Moorish towns. We could not move without considerable crowd. Indeed, the Sfaxins are the most appreciative people I have met in Barbary.

We went to the silversmiths' quarter, and sat among them for two hours, securing old enamelled beads, pure silver earrings in beautiful simple work, small silver gilt beads like peas, and great cubic beads like huge dice, gilded and enamelled. The Sfaxins rejoice very much in enamelled ornaments, and we found numerous examples of their work. Bakkoush was a sincere enjoyment: the unfailing clearness of his gestures or glances and the rapidity of his intelligence were a study. A glance at me and a tap upon his pocket meant, There are nimble fingers about, O gentle traveller. The silversmiths would offer me rings, bracelets, or engraved stones, and Bakkoush—who has a perfect genius for antique stones—by a

momentary change of expression would approve or condemn them. The viceconsul's dragoman, who was willing and useful in the bargaining, was an imbecile compared with Bakkoush.

Bakkoush had made of old stones a study and a trade, and he was distracted when he told me of the pocketful he had brought from T'kabh: and sold only a week before. Next year we would go together to Djerba and Ghabs, the islands of Serkenis, and the great plain inland, and come back with asses' loads of them.

Any Moor who might be disposed to haggle or waste time was quickly disposed of. Bakkoush, after having it valued by the Amin of the bazaar, would seize the silver object, thrust my money into the Moor's hand, and push him out of the bazaar—threatening him with loud inarticulate mutterings.

The dragoman had a cast in his eye, and, as we sat bargaining at the entrance of a dark little shop, Bakkoush sat beside him. The dragoman turning his head for an instant, Bakkoush shot a momentary glance at me with a terrific squint. In the same second the expression had vanished, and as the dragoman turned, Bakkoush was rolling up a cigarette with a solemn and impassive face. These flashes of humour and intelligence were irresistibly funny. In one moment Perruquier and his self-sufficiency shone out from the mute's face, in the next came a passing caricature of the silversmith talking to us. At times Bakkoush would take my hand and place it on his heart as a mark of friendship.

By many people in Tunisia this remarkable man is regarded as a clever impostor, as less of a buffoon than a spy, who pretends this infirmity in order to gain access and information in the Bey's interests. That he carries information about, it may be, but nothing could be more unfair than to suspect his muteness to be assumed. Mr. Carleton has known him deaf and dumb for thirty years, and if any fair reader will endeavour to feign dumbness for thirty hours, she will support me in stating that to carry on the imposition for thirty years is beyond the capabilities of our poor weak nature.

I was introduced at Sfax to an elderly dervish of ragged and hairy appearance, who takes an imbecile delight in the English Union Jack. When Mr. Wood came to Sfax many years ago in an English ship of war, the elderly dervish danced wildly about. Has the flag come? Has the flag come? he cried. What flag? said the consul-general. Why, the English flag! cried the elderly dervish, shedding tears of delight: I know no other flag. We have known people who made pets of spiders, wolves, toads, and even of cats: who sentimentalise over a plant, a

solitary column, or dote upon old flint implements and hawthorn blue china pots: if this old boy had had a craze for postage stamps, or even for portraits of other people's ancestors, we should only say we have known people equally misguided ; but to go silly about a flag, to dance and dream about it, is very original and creditable for a Sfaxin who has not had the artificial advantages of civilisation. It may be guessed that I did not tell this elderly saint that I had laid up in my portmanteau a deep blue silk Union Jack, lest he should cling fondly to me, and oblige me to take him home to England, or to give over the flag to him.

We went to see some conical stacks of esparto grass ready for shipment, which were impervious to rain, and to a cannon-ball. To strike one of them with the foot was like kicking at a wall. We strongly recommend them to armies. By the shore, close under the walls, is a marabout of very modest pretensions. It appears that the saint being what I suppose no other marabout on record has been, bashful and self-depreciatory, declined on his deathbed to have anything more elaborate than this simple white box and dome erected to his memory.

After this we saw down by the water's edge, near some villanous Maltese craft, six lengths of red granite columns. I knew them at once, though a Moorish stonemason had already chiselled over the surface of one. I asked where they had come from. A Maltese captain had brought them from Homs, where he had paid twenty-five piastres for them: and had sold them here for a hundred piastres each. I was assured that some of the harder and finer ones are worth as much as six hundred piastres, but those must be of uncommon length. They are taken, O Marcus Antoninus Pius! into the oil mills, where they are invaluable for crushing the olives, and will wear for generations.

We did not see the pirate who brought them, or I should have committed, or desired Perruquier to commit, an imprudence. Sfax is a city which has itself discreditable antecedents. It is believed to have been constructed from the materials of the famous Thainae or Thenae of antiquity, ten miles south-west of Sfax: and so complete was the plundering, that there is hardly a vestige of hewn stone to be found at Thainae. It was shameful to see the noble shafts with ths gloss of eighteen centuries upon them ground and sliced into crushers of the ignoble olive. There are numbers of them in Susa. This accounts for the total disappearance of many a noble ruin throughout Barbary, and will account for the disappearance of many more, unless the authorities are urged in their own interests to prevent it. Near these melancholy ruins of Lebda lay quantities of soft stone, pure white, brought from Mehdiya.

We watched them building Arab louds, shallow, long, half-decked boats, much used by the Kerkeni in tunny and sponge fishing. There are on the islands of Kerkeneh upwards of a thousand of these boats. The vice-consul, finding I had brought away no sponges as souvenirs of my visit to Sfax, insisted upon hurrying to his house and bringing me several specimens, three of Jershish, one of Serkenis, and one of Djerba. There were on the quay great oil jars, brought from the south side of the Djerid, where the clay is highly suitable for pottery. These were of a huge size, beautiful in form, and they cost six piastres each.

The heavy rain of last night was a godsend to the Sfaxins. I trust it was general, and extended to Tripoli where the poor Arabs were praying for it weeks before, and would be half ruined if it failed. I found an English engineer at Sfax, and made his acquaintance under the discreditable circumstances of having opened on the voyage some newspapers directed to him. He was engineer on board the Bey's corvette El Bashir.