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LES FRANÇAIS
A
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Chapter XXV

Arrival in Sfax – the bombing – picturesque desolation – the unloading – the assault – the streets war – the submission – the military occupation – our losses – the monarch – the true reason of the revolt

Today I spent all the day in the ruins of Sfax, still burning from the bombardment two days ago. The bombing took place the day before yesterday on the 16th July and Arabs are still being pulled out of the caves where they took refuge while shooting at the passing Europeans. Nobody will ever see again what the passengers of the *Dragut* saw during this strange day.

The official bulletins will say how the *Colbert*, the *Trident*, the *Reine Blanche*, the *Alma*, the *Galisoniere*, the *Friedland*, the *Surveillante* and other warships carried out the bombing of Sfax and protected the disembarkation of troops. As the witnesses testified, the memorable two hour bombardment that was in full swing on Saturday the 16th July was reminiscent of the most frightening demonstration of that kind, including the night bombing of Cherbourg for President Grévy by the same battleships of Admiral Garnault, just one year ago. (This was a spectacle produced during a naval review for the then president of France, on August 10th, 1880.)

It was a hail of fire, a roar of cannon, the sky set ablaze by 187 kg shells, that seized the admiration of officers and sailors who remained on board the naval squadron; while it also inspired an instinctive fear for the 3,000 assault troops assembled on boats and over whose heads this diabolical bombing was passing.

The city of Sfax, during this time, burned and blasted, though not without difficulty, for the ramparts are terribly strong and more than one shell went through the houses without damaging them seriously.

The Arabs called the city 'Sfax, the strong' and not without reason; for clearly, if European forces had been defending the city, ten days and twenty thousand men would have been necessary for the assault.

The three most important assault companies, those of the *Colbert*, the *Alma*, and the *Reine Blanche* were commanded by the vessel captains: Messrs. Marcq of Saint-Hilaire, Miot and Marqueyssac; lieutenant of vessels and midshipmen completed the companies and energetically led these 1500 sailors.

The 1200 men of infantry commanded by Colonel Jamais – sent from Rouen to Sfax specifically for this purpose – approached the shore on transportation boats of the *Sarthe*. Rear-admiral Conrad was leading under the orders of vice admiral Garnault.

Meanwhile, the Arabs who were defending the city, numbering around 3500 or 4000, retreated towards the impregnable gardens of Sfax. Only the fanatics, estimated at 1200 people, stayed to defend themselves with their bare hands once their rudimentary armaments – that is to say, old rusted guns – were captured by the attackers.

At 8pm Admiral Garnault, close to the shore on the *Desaix*, made a sign for the firing to cease and immediately the heavy guns and cannons stopped. The city was on fire.

This was the moment to take possession of the rudimentary battery and of the Kasbah situated, one on the right side, the other on the left side of the city, both at the seashore.

The unloading took place under a hail of bullets fired by the insurgents from 20 metres away. Ground- and sea officers withdraw their troops and a bloody attack began in a 2 metres deep trench protected by a covering of alfa (dried esparto grass) where Arabs hid themselves.

The first company of the 92nd of line, led by Captain Bouringuer, took possession of the trench in extremely intensive man to man fighting. His lieutenant M. Marchand and his sub-lieutenant M. Dailly fell seriously injured; six men and then seventeen were put out of action, while the Arabs in the trench had lost 37 men in the blink of an eye. The young soldiers of the 92nd, coming from Manouba, are worthy of their elders, and everybody waits, in Sfax, to see the company of the 92nd put on the order of the day of the army.

While the infantrymen carried out this heroic action, the marines further to the right side on the beach pounced like veritable tigers on the rudimentary battery, which they climb without weakening, always losing soldiers but killing Arabs. Without hesitation one of the officers of the *Trident* came on the top of the redoubt and there fixed the flag of his boat that he had brought without saying a word. The flag was riddled with bullets and the quartermaster fell down dead, victim of the traditions of the old France! He was immediately replaced by ten others that challenged the Arabs from the top of their invaded ramparts. Five hundred sailors turned the redoubt and the rudimentary battery was taken. A group of rebels that wanted to flee was shot and troops became master of the whole area.

The street fighting then began: in fact, in the first moment of affray, many Arabs hid themselves in their caves and, from there, fired heavily at the 136th, 71st, and the 93rd companies, who, thinking that the city was open, moved forward rapidly towards the end of

the streets, that lead to the sea. The soldiers, struck from behind, began to fall in great numbers.

The houses were then searched one by one; anybody found with a gun was shot, and, a serious hunt for Arabs began in the deserted Sfax, which went on for three more days.

The torpedo-officer on the *Reine-Blanche*, M. Debrem, a ship's lieutenant whose help was most valuable, was made responsible for demolishing with fulmi-cotton the block of houses where Arabs defended themselves strongly. This progress of the expedition terrified those who were not crushed but they didn't beg for forgiveness. The defence of Sfax by the Arabs had been heroic, as much as the bombing and the assault by our troops had been worthy of the most beautiful heroic actions of African army.

Let's not be deceived; the taking of Sfax was a military action more important than all that has happened in Tunisia until now.

I went ashore with some officers; the Europeans were still compelled to stay on board the war vessels where they had taken refuge, for the taking of Sfax was not complete; the blowing up of houses continued and rebels were still being dislodged.

Never shall I forget this day spent in the midst of flames and demolitions. The city was practically in ruins and everywhere there were just big holes and gaps caused by shells of the fifteen ships firing without pause.

I successively glanced through the rudimentary arms whose old cannons, from the time of Lewis the XVI, have been confiscated by our sailors. A detachment of the army took control of them. I also visited the defence trench where a strong scent of dead bodies had begun to escape. In fact there were thirty seven corpses of Arabs killed by bullets, buried under the Alfa, a few centimetres away in that very trench.

As soon as I went through the gate of the city which was destroyed by shells, the general aspect became darker. The soldiers of the 93rd and of the 77th were camped in the ruins of the European quarter that formed the lower part of Sfax. People trampled on pieces of cloth, on broken furniture, on accountancy books, on various items that were violently projected along with the debris of the explosions. Soldiers' faces were darkened by their powder; they went on guard two by two and doing twenty steps in a turn, whereas the officers and sub officers visited houses with squad of ten men, searched caves and then blocked the doors on which they wrote the word "visited."

Colonel Jamais who commanded the place under the authority of General Logerot, separate from the authority of admirals, occupied the first story of a house that remained untouched.

He gave the order to lead on board the *Alma* the Sfaxien notable who wanted to compromise and discuss the conditions of peace.

These notables looked opulent; one of them owned a dozen of houses in Sfax. They said that the rebels forced them to stand with them; that was possible but not absolutely certain.

At last, today, they came to ask the imam, the eternal imam, and, after the decision of Governor Djellouli, in refuge on board the *Alma*, it was going to be granted to them.

In the Arabic city, the sight was most curious and unexpected; each street was congested with rubble stones and whole pieces of minaret. The soldiers, in order to avoid getting lost in this maze, gave to the streets the number of their regiments: street of the 92nd, street of the 77th.

I arrived in front of a mosque that was most beautiful; it was occupied by the 77th battalion commanded by Commander Sartor, a man from Lorraine, tough to the core like all the men of Metz in Lorraine. Nothing is as unusual as the aspect of this huge mosque, with its vaults carefully whitewashed, its columns made of marble and the mats of which the troops settled down. There was nothing wrong with the lads of this battalion that had arrived at the front from barracks in the suburb of Poissonière. We were able to admire the soldiers who were preparing soup, wearing priests' clothes with incredible gowns and multicoloured skullcaps. The green turban of the flag of the prophet was used as a belt by several cooks. Six hundred men were housed there like princes. Consequently it was with pains that they heard from their officers that tomorrow they were supposed to return the mosque for the worship of the Sfaxiens who return to their homes, destroyed with the rest.

The fourth battalion of the 92nd, 93rd, 77th, 136th, and 137th of line will bring to France some trinkets from the taking of Sfax; more than one soldier put in his bag a silk scarf or embroidered slippers for his country-woman; but unfortunately the bag of the soldier is heavy and already full of necessary objects. It will be make the journey in Gabes in stages, and then, goodbye to the souvenirs from Sfax.

I picked up in the mosque a Koran that I will keep precious in my library. It was all the more so precious since I picked it up in the one of the marabout cells.

That marabout had been killed in his mosque, screaming cries of death against the Christians and exciting his fellow-muslims to resistance even though the city had already been taken.

It looked as if the Sfaxiens had been preparing for this house-to-house fighting, for in this way they killed many of us.

The losses we endured could be listed as follows:

- Marines: killed, 13; injured, 26 (transported by the ambulance on board the *Sarthe*)
- Troops of the line: killed, 25; injured, 80

Total for the different branches: 38 dead persons and 106 persons injured

Among the dead, was Mr Léonce Leonnec, midshipman and relative of Mr Paul Leonnec, the illustrator of the *Journal Amusant*. Mr Léonnec, struck by two bullets while entering the Kasbah, died two days later on account of his wounds. He was solemnly buried in the European cemetery of Sfax. The religious ceremony took place on board the Abna where the young midshipman was serving. After that another ceremony, to which I will come back later, was celebrated in the mosque by the Catholic priest of Sfax from Malta. And at the grave, in front of the gathered military staff, Admiral Conrad pronounced a moving speech, recalling the bravery of this young man, coming from a humble condition, the only support of his old mother, and recounting his death, which had been that of a brave child of France.

About the Kasbah, it must be said that, contrary to what one believed, it was not defended by a garrison. Once the shells had destroyed the massive door, carefully locked, nobody was found inside except an Arab, who had taken upon himself the duty to blow up the powder room. He was shot on the spot and a great disaster had been avoided

While continuing my walk in the bombed city, I came to two enclosures of ramparts, hard as iron and capable of resisting a strong artillery. The Arabs had reason to put their confidence in these amazing fortifications; they had to be seen to understand all what 1200 fanatics Arabs benefited from them.

In the governor's palace situated at the top of the Arabic city, I met Commander Garderein, of the 93rd of line. This palace was a small wonder of oriental decoration, and the Commander was fair to complain about the headquarters that fell to him after sharing it. On going down towards the mosque, always through collapsed houses, I help, under a small

porch, the meeting of notables, presided over by a Lieutenant-colonel, surrounded by thirty officers.

The notables had obtained the *iman* and negotiated on the *Alma* with Djellouli, the Bey's Governor that they had expelled. It had been heard that before any discussion, they would go to the four corners of the city by twos or threes, crying to their co-religionists that they have a truce and that they could come out of their caves without danger for their life.

It was to be said that a similar notice, read by some interpreters, had produced no effect. The officers gave to each notable a guard of four men, and there our people have gone, crying in Arabic and inviting their countrymen to come out of the ground. Immediately Arabs appeared by ten or fifteen. More than one soldier was astounded and thought about the great number of bullets that could still come out of the caves. All of them had spent four days without eating nor drinking, which is not excessive for an Arab who is waging holy war. But they didn't pounce with less enthusiasm on the cups of water that the soldiers brought to them. Our soldiers were like that: after shooting with rage during the fight, they were attentive to the injured who came out of their refuge relying on the treaties.

General Logerot will probably come to in Sfax next, in order to take account of the situation and decide on occupational measures. Today the troops will occupy the lines surrounding the city. They will blow up the cannons that the rebels were using. They will cut down the walls, which are too high, and wait for the Sfaxiens to come and rebuild their houses if it is their will. Indemnities will be only granted if taken from the Arabs; also the war compensation that will be imposed will be considerable. They will compensate with money all losses that the bombing and other actions of war caused the Europeans to suffer.

Only one foreign warship assisted in the taking of Sfax, the *Monarch*, an English frigate. The commander had been correct, apparently, after having, on the invitation of his government, proposed his warlike help; help that was refused.

The commander of the *Monarch* sent, during the action of the squadrons, twelve barrels of fresh water to our men, his doctors and ambulance men with the white flag carrying the red cross of the Geneva Convention. After the action he congratulated the French officers of his rank.

During my visit in Sfax, I met those sailors walking in the city. Under the pretext of ambulance they... watched charitably all that was happening.

At this moment the Moslem population began to return; always a little defiant, but this will pass. The Arabic rebels were still hidden in the gardens of Sfax that spread six miles wide. An army would be necessary to track them down, but it is probable that the terrible punishment under which the Sfaxiens suffered will pacify that region.

The cause of the revolt was positively the treaty of Bardo that the Arabs refused to recognise on any account.

People in France thought without any doubt that Sfax was a small city, a fortified borough, an Arabic village lost in the south coast of Tunisia

Yet we have to know that Sfax was, after Tunis, the most important city in the whole Regency. Rivalling Tunis for the trade of oil, alfa (esparto grass), ostrich feathers, fruits and wheat. Sfax came before Sousse, Monastir and Mahdia, these three exportation ports of Tunisia, also unknown to the people of Paris but frequented by dealers from the Mediterranean, Greeks, Maltese, Algerians and others as we saw above.

Easily fifteen thousand people lived in Sfax. Today they began to return. Colonel Jamais authorised them to come back to the city but on condition that they were accompanied by their wives and children; singles were carefully excluded; an examination committee presided over this selection and sat permanently at the place.

There was this morning a small market at the gates of the city. Grapes and chickens were sold to the soldiers and to the squadron; it was the beginning of détente.

An order of Colonel Jamais laid down yesterday the indictment of any soldier, before a court martial, who takes something away from the houses that were reopened today.

The old governor of the city is still on board the *Alma*; he will come back to the city tomorrow, when about a hundred of families will be reintegrated. Those who are already back, were given their homes or at least what remained; they cooked cereals with the soldiers, for they didn't have either fork or cup left. All had been blown up in the air or melted in the fire.

That night between midnight and one, there was an alert; a hundred riders from the surrounding plain came to attack the camels of the Sfaxien group, camped in the proximity of the city and ready to come back home at daybreak. These Arabs were going surely to Gabes and needed means of transport. They vigorously attacked the Sfaxiens, who, all armed,

defended themselves. Our sentries were in their turn attacked by riders that the Sfaxiens had repelled, and heavy shots of salvo felled a good number to the ground.

These night alerts didn't stop; they kept alive the worries of soldiers, for, each night, one hears shots around the city. Near the Arabic ramparts our troops built trenches in the ground and embankments, in case of an offensive return of Ali-Ben-Kalifa, the main leader of this whole matter of Sfax, with Ali-Cheriff the former commander of the place.

These two persons couldn't be shot; they were 40 km away from Sfax where they evidently consulted with the Arabs of the plain. Ali-Cheriff was a former soldier of the Bey; it was said in Tunis that he had been at the engineering college! He was only but a humble Arab soldier ignorant like a carp, but eager for the independence of the Tunisians.

In Sfax, he commanded the place and, consequently, was employed in the handling of old cannons which I have described, when the governor made him known the treaty of Bardo. First of all he refused to believe it but then he patiently and meticulously organised the revolt.

The city of Sfax as much better deserved its punishment as it had studied well this affair before embarking on it.

Many discharged Martini guns and a wide bore rifle were found in the streets. A captain of the 93rd was searching a house when an Arab jumped on him and cried out to him "What do you want, captain?" The officer replied "Are you Turco?" "Yes, I am Turco!" cried the deserter and immediately he was put before the wall and shot.

We lacked purifying products and this made us fear that the presence of corpses under a very light mound of earth would bring to the troops dangerous odours.

The sub governor started his job again while waiting for Djellouli to start his. That civil servant took his breakfast yesterday in front of me with a cup of water and twelve Barbary figs. The soldier had nothing but the biscuit to subsist on until now, a little meat from time to time, and [smoothing drugs] that the droves of *mercanti* sell for a high price.

The clever one would be the Parisian who left Marseille today or in eight days, with a ship filled with tinned food, wine, cognac, sausage, herring, coffee and an appliance to make ice; he would become rich in a fortnight to the detriment of all the penniless *mercanti* without a stitch selling horrible drugs and rotten meat.

The battleship, the *Alma* still had on board about a hundred refugees, men, women and children, who could return to land tomorrow. Officers and sailors did their utmost to ease the

lot of these exiles; being singularly difficult on a warship. The women lay on one side with children, men on the other, and for a few days, before the arrival of the main part of the squadron, there was a shortage of bread and clear water.

The behaviour of Commander Miot was beyond admiration and the refugees praised him for his affability.

I went on board the Alma. The spectacle was curious and sad to see. Today the sufferings are all forgotten, and each person will try to return to work. However, the security is not great; it is necessary for the six battalions that are in Sfax remain there, and operate in open country up to ten kilometres away around Sfax.

These men, today in number about three thousand, are too valuable to be sent to Gabes.

If the squadron goes to Gabes, as dictated by the need to make the repression thorough, Admiral Garnault would have enough of his 1200 marines of the assault companies, protected by the squadron's cannons, until the arrival of fresh troops from France.

Maybe people will find I have spoken much about the picturesque ruins of the destroyed Sfax, about our young brave soldiers, about the boldness of sailors, always the elites of French valor, about the officers of our squadrons, or of the line, and not at all about consul Mattei, who was the involuntary cause, I can well admit, of this matter.

It's just that consul Mattei is by no means interesting; he had a broken arm, he 'carried himself like the Pont-Neuf'.

This issue could not have been avoided, and the bombardment of Sfax was inevitable with or without the consular incapacity that reigned uncontrolled over this Arab city, far, far away from Mr Roustan and Mr Barthelemy Saint-Hilaire. But it is shameful that newspapers have made a tragic hero of this consul.

M. Mattei was the cause of these events but not the hero so praised in the papers.

The hero of Sfax was M Gau, employee of the telegraph, who like the legendary worker of modern novels, telegraphed up to the moment where the insurrection cut his wire with a slash of the sabre.

So was the taking of Sfax.

The Arabs are really naïve! They have never wanted to believe, in the interior, in the taking of Sfax. Similarly in Kairouan, the holy city, where the barber of the prophet is buried, the marabouts denied it, basing on the fact that a missile cannot fly beyond two thousand metres, and that the natural harbour of Sfax was inaccessible to our large battleships.

In Sousse, an Arabic chief told me, myself, that the Sfaxiens had been bombarded and forced to retreat, but that on the 17th they had recovered their position and conquered by attacking, on horseback, all the vessels of the French flotilla.