

# FROM PALERMO TO TUNIS

VIA MALTE, TRIPOLI

AND THE COAST

NOTES AND IMPRESSIONS

BY

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Work decorated with engravings



**PARIS**

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RUE GARANCIÈRE, 10

**1885**

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Djrbah, 4 May 1884.

A terrible storm which prevented the steamer from entering the French port of Tripoli, requires us to embark on board the Italian ship that serves the coast. We regret even more strongly that the ships of the company Rubattino are dirty, small, poorly installed and sail poorly. With them you never know when you will leave or when you will arrive. The regulation hour of departure is long gone already, and we're still at anchor, carrying camels, dogs and sheep, all that remains of the belongings, in a word, [80] of the unfortunate refugees who benefit from the Tunisian *aman* [pardon] to return to their homeland. They include about three hundred men, women and children, squatting on the deck, settling in the best place from which they will not move until the end of the trip. Their faces are curious to observe, they are impassive and betray no emotion, these poor people leave a country where they suffered two years of the toughest hardships, they return to the land of their fathers, to fields they have left fallow, where brothers, friends, continued to live their gentle existence of peaceful peasants, and not a tear wets their eyes, in memory of their unhappy days, not a smile of joy illuminates their foreheads at the thought of returning home. Their eyes come alive when they recognize as their own camel the poor beast that is a hanging [81] grotesquely at the end of the crane, but it is only a flash, once the animal disappears into the ship, they regain their composure and subside, some in one corner, some in another, the men wrapped in their burnous, the legs and bare skin of the women exposed to the biting cold. They fall asleep and will not wake until tomorrow evening at Sfax, journey's end.

The next day about noon, we arrive at Djrbah. The island, indicated by only a very long line of palm trees, just emerging from the waves. The sea is calm and gently laps around the hull of the ship which has dropped anchor at a considerable distance, because the water is shallow and does not permit a close approach. Some boats make their way towards us and accost us. We can get off right away without waiting, as often happens, in a unmasted pontoon boat [82] that floats like a prison, a few cables length away, once the sea has lessened. The harbor is busy, fishing boats fly like birds to all points of the horizon, because this area provides an abundance of sponges and octopus, and the lure of a product that sells for 700 francs quintals in the markets Livorno and Marseille, attracts a fleet of Greek and Sicilian sea. A cool wind that blows from out at sea, however, vigorously pushes our boat which bounces on the line of waves and we take three quarters of an hour to land. The beach is sad and lonely, with its old tower and dilapidated warehouse whose modern red bricks clash in this African landscape.

There is more local color in these boats overloaded with pots and jugs which, docked at the wharf, seeming to sleep like animals [83] are overwhelmed by the heat of midday and the shimmering sea which reflects in its waters a splendid metallic light. We drop anchor without difficulty, it's the time of the high tide, and the flood carries us as far as the shore. It is a fortunate, because the coast from Sfax is subject to the tides, and the water here is so shallow that one often reaches land on the shoulders of a robust sailor.

The city is quite far, it hides behind some clumps of palms. We take a dusty road where the sun burns us with its fire and a few moments later we come up on Houmt Souk, and we come to a halt. However, the tableau is of great simplicity, a simplicity such that there is nothing to describe a

palm tree whose trunk is twisted and rises vigorously against a white wall, to the right, a [83 ] mosque raises its many domes in the air while behind, there are a few plumes of green, and that's all. But the light streams from the sky and spreads its abundant rays on these flat surfaces and reflect back from the land to its source, these lights so dazzling that the whole, suddenly assuming grand proportions, summarizes all the splendours of African nature.

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Sfax, 12 May 1884.

Twenty months have passed since my first visit to Sfax, and from a distance I no longer recognize the city. It has used the time to expand and spread over the sea; where I had left only wooden sheds, I found solid construction and a beautiful appearance, the wall that encircled the European city was demolished and the air circulates freely.

The Catholic Church, thanks to the thirty thousand francs levied as war compensation, is now finished and its two towers stand proudly, a boulevard lined with trees, created by the engineers, connects the [110] port to the camp barracks which are erected at a safe position north of the city. The quays have been extended. The Transatlantic Company has given itself airs, and the Post Office, once relegated to a slum, has also been revamped. Sfax is a city of opportunity. For its population, moreover, which reaches about 30,000 souls if we include the suburbs, it is one of the largest on the coast. Its ten thousand gardens extend over a length of thirty miles and a depth of twenty. Seen from the deck of the boat, they give the city a dark green frame, on which stand brightly, hundreds of houses. This all recalls the surroundings of our cities on the Mediterranean coast. These gardens are the wealth of the city; vegetables, figs, lemons, [111] vines, almond trees, provide for local consumption; olive trees, which give, year in, year out, 27 million liters oil, fuel the exports.

Unfortunately the production is bad, and products sell poorly. The soil is sandy country, water sources are rare, but the Sfaxien is laborious. He digs tanks in fields, by the roads, he collects rainwater, and thus caters to the needs of his consumption. He has already planted more than one million olive trees, and each year he expands its culture. The Tunisian government, it must be said in its praise, is not ashamed to take the initiative. Even before the French occupation, it had the good sense to exempt the new plantings from taxes, and the Sfaxien did not fail to take this unusual favor and intrude on the wilderness. For thirty or thirty-five francs, he bought a hectare [112] of sand, digging holes, planting olive saplings, and relied for the rest on Providence, who rewarded him by increasing his land and his income.

The events of 1881, and the war contributions which followed, have halted movement. Arabs, fearing new taxes, have interrupted their planting. But that decision can only be temporary; financial interests are pursuing them; and besides, security returns, confidence rises, and no doubt soon, under the influence of the last three good harvests, activity will be resumed with more intensity.

The Sfaxien does not live in the city. He lives in the countryside and comes every morning to his shop in the souk or the blacksmith's. In the evening when the sun goes down on the horizon, he

returns to his family. The city then empties gradually, [113] stores close, sounds are extinguished, all becomes calm and solitary, and a few Arabs drag themselves languidly to the arches of the central street, close to the cafes.

We explore Sfax in all directions here and there: gutted houses still bear the scars of the bombardment by the French squadron. The city, moreover, does not have a very picturesque attraction; its walls and horseshoe gates indeed have a certain allure, but they lack, which adds such charm to the walls of Sousse and Monastir, the immediate vicinity of the sea.

What is most interesting in Sfax, is the character of the inhabitants. It is interesting to study. We so often hear about the nonchalance of the Arabs, that one is pleasantly surprised, either strolling through the souks, or visiting the neighborhoods of blacksmiths and weavers, by the activity that they [114] deploy in their stalls and one never tires of watching them work on their anvils or on their jobs.

If one leaves the city, the astonishment is no less great. Thousands of tanks that people have built demonstrate a spirit of progress and foresight that strikes you. You see them everywhere in gardens, on roads, at intersections of roads. At the very gates of the city, there are over four hundred. Assembled in groups of one hundred and fifty or two hundred, surrounded by high walls, they constitute the water supply of the population in case of famine.

A sequence number indicates the district to which they are specially dedicated. Most come from charitable foundations, pious Muslims, in their will, having left a legacy to provide for their upkeep, as we do in France to establish hospital beds. [115]

Unfortunately, in recent times, unfaithful administrators have squandered endowments, and poorly maintained tanks no longer guarantee the supply of the city.

The non-Muslim population of Sfax, which has two thousand Israelites, a thousand Maltese, Italians, three hundred and one hundred and fifty French, is concerned about this situation and plan on remedying this by procuring, with an aqueduct sixty kilometers long, the gushing waters of Bou-Hedma. If this project succeeds, and if, on the other hand, as is the question, the engineers advance the quays two hundred meters into the sea, the city will have the two conditions necessary for any development of water and area. These improvements, moreover, are not just a luxury, they clean up the city and have a beneficial influence on the public health which today is so severely [116] compromised. Of all the cities in Tunisia, Sfax is indeed one of the dirtiest. The streets are veritable cesspools, where one sinks to the ankle in garbage and filth. In this regard, no progress has been made since 1881, and the French authorities are as impotent as on the first day.

This issue of roadways goes beyond the limits of a routine policy; it has its political side, because it involves the rivalry between the different European colonies and threatens many privileges. Here's what I was told by an inhabitant of the country based in Sfax who has been thoroughly aware of the situation "If it was only a matter of roads, of streets more or less well kept, is all very well, but it's the public health. This endemic dirt which surprises you causes pestilential germs, [117] and fevers are rife with the most cruel intensity throughout the year, amongst children and civilians of all ages and sexes. The consul, the commissioners of police, military authorities make every effort to stop the evil, but their good will crumbles before the forces of inertia that their foreign colonies present, and the privileges which we have had the stupidity to bless by the Treaty of Bardo; last April, our consul did his best to clean the city; he contracted with an Israelite and

obtained from all Europeans the promise they would pay a contribution of a franc each month. First, everything worked perfectly, but by the second month nobody wanted to pay any longer, General Riu came from Sousse and has forbidden his soldiers to frequent the streets that are not cleaned, and formed an international committee [118] responsible for taking the necessary action in the interest of public safety, but it will all be for nothing; necessity is stronger than human will. We are promised that the abolition of the capitulations and the creation of a municipality will put an end of the Byzantine scheme so humiliating for France. I want to believe it, but don't count on it.

The abolition of capitulations which result in consular courts, do not touch the many privileges of foreign colonists, and as for the municipality, its operation does concern me. The French are very few here. What can be done there to ensure a majority? and if one succeeds, how will we silence the grudges, jealousy, and animosity? Man is the same everywhere, and things are not as simple as they appear, we will suffer for a long time [119] still from the mistakes of 1881.

Besides, and from a broader perspective, I admit to not understanding the way in which the new French administration came. One would say that, jealous of any authority that might develop alongside, it worried less about the Arabesque of rivalries of influence, and that, concerned mainly with the gallery, she does not judge the excellence of transgressions to follow, in matters of government, except for the theoretical support that they enjoy in some quarters. The army, for example, has been reduced to a considerable extent.

This is unfortunate because it is a powerful means of assimilation, especially valuable in a country where the civilian component migrates only slightly, and its prestige is necessary for us to ensure our influence. By reducing under the pretext of economy to sixteen thousand men, we have already crossed the extreme limit, where the right idea [120] degenerate into a system and creates dangers. The information offices have been closed. Is this good? Is this bad? *Chi lo sa? Nobody knows?* What is certain is that the principle of authority they represented so strongly has now gone. Today, everything goes more or less adrift. Nobody obeys orders. Arabs are noticing it and saying so.

This paternal system of administration, they say, facilitates conquest, it conciliates the spirit of the native's; this is true to some extent but it has its dangers, because it gives us illusions about the real progress of assimilation. When everyone has his head, everything seems to work as agreed but at the first attempt to restore authority, all these appearances of submission disappear. Today, we have restored and strengthened the Beylical authority; let us hope it will not benefit from our ingenuity to torment us, [121] one day or another, a villain turns his own way.

In the streets of Sfax we meet soldiers belonging to mixed companies that are for the most part natives who wear the costume of *turcos*, almost as boldly as their Algerians fellows. What progress in eighteen months! This is a true metamorphosis. I remember seeing them in these same streets, badly dressed, unable to walk or stand; this was while men were leaving the regiments of the Bey, with a graying beard; and now I see strong and vigorous soldiers.

Aged eighteen to thirty-two years, and chosen with care in a considerable contingent, they are soft and teachable, and their officers have the highest praise for them. What will they fire? no one knows [122] yet. The army, perhaps, however, already judges them severely. Based on the unwarlike character of their race and the fairly frequent cases of desertion, it denies them any military value. This judgement may be somewhat premature. Tunisian soldiers belong to a body

that is not very popular in the army. The mixed companies are small independent troops, they have their own life, enjoying privileges that in the balance may seem excessive. This is more than enough to lead to criticism. Unfortunately as always, this is not held in strict limits: it does not question only the vices of an organization that may be defective it goes too far: it condemns the principle. Removing the mixed companies and merging them in a regiment of riflemen and Spahis, is probably a good thing, especially from [123] the budgetary point of view; but to come out against indigenous conscription, to decry it as dangerous and unnecessary, to accuse it of being an obstacle to reconciliation of the victors and the vanquished, this is obviously to charge an excellent institution with some organizational shortcomings and to encompass in the same criticism two things that should be assessed differently.

Indigenous military service by the drawing of lots has great advantages: it provides for the military men of considerable resources, and helps the assimilation of the Tunisian element as they pass through the school of the regiment, and this without creating a dangerous novelty, since conscription has long existed in the Regency. Why do we light heartedly renounce the precious effects of a law for which we do not bear responsibility in the eyes of the natives, and we create an [124] situation as embarrassing in Algeria, which we dare not touch, except by the onerous method of voluntary commitments, to the admirable military elements that we have there?

In these kinds of matters, Russia and Austria, by incorporating their new conquests immediately into their armed recruits, provide us with excellent examples to emulate. We have only to follow them, while we are trying hard to make French military service less popular. All Tunisia was once subjected to conscription at eighteen to thirty-two years and is still within the scope of recruitment, the effect of being able to draw a good number lasting only until the next year. Moving the sword of Damocles away from his head, which constantly threatens him and lowering even more the age limit that has been fixed by a recent decree at twenty-six. [125] The thing is easy, given the huge disparity between the annual quota of 4,000 men and the number of young men capable of bearing arms. Then let us divide more evenly than has been until now the military burden, definitively liberate men who have already responded to the call, and certainly the Tunisian peasant, seeing that he gained in the exchange, will accept as a boon the French service.

Mahdia, 16 mai 1884.

Leaving Sfax, the ship does not head north. The shoals which obstruct the channel of the Kerkennah Islands prevent any direct navigation, so it must head south and make a great circuit prior to heading to Mahdia.

Leaning over the bridge, we see the city slowly fade into the mist and the land itself disappear. How interesting this would be to skirt, the Tunisian coast of Gabes, where the henchirs of Oungha, the Phoenician Macomadès, are scattered, of Thyna, near which the archaeologists seek the foundations [128] of the wall bordering the province, of Taphrura, one kilometer north of Sfax, and further up finally, near the cape where Belisarius landed, of Thapsus, Leptis Parva, Ruspina, the modern Monastir, etc., etc. These towns, as opposed to those which, protected by the desert, have been preserved as Suffetula admirable remains, are no longer, it is true, anything but shapeless

ruins. Located on the shores of the sea, exposed to all raids, all attacks, they have resisted neither time nor men, and have been spoiled in the dust with their temples and monuments, but their ashes have remained eloquent and provoke interest also by the thoughts they arouse, for what could be more moving than the spectacle of destruction that one time or another strikes everything that man has created, and reverses the monuments of his pride? Moreover, these cities are for the [129] most part of a great antiquity; they go back to the first appearance of the Phoenicians on the coast. Who knows if they do not hide in their remains some unpublished pages of history?

Tunisia is in fact the privileged land of archeology. Across its territory Henchiri succeed each other squeezed, thickly, arrayed one against the other. Here are the Roman or Byzantine ruins, then the Phoenician tombs. All that was apparent has disappeared long ago, and the columns of Carthage or Leptis today decorate cathedrals and churches of Sicily and Italy. But what inscriptions, mosaics, statues still remain to be discovered buried after all the excavations already done! The province of Africa was very rich and very prosperous, if we refer to the testimony of the Latin writers. We know, moreover, that it paid large sums of money [130] to the treasury of the Empire in Rome and provided huge quantities of wheat. Is it not probable that these privileged cities, enriched for centuries by trade and a flourishing agriculture, rivaled for luxury and beauty with the Italian cities, and asked as they did for famous artists to adorn and embellish them?

# DE PALERME A TUNIS

PAR MALTE, TRIPOLI

ET LA CÔTE

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Ouvrage orné de gravures



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RUE GARANCIÈRE, 10

1885

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