

ACTUAL AFRICA

OR, THE COMING CONTINENT

A TOUR OF EXPLORATION

BY

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WITH MAP AND OVER ONE HUNDRED ILLUSTRATIONS

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Geo. H. ...



H. H. the Bey of Tunis.

CHAPTER XV.

ROUNDAABOUT THE REGENCY.

ONE morning, by special invitation, I paid a visit to His Highness Sidi Ali, the Bey of Tunis, at his palace in the village of La Marsa, about ten miles northeast of the city, which is his permanent place of residence, though he has a number of other palaces in the capital and its environs. The journey is accomplished by the Italian railway which runs to Goletta, with a branch line connecting with La Marsa. I was obliged to leave at the early hour of 7.30 A. M., and met at the station Gen. Valensi, the first interpreter of the Bey, who speaks no French. The General was dressed in the Tunisian uniform, a dark blue coat covered with embroidery, red trousers and a fez cap. Three silver stars on his sleeve indicated his rank. In a button-hole he wore the ribbon of the Legion of Honor. At the station of La Marsa one of the Beylical carriages was in waiting. It was a dark-blue close carriage, with the arms of the Bey upon the door. An Arab in a gold-laced uniform was the driver of the team of handsome mules. The palace covers a considerable extent of ground and the buildings are in better condition than those usually seen in Tunisia. We entered a large square, having on one side the guard room full of native troops, and on two others stood a battery of light field guns. On the third was the entrance proper to the palace and here we alighted, and passed into another square surrounded by large two-story buildings. Walking through the guard room, in which was a motley assembly of Tunisian officers and soldiers, and great, tall, grinning, jet-black eunuchs, six feet and upwards in height, and clothed in long, dark gowns and red fez caps, we entered a small sitting-room and awaited command to enter the Presence. This soon came and we crossed the corner of the court, mounted a marble staircase, halted in an antechamber full of officials and servants, and then entered a long, narrow apart-

ment, from one side of which His Highness the Bey and his First Minister arose and advanced to meet me. He was an old gentleman of very amiable expression, rather short, and clothed in undress uniform, without any display of finery or any decorations. The minister was still more plainly attired; both wore the national red caps. After bows, handshaking and taking seats the interpreter translated my French into Arabic for the benefit of His Highness, who addressed me in a similar roundabout fashion. The reception-room was quite ordinary in its appearance and furnishings. I noticed however that it contained a number of framed texts from the Koran, also several gilt clocks and many small pictures.

After the audience I was courteously shown through a part of the palace and the gardens. The Throne Room is a long and narrow apartment of no special artistic merit, but contains some good portraits of former Beys and of the present one—and six clocks. Behind the palace is a remarkably fine large garden, in one corner of which is a menagerie of large and small animals, birds and fishes. Among the large animals are some interesting lions and panthers. In the gardens are several pretty summer-houses, one being on an island in the centre of a pond and approached by a drawbridge. At every doorway of the palace there loitered crowds of soldiers, officers, servants and eunuchs. Though the palace is large it does not contain any grand or beautiful rooms; these must be sought at the Bardo and the Dar-el-Bey, or town palace. The present Bey of Tunis is seventy-five years old. He succeeded his brother in 1882. The reigning family has given occupants to the throne for two hundred years past. Until 1881 the government was a hereditary Beylick. The old Beys acknowledged the suzerainty of the Sultan of Turkey and paid tribute until 1871, when the reigning Bey obtained an imperial firman, which liberated him from the payment of tribute, but clearly established his position as a vassal of the Sublime Porte. Tunisia is now styled a "Regency" and France is said to have over her a protectorate. In other words a Minister-Resident of France, backed by a corps of occupation of 10,000 troops, is now the virtual ruler of the country—the Bey reigns but does not govern. By the treaty of May 12, 1881, already alluded to as having been signed in the palace of Kasr-es-Saeed, the occupation is to cease when the French and Tunisian authorities recognize by common accord that the local government is capable of sustaining order.



A Lady of the Harem.

France therefore administers the country and collects the taxes in the name of the Bey, who is granted a civil list of \$200,000. The princes, of whom there are many, receive a total of \$150,000 per year. The French Representative governs the country under the direction of the French Foreign Office, which has a special "Bureau des Affaires Tunisiennes." The cost of maintaining the army is borne by the French government. The present Bey was described to me as an intelligent, kindly man, benevolent and liberal, who is greatly devoted to the welfare of his people. He is much liked both by Arabs and Jews, Maltese and French. He is especially desirous of spreading the French language and literature, and thoroughly believes in the benefit of their influence, both material and intellectual. I heard however on the other hand that it is impossible to civilize the Arabs to an appreciable extent. Their religion, to which they are bound by bands of iron, prescribes their daily life in minutest detail, as set forth by the Koran, and is an impassable barrier to the great bulk of the population. Still certainly their physical condition in the cities and towns has been improved, and it would seem that the constant contact and influence of the French must gradually, even if indirectly, work some change. The chief exports of the country in order of value now are: wheat, esparto grass, olive oil, tan, wool and woolen goods, barley, sponges and wine. The imports, which are at present nearly double the value of the exports, are, half of them, from France.

From Tunis I went to Tripoli in a steamer of the *Compagnie Générale Transatlantique*, visiting the ports on the east coast of the Regency by the way. We went by rail to Goletta and then took a steam-launch to the "Ville de Rome," a fine vessel of 1,900 tons, with a saloon lined with white marble, a *cabin de luxe*, smoking room, etc. We steamed out of the artificial passage which connects the lake with the gulf of Tunis and bisects the town of Goletta. The Ville de Rome carried a great quantity of merchandise, chiefly of European manufacture. There were a goodly number of third-class passengers, less of the second and but three of the first, including myself. We sailed at half-past five in the afternoon and at six the next morning had reached the important town of Susa, where we intended to stop twenty-four hours. At all the calls of these steamers they remain from four to twenty-four hours—excepting at the island of Djerba, which cannot be approached nearer than four miles, and where there is no steam-launch—so that the traveller has ample time to go on shore and

see everything of interest. In leaving the gulf of Tunis we headed towards the northeast and passed between the island of Zembra and Cape Bon—the Hermean promontory, beyond which the Carthaginians so often stipulated that no Roman ships should pass. Susa is the seaport of the city of Kerouan, and is connected with it by a horse tramway which makes the journey in about six hours. Kerouan is the holy city, the Rome, of Tunisia. Next to Mecca and Medina it is the most sacred in the eyes of western Mohammedans. It possesses one of the most elegant mosques in North Africa. The appearance of Susa from the sea is very picturesque. It lies upon the flank of a low range of hills, somewhat after the style of Algiers, and descends quite to the border of the sea. It is oblong in shape, extending north and south, and is surrounded by a lofty crenelated wall having towers and bastions at frequent intervals. At the summit is the old Kasbah which has been turned into barracks by the French and is the residence of the general commanding the post. A mosque tower here has been secularized as a lighthouse. The French quarter lies mostly without the walls to the north; to the south are several large manufactories of olive oil, the oil trade of Susa being very important. Pretty villages nestling in bosky gardens are also seen scattered along the shore in either direction. Many date palms appear. There are four gates to the town, two being upon the sea side. All of them are curiously painted in distemper. We anchored about half a mile from shore in an open roadstead. The old Roman harbor was slightly protected by a curve in the coast, and by a breakwater whose remains may still be seen. The population of Susa is about 15,000, of whom 2,000 are Jews and 5,000 Europeans. It is an important military station, a large French camp being located just beyond the citadel, without the walls. Susa contains many shops and warehouses. There is also a good hotel. But it is in general so similar to the greater part of Tunis as to hardly merit a special description. The view from the terrace of the Kasbah is very fine. A considerable part of the trade of Susa is in the hands of the Maltese, of whom there are about a thousand in the city. These people are industrious, frugal and law-abiding. As with the Spaniards in Oran and Algiers, who quite monopolize the carrying trade with their huge two-wheeled drays and string-teams, so with the Maltese here with their light carts and single horse or mule.

Early on the morning of the 26th we left Susa for Monastir. This is a little town situated about a mile from the shore with



General View of Suva.

which, and the quay and Custom-house and a pier built by the French, it is connected by a good carriage road. The town is of the usual Tunisian type, with a wall and citadel. North of the landing-place is an old Arab fort and scattered along the coast are a number of pretty country-houses. The whole shore seems covered with olive groves, interspersed with date palms. Monastir is only twelve miles from Susa, and the next stop is at Mahadia, thirty-one miles from here. The trade of Monastir is chiefly in olive oil. The town is situated on a promontory, near the extremity of which stands its very picturesque Kasbah with a lofty round tower at one angle of its buttressed walls. We were about four hours in reaching Mahadia. This also is a picturesque but very dilapidated town situated on a narrow promontory. On the point of the Cape is a lighthouse; next a large space is occupied by an Arab cemetery; and then comes an old Spanish citadel which has been thoroughly restored and repaired by the French, and contains quarters for the commandant. Under its walls are the ruins of an ancient Phœnician harbor. The country hereabouts is low, and covered with olive and date trees. In going on to the south in the evening we passed between the Kerkena islands and the mainland, from which they were distant twenty-five miles, though such extensive sandbanks surrounded them that the navigable channel is not more than a mile wide. It is regarded as so dangerous a part of the coast that the channel has been marked out by a series of luminous buoys. The two principal islands, which are low and covered with olive and date trees, have a population of about three thousand. These live on the produce of the sea, and cereals which grow well in the less sandy parts. The people also export mats and baskets made from the alfa grass, which grows abundantly.

Sfax is 150 miles from Mahadia. It is the second town of Tunisia in population and general importance. It has a valuable trade in alfa, and is also one of the centres of the sponge trade. The inhabitants number 42,000, of whom 1,200 are Maltese and 800 of various European nationalities. We arrived at the anchorage early the following morning. The low-lying Kerkena islands may be readily seen with a marine-glass. We were about two miles distant from the city, which lies upon low ground and consequently does not present a handsome appearance from the sea. The coast in either direction was extremely low but as usual covered with olive and date trees. Near us a couple of small mer-

chant brigs were anchored. On the horizon was a large fleet of fishing-smacks, while coming out to us from the city were several large lighters—boats sharp at each end, having two masts, each with a broad triangular sail. Some of these were sailing, others being towed to us by a little steam-launch. Along the shore were many great fish-pounds. These are the "tonnara," which abound so much in this sea. They are intended for the capture of tunny fish, which is like the Spanish mackerel though much larger and highly esteemed along the Mediterranean as food. They make an annual migration from the ocean to the Grecian Archipelago and Black Sea, and following either the southern or northern shores of the Mediterranean in all their windings are caught in great numbers by these barriers of nets. For so strong are the migratory instincts of these fish that they never retrace their course, but always endeavor to find a way to the east. Thus they pass from one enclosure of nets to another until as many as a thousand fish are sometimes secured in a single catch. The tunny fish—called "scabecio"—is preserved in oil, and largely used in the countries bordering on the Mediterranean. Oil also is extracted from the heads and refuse of the fish which is much used by curriers and tanners.

Sfax I found to consist of three portions. The European town is to the south, along the seashore, where roads and piers are being built and where there are two ordinary hotels. Next this quarter, towards the north, comes the Arab town which is surrounded by a high wall flanked by towers, some of which are round, others square. Beyond this is the French military camp. The distinctive feature however of Sfax, and one which you notice best from the deck of your steamer, is its great suburb extending along the low hills to the north for four or five miles. Here all the rich families of the city have orchards and gardens in which are villas where the owner passes always the summer and frequently the entire year, riding to town and out again every day from his work. The general appearance of Sfax is so like that of other Tunisian towns already described that I will only add that probably its most curious sight is the great reservoir for collecting rain-water, a series of several hundred bottle-shaped cisterns, within a walled enclosure almost as large as the Arab town itself.

We remained all day at Sfax, both embarking and disembarking much freight. The staple products of this place besides alfa and sponges, are dates from the southern plains of Tunisia, the

so-called Belad-el-Jerid or "land of the date"; woolen cloth from the oasis of Gafsa; olive oil from the rich country inland; and the rose and jasmine oil, so highly prized in Tunis and Constantinople, from the gardens of the town itself. Leaving Sfax at midnight we went on across the gulf of Gabes—the ancient Syrtis Minor—to our next halting-place, the town, or more properly the assemblage of villages, styled Gabes. This corner of the Mediterranean is about the only part which has any tide. At Sfax there is a rise and fall of five feet and at Gabes of seven.

We reached Gabes early the next morning. In the roadstead were two little merchant vessels. We anchored about half a mile from a pier which projects out into the sea some seven or eight hundred feet. But little of the town was in sight and that had a very dilapidated air. In the south a great number of single-story barracks appeared, since Gabes is an important military station, containing a large number of troops intended to protect the southern parts of the Regency. The coast in sight was undulating and very sandy, and utterly bare of trees save in the large oases of date palms in which Gabes is situated. Beyond, in the interior, were ranges of low, smooth hills. You notice many groves of palms thriving vigorously in the clear white sand. They make a splendid appearance from the sea, nor are you disappointed at a nearer view upon landing. Then you perceive that Gabes is not a single town, but consists of many villages scattered through large oases, just as with the villages that constitute Biskra, as hereinbefore described. In two of these villages you will be surprised to find most of the houses constructed of cut stone and broken columns. These came from the ruins of an old Roman town in the neighborhood. The number of date palms in this and the neighboring oases is estimated at 400,000. The population of all the villages is put at 16,000—of whom some 500 are Europeans, including 200 Maltese. The trade, like that of all the seaports of eastern Tunisia, is in oil, dates and alfa grass.

A number of years ago, before the French occupation and protectorate, a scheme was mooted in France for the cutting of a canal near Gabes, and flooding large portions of the upper Sahara, thus making a great inland lake and reclaiming vast tracts of arid land and introducing fertility, commerce, and life into the desert. It seems there is a vast depression 235 miles long extending from the gulf of Gabes to a point about fifty miles south of Biskra in

Algeria, with an extreme width of twenty-five miles and occupied by three chotts or salt lakes, simply low-lying marshes, which are separated from each other and from the Mediterranean in no place by more than ten miles. While the lakes are all below the level of the sea the isthmuses are on the other hand considerably above it. These marshes have been examined by several French and Italian scientific commissioners and especially by Commandant Roudaire for the French government. The most easterly of the chotts is called "el Fedjij," which means "dread," since its quicksands are likely to engulf any caravans deviating from the regular tracks. The spot where it was proposed to connect this chott by a canal with the Mediterranean is about nine miles north of Gabes, at a place where the work would be facilitated by another small chott and by the depression through which a small river enters the sea. The most westerly of the marshes is called "Melrir," and its level is about fifty feet below that of the Mediterranean. The river on which Biskra is situated, as well as many others, flows into this lake. M. Roudaire proposed first to cut through the narrowest portion of the inland isthmus, thus leaving the three basins prepared to receive the waters of the Mediterranean. The quantity of water that he estimated would be necessary to flood this depressed area would be about two hundred milliards of cubic mètres. The admission of so much water would undoubtedly by affording a large evaporating surface tend to give a permanent moisture supply and restore fertility to the lands round its borders. The practicability of thus inundating a comparatively small district in Tunisia and Algeria has been generally conceded; not so however that of a wild scheme projected some years ago in England for the inundation of the whole western Sahara, the greater part of which has been found to be above sea level. The French commission however did not make a favorable report. They thought that the advantages likely to accrue from the submerging of these chotts would not be proportioned to the large cost involved in its execution. Even if ships should be able to circulate in the interior, the region possesses nothing save dates. Though the French government declined to undertake this daring work, a private company, under the auspices of M. de Lesseps, was some time afterwards organized and received important concessions from the Tunisian authorities. It has however so far done little more than sink a number of artesian wells, and has been so successful in producing verdure and fertility in this manner that it

is extremely doubtful if any more attention will be given to the formation of an inland sea, which after all appeals much stronger to the imagination and sentiment than it does to the support and endorsement of hard scientific facts. This somewhat sensational scheme may therefore be considered as definitely abandoned. To give an idea of the importance and value of these artesian wells, it is only necessary to say there is one near Gabes which throws a column of water into the air equal to 10,000 tons a day, a quantity sufficient to redeem 1,500 acres of land from sterility and irrigate 60,000 palm trees! In this simple manner then can the desert gradually be redeemed with infinitely less labor and cost than with any colossal project of inundation.