



PROMENADE EN TUNISIE
(Tour of Tunisia)
Par M. Henri Lorin

IV

Sfax and the sialines lands - the Sahel - Mehdiâ; visit of El Djem - Sousse - Enfida - Return in Tunis

We will finish our excursion in Tunisia by the Sahel; it is the coastal zone, which starts with the Eastern terraces of Cape Bon, and in the south Sfax marks the extreme limit; an area predestined of the olive-tree, but well suitable still for cultivation of other crops, the Sahel is one of the parts of Tunisia that is rich and populated; the inhabitants, for the most part, Berberes fro a long time sedentary, an industrious race that works hard and already understands the benefit of the French occupation and which will provide us our best auxiliaries for the economic restoration of Regency.

We moored in front of Sfax at the crack of dawn, three miles out to sea; the civil servants in charge came on board at once to bring the program of the reception to us; it is promising, and, to start, we will have around the *Felix Touache* a naval fantasia; here, indeed, towed by steam-launches, come two long lines of small fishing boats; they gradually detach themselves from the remote line of the shore, in front of which other ships, at anchor, make a confused network veils and masts; the city, at the distance where we are, looks like a white pie, with, in front, darker objects: these are the hangars which surround the old port and the embankments in construction will frame the new one.

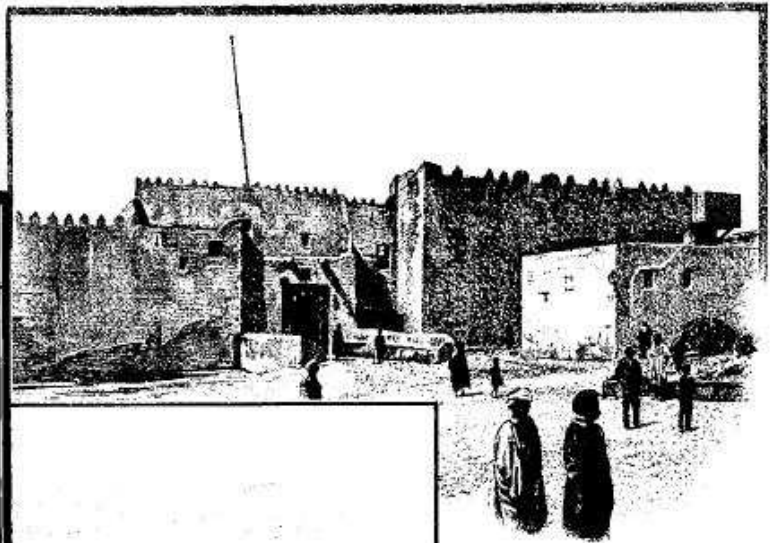
The flotilla advances; we now distinguish the armaments of the vessels, who are towing the fishing boats of the Kerkenna Islands. Twenty-five or thirty people can take seat in these boats, without decks, with round bows like the barges of the canals of Holland, and provided with two masts one right to front, the other, in

the center, inclined backwards; they operate with two sails, a jib and a cape, hold the sea very well and, in spite of their heavy form, take the wind easily. The sailors are upright on their benches, and greet us by waving flags; they are vigorous, heavysset men, bronzed by the sun and the spray, capped with a broad turban and dressed alike in brown *gandouras*, without *burnous*; they are in their costume of work, and indeed will work in front of us; it is not that the operation is difficult, the sea is flat calms, and the tug boats, skilfully led, circulate around us their lines of boats without the crews even having to supervise the movement; but the majority of these fishermen are of Àïssaouas: they brought the objects necessary to give us a display, and we will have rare good fortune to see their exercises in the open air, on the open sea even; all the accessories are on board: musical instruments intended to regulate the preparatory movements, the sharp rods with which one bores the cheeks, the sabres and the thorny rackets of cactus fronds; in the usual order, the ceremony proceeds under our eyes; it does not differ appreciably from that of last week, in Kairouan: but we understand better how these religious guilds have penetrated the daily life of the natives, having seen their colleagues, upon leaving the ordeal and the hypnotic sleep, taking again their place at once and, if necessary, giving a hand in the operation.

To end, the boats will line up on two lines, and we will review them; the steamer of the Highways Department ("Ponts et Chaussées") *Fresnel*, on whom we are seated, overtakes the *Felix Touache*, and advances at low speed, between two lines of Kerkenniens; all these fishing brave men celebrated their boats; those which did not have cabins hoisted on their poop a red handkerchief, to which it misses only the crescent to represent the Beylical flag precisely; they brought their rifles, and deafening discharges follow us: there would not be a true festival, in these countries, if they did not burn powder.

While approaching the port, between the buoys which mark out the provisional channel, we pass in front of a group of Greek boats, come from the Archipelago for fish; longer and more narrow than the trawlers of Kerkenna, they are pretty schooners with masts hung with lateen sails, whose hull is painted in crisp colors, yellow, blue or rose, crossed black lines, like the frames of the old calèches (horse-drawn carriages); they made apparently a bit of display in our honor, and hoist in front of us their white canopies with blue lines.

Work of the port is actively thorough; Sfax is an Arab town of prosperous industry; the surroundings are transformed daily by the increasing cultivation of olive-trees, and the traffic of phosphates from Gafsa must provide to the loaders, within two years, a considerable freight; the company in charge of work is that which already dug the port of Tunis and currently improves that of Sousse; the foundations being very stable, in Sfax, simple dredging will be enough to ensure the boats in sheltered zone, fixed depths of 6.5m: the excavated earth, flowing back through the pipes, raises little by little the dams between which the channel will be practical; it is notable that the shores of Sfax are usually calm, the swell and the wind being broken by the obstacle of the Kerkenna islands.



VUES DE SEAX. — DESSIN DE BOUDIER.

Our entry into Sfax, minus the cavalcade, was as brilliant as that of Kairouan; from the port at the office of control, where we stop, we walk under garlands, between banners: two hedges full of spectators are crowded along our passage, so dense that the gendarmes have difficulty making them respect the procession; at the houses close to the European city, post office, officers' circle, Hotel de France, the terraces and the windows are crammed with the curious; the children of the schools, boys and girls, are in the forefront of the crowd, and it is a pleasure to see these small children, of so diverse origins, join a common demonstration in the honor of the first French *Magistral* of Tunisia; their rulers all are among them, French and natives, Marists with the long frock coats, good sisters hastened to put forward the bouquets which their pupils offer; and some of the little boys play us a Marseillaise of brass band which touched us more than others.

To judge the whole of the topography of Sfax, no observatory is worth the terrace of the rich Arab house where Si Djellouli, the distinguished current caïd, invited us for an exquisite collation; the city, like Sousse, is not built in an amphitheatre, but almost flat, is crowded against the shore; its fortifications had left free a rather wide shoreline, where the European district rose, but the characteristic feature is outside the central agglomeration, the dispersion of the villas through the gardens; Sfax is not very complete in itself; unlike the Gabsiens in their oasis, Sfaxiotes have in the suburbs their country dwelling at the same time as their profitable land.

It is enough to wander a few hours in the streets of the indigenous city to be convinced of the richness of Sfax: in the souks, the workshops of Blacksmiths are particularly active; there the ploughs are manufactured, as well as the various tools necessary for the cultivation of the olive-tree; Mr. L..., who had made in Gabes an experiment in gardening, wanted to handle a hammer in a forging mill of Sfax; just as he did not neglect to taste the rackets of cacti which the Aïssaouas eat, he will take from his voyage more than a banal collection of personal memories, and us a good idea of his energy and good mood.

Many of the Arab houses in Sfax are beautiful and well decorated; the external doors are decorated, not only with designs in nails, but of complicated fittings, true arabesques of metal; earthenware of the best indigenous style frame the leaves and intersections; we saw some, in the house of the governor, as remarkable as those of the mosque of the Barber, forming panels whose greens, in particular, seem to me deep and solid; the ceiling, in the same room, is partitioned by thick beams, painted interlacing of colors varied on a red surface. Then, throwing a furtive glance at the patios of houses partly open (*ajar*), we saw carefully joined flagstones, marble colonnades, with engraved capitals, stained glasses covered with fine plaster netting; in all this city a taste of luxury and comfort reigns. It is also that Sfaxiotes are very entrepreneurial; one meets them through all Tunisia, drapers or grocers travelling, carrying from market to market their shoddy goods on the back of a mule.

An aperitif with the military circle prepared us for the buffet of the governor, who is in himself only a preface, because we must lunch in Aïn-el-Meil, at the current limit of the grounds *sialines* planted in olive-trees; we will have all the leisure to study on the way, a score of kilometers, this very interesting agricultural district; one of our companions, Mr. de Lespinasse. is here at his place; a settler in the region of Sfax, and resident colonist, he knows better than anybody the local conditions, and lavishes very instructive explanations on us.

Contrary to an error which excuses the consonance of the word, the epithet of *sialines* does not mean anything geological; it applies simply to the grounds that a former bey of 16th century I believe, conceded to the Siala family; these privileged people, being unaware of the immense fortune which was given to them, limited themselves contented themselves with some fields around Sfax, and, until our days, the major part of the concession remained wild; recently, some of the descendants having new occupations, the minister Khéreddine revoked the donation, and some very large fields were thus vacant; in the caïdat of Sfax, which is a half-million hectares in extent, the indigenous population of Métellits had the practice of moving with complete freedom, pushing their herds from place to place and making of all the country a roadway.



FANTASIA À SFAX. — DESSIN DE MADAME PAUL CRAMPÉL.

The inspection of the lands of Tunis continues methodically with the study of the sialine lands, in order to open them up to colonization: the principal difficulty consists in settling the Métellits, in creating reserves sufficient for their sustenance and that of their herds: the company of phosphates of Gafsa, along with the grant for the construction of the coastal railroad, will have 30 000 hectares of sialine land; work currently in hand will free another 20000 hectares, and, for several years already, all the immediate surroundings of Sfax have been appropriated. The State sells the allotted grounds for *ten franks a hectare*; the olive-tree planted on these grounds is in not in full production until the end of ten years; it is therefore necessary to wait a while for the income generated; but the conditions of acquisition and of development are so favorable that there is, either for

individual capitalists, or for associations with little capital, an opportunity very worthy of attention; the single condition of success is the choice of a good manager.

Leaving the ramparts of Sfax, it turns out that we pass through the gardens initially; they are the rural properties of the tradesmen of Sfax; they have a small house there, where they come, often to sleep; there they cultivate vegetables, fruit trees and particularly almond trees; wells or cisterns provide water in sufficient quantity; earthen walls, crowned with thorny cactus, limit the fields. Beyond the gardens the olives begin, planted in very tight rows, they are the oldest, increasingly sparse, so much so that the recent plantations barely count twenty or twenty-five trees a hectare; one sees in which sense the word should be heard, currently in Tunisia, of a *forest* of olive-trees. This cultivation becomes, each day, more scientific: in the first years, one sows cereals between the olive-trees, especially barley; but, as soon as the tree is in full production, it is left master of the ground, the weak annual rains are then enough to maintain it; the size is a very delicate operation; formerly one would force the tree into a dome; today the olive growers of Sfax prefer the appearance of a goblet, which dips in the center and better distributes the atmospheric effects on all the parts of the foliage.



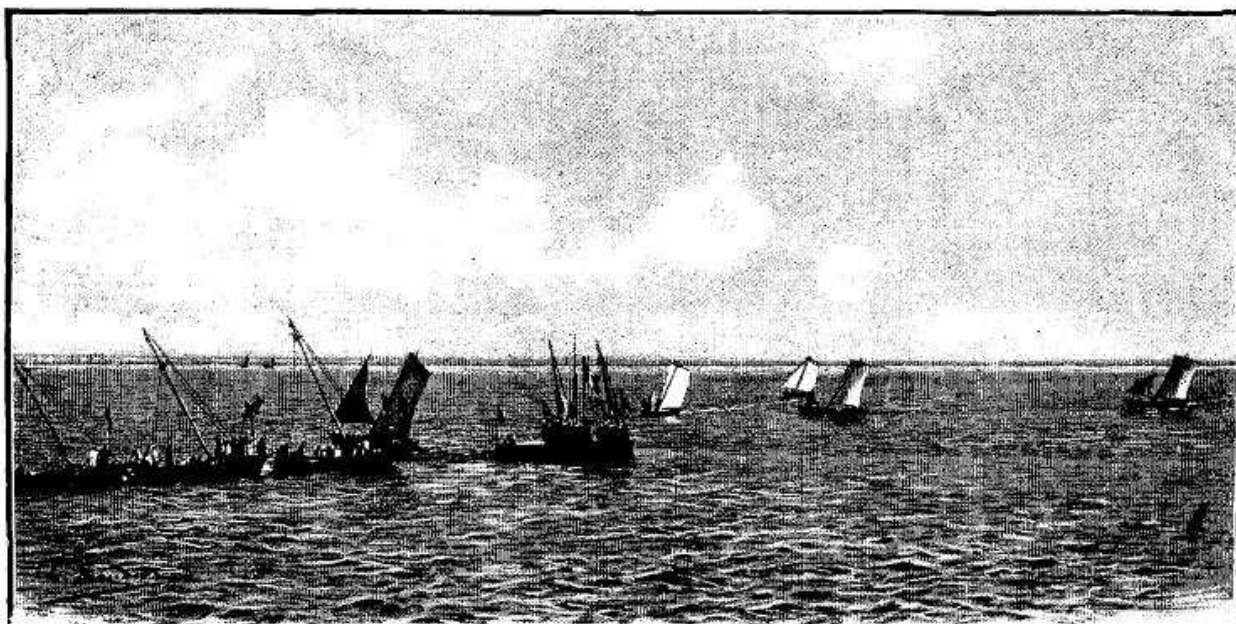
CAVALIER SOUASSI. — D'APRÈS UNE PHOTOGRAPHIE.

Paved initially, our road was now nothing but a sandy track, where our cars were mired at each step; it was almost humiliating, this intermittent walk when we started to parade between the Métellits horsemen, arranged on both sides of the path; we arrive, in small packets, and are set at a table under a large tent, without the last of the latecomers, because our minutes are counted, and the menu, Franco-Arabic, is looming; I have guarded for a long time the taste of a *chekchouka*. a frightening composition eggs, tomatos and peppers.

Sat near their horses, under the cooking sun, Métellits patiently awaited the end of our meal, to give us an original fantasia, with coordinated movements; rider by rider initially, then two to two, four to four, finally by squadrons in mass, they climb at the gallop the stony slope at the top of which we dominate the country; pouring onto each other they will stop, in the middle of the ridge on which the horses are butting together; we are here on ground too rocky for the olive-tree, but at our feet, indefinite in the direction of Sfax, the plantations form their lines, and this hill is only one small island of bad soil in a cultivable district which can still be extended much wider towards the west. Tramways established on most important of the trails that fan out from Sfax would activate colonization across this country, undoubtedly cleared, but where the sandy nature of the ground makes transport difficult.

The progress achieved already show the quality of the colonists settled in Sfax; one feels, around this city, the continuity, the intelligence of their efforts. Mr. de Lespinasse has spoken, in excellent terms, of the reception which was made to us before our boarding: In Sfax, one is not delayed with irritations and vain political quarrels, one wants to only work.... One succeeds extremely well there also, we all thought while climbing onto the *Fresnel* which received us on board; the managers, some officers, notables that accompany us to the *Felix Touache* we follow with the tug two large trawlers of Kerkenna, the *amin* of the fishermen upright among the musicians, at the foot of the foremast; we re-examine the work of the port, and, while the city is left and grows small behind us, the conviction is established clearer and more explicit in our spirit that it deserves and can promise a brilliant future.

We leave the *Felix Touache* in Mehdia, the next morning, not without thanking the captain, who multiplied himself, as did his crew, to render our stay onboard pleasant; the sea was so lenient to us, that we took all our meals on the bridge and that no one among us had to do anything specific against sea sickness; it is almost with regret that we regain a footing on land, but we should now cross the Sahel proper by Mehdia, El Djem, imprisoned in the steppes, Djemal, Sousse and Enfida; we will travel in landau, as at the beginning of the tour, and we will not miss the new performances.



FANTASIA NAVALE. — DESSIN DE LOUDIER.

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