

GASTON VUILLIER

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# LA TUNISIE

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## La Tunisie

**Gaston Vuilliers, 1896**

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We drop anchor so far from Sfax! And here the sea is so calm, flat like a mirror, becoming agitated with the touch of a breeze which, initially light, increases gradually in strength. By an unexplained phenomenon the tidal flow, hardly significant on the African coast in general, here produces a difference of 1 meter 50 between the high and low tides. At the time of the equinoxes the difference is much larger and will reach two meters. This is why this coast, so much dreaded in the past, is always dangerous because of its shallows, for navigators who do not know the local phenomena.

From the bridge of the ship, very far away from the land, we can clearly see the Arab city gleaming in the sun, and we make out the port somewhat. The sea is furrowed with bright red sails, and it is miracle to see them under the breeze, tilted almost to the wave - fringed with white froth, for the sea has grown larger - coming from broadside, taking the wind and slipping by in all directions like arrows. It will be difficult to gain the city, because the boats have great difficulty to come alongside our

ship. Some travellers arrive, the boat which carries them mounts sometimes on a wave, and sometimes disappears, reversed almost, always covered with foam. As it approaches, following a large wave, I hear the piercing cry of a young girl thrown into a panic by fear. Here comes the boat close to the boarding ladder, the travellers are soaked by sea water, their faces are convulsed, the boarding is difficult, one needs to choose the moment when the boat descended very low in the wave rises with it.

Lastly, after a much trouble, they are here on the bridge. The young girl is in tears still, but she is no longer afraid.

It is really a painful voyage, dangerous to even undertake to make landfall. It is the indifference of the *Compagnie Française* which makes the stopovers that delivers the travellers to boats with sails which offer no safety and where they are stacked in the middle of the merchandise. Accidents are rare, it is true, but they occur sometimes.

The access channel and the port which two dredgers currently dig will be a great benefit for Sfax. While waiting for the new port one regrets the loss of the service of the Transatlantiques (liners) whose suppression only served the interests of the *Compagnie Italienne*.

In spite of the trouble of this crossing of several kilometers, by a heavy sea, and under precarious conditions, I delivered myself into a boat and after an animated voyage I approached the quays of Sfax which I had already visited three years before.

The first view of the *Quartier Franc*, extended along the shore, reveals to me an extraordinary transformation accomplished rapidly. Boulevards are planted with trees, streets take shape, beautiful houses have risen, the hotels receive travellers. The Europeans here are industrious, the Greek ships fish for sponge, the trade of oil and halfa increases every year. The only discordant note comes from the port where the dredgers raising the mud, or rather ancient filth, poison the air.

European Sfax and the Arab city are towns with a great future. By its population and its trade, the first is already one of most important of the coast. With the surroundings, its 10,000 gardens occupy a surface of 60 kilometers. It is to them, even more than its trade, that Sfax owes its prosperity. Its constant rapport with Gafsa, to which all the oases of the Djerid are tributary, contributes to its richness to

ensure the future. And what horizons of prosperity still open for this city: a railway line connecting it to Gafsa, and consequently to Djerid, whose projected construction will be soon in process of execution, the port which will shortly make the access easy by sea. But what is especially interesting in Sfax, apart from the progress of colonization which cannot leave us indifferent, is the Arab city. Bombarded and taken by Admiral Garnault on July 16, 1881, following the insurrection of Ali-Ben-Khalifa, it no longer preserves any trace of the assault, but has regained its original appearance. Only a wall which enclosed the *Quartier Franc* was destroyed.

The old city will preserve its character for a long time still through the habits of its inhabitants. People of Sfax, in effect, do not live like the other town Arabs, they do not live the city, but the surrounding countryside. Each morning, on their small donkeys trotting keenly, one sees them arriving at their shop or their workshop. Furthermore, Sfax offers the most astonishing contrast with the other cities of regency. There is everywhere an extraordinary animation, the legendary nonchalance of the Moslems is unknown here, one goes, one comes, one signals, one speaks loudly, and there is an incredible confusion in the narrow lanes, of horses, donkeys, loaded camels in the middle of a very busy teeming population.

When evening comes, as by enchantment any noise ceases, there is a profound silence almost like death. Each one, giving up the city, has returned to the gardens.

The question of water unceasingly worried the people of Sfax and in their astonishing spirit of precaution, distinct from usual Arab practices, they built thousands of cisterns. You will see it even has doors like a city. Protected by walls, joined together by groups, there are four hundred: it is the reserve in the event of extreme dryness.

The establishment of these cisterns is due to the pious foundations, to the organization of the *habous* about which I previously spoke.

But this spirit of precaution so characteristic of Sfax is not exerted on the questions of roadway system. The streets are of a revolting dirtiness, and pernicious fevers, due undoubtedly in this state of affairs, prevail there with violence.

Many inhabitants here are claim descent from the Prophet and wear a green turban which distinguishes them from the others. Their ancestors would have

accompanied the barber of Mahomet who is buried in the mosque in Kairouan which we have visited. There are some that are completely clothed in green. The turban is not rolled up around their head like elsewhere, it is broader, and its folds go up to a peak above the face. The faces themselves are quite different from those of the other Moors and the contrast is surprising when one arrives at Mahdia where the faces are broad, round and coloured. Here the feature is firm, nervous, the bone structure apparent, the eyes expressive.

I found in Sfax some old memories of Tunis, *Fezzesna* amongst others, dancing as in *Halfaouïne* without ceasing nor rest, with the sound of the *zourna* and the tom-tom. I saw also a café decorated with naive paintings as in Bab Djedid. But this one was surprising with its fantastic camel bearing on its hump a notched tower, its chained lions and its hairy serpents.

I enjoyed myself especially in the souks. They are far from having the importance and the richness of those of Tunis, but they exceed them greatly from the picturesque point of view! Some corners have a charming strangeness, splashed with rays of gold and insane colors, with shops of which the canopies are formed by old disjoined boards, old bags full of holes, patched, all hanging, held up by strings, where the sun plays and where the shadows adopt the most peculiar forms. It is picturesque in random ways. There are streets of which I am unaware of their names expecting that figures alone indicate them, where black and oily earthenware jars are aligned in the dazzling light. There the sick camels are treated. I saw these wretched animals, gaunt, from which the hair had fallen in places, that had been painted with tar. It was odd then to see the black animal going away slowly in the sun like the skeleton of an antediluvian animal; and each one along a different passage. And suddenly, this bizarre sight was followed by the appearance of a beautiful rider on an embroidered saddle of gold, noble and proud in pace, dressed in a splendid coat.

Then there were the resolvers of *babouches* (Turkish slippers) stretching leather, crossing and tapping without a break, the dyers with red hands, others with yellow hands, because each one of them employs only one color. Then merchants of sweets installed under the canopies of fortune which we know, constantly agitating a fan of palm tree leaves above their display to chase away the flies. It was a continual buzz, black wings whirled around the confectioneries that the merchant, in spite of his efforts, did not manage to defend. And all that in the middle of a perpetual

hubbub, in an agitated rabble, among riders, pedestrians where camels alone passed with unconcern and gravity.

I arrived at a door of the city, a high arch opened in the rampart. Here the activity is more extraordinary than anywhere else in Sfax. Riders on horseback or donkey, pedestrians, from morning to evening all emerge from the dark opening, follow one another through it; many wear the broad green turban, most are draped in brilliant white coats, continuously milling around and agitated with an eternal to- and fro-ing. The superb djebbas sparkle always and fade away making place for others. Dazzling the eyes, it is an indescribable tumult where all these merge: the cries, calls and the resounding blows of the blacksmiths' hammers all neighbouring each other in the street they occupy.

The two sides of this street are bordered by their workshops and, through the dark swirls of smoke which escape from it, an unusual white minaret becomes visible. Around, in the lanes close to the ramparts, odd balconies cling. Their buckled balustrades, hung with fabrics, rags, tatters of all colors, and garlands of woollen articles dyed in crimsons or yellows. Even with the help of the stakes and strings, one does not know how everything is supported. And always, in this chaos of fumes and dazzling rays of sunlight, the agitated crowd squeezes between riders, donkeys and heavily loaded camels.

I hardly manage to clear myself a passage through the mob and pass through the gate, finding myself at the base of the ramparts. The countryside scorched by the sun is spread out in front of me all bare, since the green line of gardens which I see are further over.

Here, outside the walls, in full sunlight, is a world of camels and donkeys, *fondouks* (markets), shining *koubbas* (marabout tombs), the poor *gourbis* (mud & straw huts) occupied by negros. But the heat is suffocating, so I soon regain the door of the city and, eventually finding the original street, I take refuge in the shade of the souks, in the old auction market. It is most original which can be seen. The center is occupied by an open air café where patched fabrics shelter one from the sun. Around it boutiques of clothes merchants are open whose doors are surrounded by garlands of rags. There are old djebbas, blouses of Jews with faded gold embroidery, bridles and saddles, burnous, shoddy carpets and I forget how much

else was hung there - brilliant tinsels, superb scraps, objects whose origins and purpose I did not know!

There were not only second-hand dealers in this place, but also pottery merchants. The strange hoods of these shops, made with one does not know what, hung, leaned or capriciously attached themselves using boards or poles planted in the wall. The torn fabrics were stopped with rags and, despite everything, the gold of the sun poured through the cracks, striking glaring shards on an antique earthenware jar, enriching by dazzling arabesques a normal vase of unspecific use. In front of the door, the earthenware jars and the *gargoulettes* were piled up; the passers by knocked against them with their feet. Elsewhere one proceeded to the sales with the shrieks of saddles, harness, bridles and brasses.

One of the doors of the mosque of Sfax opens into the souks.

While passing under the dim gallery, one is surprised by the sight of columns lit by the reflection of the sun as it strikes unseen walls. Under the arches, in the luminous half-light, some Moors with green or gold turbans, in rich costumes, are upright with hands raised in the attitude of prayer or prostrate towards the East. And this is a scene of singular grandeur in its simplicity.

If you go to Sfax, do not forget to direct yourself towards the large mosque on a Friday at one o'clock. The assembly of believing is so numerous this day that the sanctuary cannot contain them all. You see outside, on benches in masonry, a whole courtyard of the faithful. And the gravity or the character of the faces, the richness of the costume, the meditation of this crowd will surprise you.

A dervish with a red turban and green coat, the beard white as snow passed and passed again around the mosque in front of the people in prayer "Oh! believers, my brothers," he said," know that we are in the right and that we return thanks to God. He is the Master to do all that he it likes. That salvation accompanies Mahomet his envoy!"

One heard only his voice repeating the invocation and by the open large doors of the mosque, in the shade of the arches, the white silhouettes prostrate themselves or stood up and the coats were agitated as large wings

"He is *mahoul*." a Jew with whom I discussed told me. A Moor who passed cried: "Do not listen to him, *Roumi* (foreigner, "European"), he is a saint in not insane."

The Jew evades him.

"See you," continuing to regard the other contemptuously, and going on, "the spirit of God is with this man and he cannot abide it. If you went to Tunis, you would notice a tomb in the middle of the souk of the saddlers; every Friday, a sacred hour for us, flags are planted on the tomb and the passersby kiss its folds. He was a saint also, the one who is buried there, and the foreigners took him to be insane."

"Us others, we respect these men that the spirit of God visits and, as they are unable to earn their living, we recognize their right to take their food in the stalls of the merchants"

And while I left the entrance of the mosque, the voice of the dervish always made itself heard. Now it spoke with a intense volubility.

The Jew who was not gone far waited for me.

"But what is this madman doing now? See how he acts: a crowd has just formed around him... Tell me what he says."

"He speaks about the war, Sidi, he always repeats the same thing. It is said that he became suddenly insane during the bombardment of Sfax by the French and since then he lives in the memory of the events which made him lose his reason."

And the Jew translated the speeches of the odd fellow for me which I saw adjusting his figure, making great gestures, and as we approached I distinctly heard his voice.

"O my brothers", he said, "the time of glory is passed. Allah gives up his people, see the sun which rises all red in a sea of blood. The *giaours* (infidels) came by the sea with their vessels of fire: here they advance like the swirls of sand of the Sahara. One hears the bellowing of the camels and the cows... the horses neigh... the squadrons attack us, the armour launches sparks.

"The valiant Kroumirs awaited them in their mountains, but weep, with my brothers, the ruin of Islam starts, the forests burn, the fields are ravaged, the herds, the women, the children are the prey of the infidel.

“Praise to God who causes men to die and who makes them live!

“The cloud of fire approaches, seize the long rifles, the *yatagans* (sabre), the guns, put on your spurs. Warriors and *goums* (Arab military unit), follow your standards. Ahead!...

“...The Ulémas, in Kairouan, preach the holy war from the top of the minarets, the Moslem world is agitated, the sultan sends battalions from Tripoli. Hope is reborn, the infidel will be driven out.

“Listen, now: we have sawn down the large posts that carry the message along the roads, because with wires the Christians spoke each other from one end of the world to the other. War with the *giaours*! Without the vessel of fire, as full of guns as a fort which one sees close to the shore, they all would have their throat cut in Sfax!

“The tribes were with us and in the depths of the desert we awaited the signal. And as the hour was going to sound...

“Oh! believers, my brothers, know, that we are in the right and that we return thanks to God. He is the Master to do all that he pleases, that salvation follows Mahomet his envoy!

“And as the hour was going to sound, the sea was covered with a cloud of large vessels of fire, large like fortresses, all black, vomiting smoke, prickling with armour, like monsters.

“The following day a rain of iron and fire fell on the city, the walls collapsed, the ground and the sky resounded of terrible rumbling, as if the end of the world arrived.

“O my brothers, celestial anger us refines us, here are the black days, you do not possess anything any more, it is eternal disgrace!...

“And while this rain of iron and fire crushed us, the boats loaded with soldiers approached the shore. Praise to God who raises the dead! God alone is eternal!

“Die, we will not say: they have fled!... , You die, you will still live...

“Many of our warriors died this day. They will live...

“The army of the infidel was on the sand of the shore, but we defended ourselves outside of the ramparts, and the tribes approached to join to us. The boats vomitted fire, O shame, my brothers, it was necessary to flee...

“Then, under the fire from the guns the doors of the city fell down, and the infidel entered...

“It was written, O my brothers.

“They made a siege of the houses. We struggled man with man, but at evening the flag of the French replaced the standard of Islam on the Kasbah!...

“The time of glory has passed, O Muslims: where are our warriors, where are our *goums*, where are our standards? Celestial anger has dispersed them. Praise to God who raises the dead! God alone is eternal.”

The dervish did not speak any more, he went away now through the crowd which opened respectfully on his passage.

I said to the Jew then: "The Arab was right a little, a few moments ago, because he is not crazy, but neither is he a saint. This is a crazy man and maybe a fanatic who could become dangerous in certain circumstances. I saw this morning a true lunatic by the streets, he went around half-naked, with a twisted body, dull eyes, his mouth open and slobbering."

And I thought of the Sicilian Vespers (*Vèpres Siciliennes*, an opera by Verdi), with Jean de Procida simulating madness and going from city to city to warn the conspirators of the hour of the massacre.

“You see,” answered me the Jew, in a low voice, “I think like you, but we do not dare any statement us others, you know well...”

We had left the surroundings of the mosque and we went through the lanes, stopping ourselves at every moment, because in Sfax one can pass the days without trouble, always discovering new interesting details. Sometimes a Jewish woman passes with dishevelled hair, dyed by henna, a bush burning brightly in the sun: a water carrier driving a donkey in front of him, beribboned, full of amulets and tufts of wool in brilliant colors: children loaded with green palms; cloth merchants waving glittering fabrics. And all that goes on under rays of light, in the translucent shade, in

the midst of scents of fennel and *benzoin* (an aromatic resin), and the acrid odor of frying.

We saw a number of shops full of cucumbers of uncommon size, they were everywhere. It is a vegetable dear to the people of Sfax. It is even claimed that the abundance of cucumbers, *fakous* in Arabic, had inspired the name of the city.

And we went thus when songs struck our ears. An Arab band emerged almost at once from a lane. It was a burial. The dead person, lying in his coffin, wrapped in a mat, was carried on a high stretcher with rails.

The song accelerated, the carriers hurried, they jostled every moment on the uneven ground, and the high stretcher wobbled. The procession passed very close to us, illuminated in the passage under the rays of the sun falling at once in the shade of the street, illuminated by a stray glint from a distance. The procession went up and down and showed one last time and then disappeared. The songs died out in the distance.

I had left the Arab district and I had arrived at the sea, where a boat had just arrived. The Archbishop of Alexandria disembarked, he was going to inaugurate the Greek church. A large crowd awaited him on the quays. The pastor had covered his hair with a black veil which covered also his face. The faithful ones knelt in front of him, kissing his hands and the archbishop touched their head with his lips in passing.



LE DERNICHE

(<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k106534x>)