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Sfax
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It is necessary to forgive much in Sfax, and its French city obscuring the view of the Arab city, and the monotony of its landscape, and the poor quality of its hotels, and the dirtiness, filth and the sordid crowds of its kasbah, the most Arab of the Arab kasbahs. It is necessary to forgive Sfax for the stink of its souks, revolting view of its butchers, the refuse in its cul de sacs, the obstruction of its
306 open spaces and so many natives running up against you and hustling you, and in what a stir of rags and tatters! because Sfax is the town of Fathma, the mother of the Prophet, and because there all the Arabs or almost all wear the green turban, a sign of their holy relationship with the mother of Mahomet, and that in remembering her the women of Sfax are, it is said, the most beautiful of all Algeria and the Tunisian South.

I wrote "*it is said*", because, in Sfax more than elsewhere, an impenetrable mystery reigns between eye of the roumi [foreigner] and the face of the women. Hardly does one meet one in the streets, furtive and slow phantoms in white shrouds: the white haïck white which obscures here is a black mask in Tunis and lends to the women the squashed face of a Negress, the white haïck reappears here immaculate like that of Algiers, and the eye is very happy to find it after the black spectra of the women of Sousse, where the staircases of the streets going down towards the sea are like pedestal bearing statues in mourning; Sousse, where the black, enveloping head to foot haïck of the women, seems to walk through the city like the sinister sails of the old pirate boats.

307 And this city with the women hermetically sealed, this Sfax where the haïck is done rare in a revolting proliferation d' Arabs, it should be appreciated for the poetry and nostalgic decoration of its cisterns. Over there, over there, out of the gates and past the cemetery, on the side of the gardens, after the camp of the riflemen and the spahis, it is there that Sfax, with its high roughcast walls crenelated in a palisade of teeth, is profiled, heroic and savagely white against the blue of the sky, a deliciously soft blue today; because we have rediscovered the sun in Sfax, town of Fathma, and after the streets swarming with nomads, riders and convoys of camels, after the unnamable hubbub of the souk of the blacksmiths and the east side sordid with a market of grains and esparto set up at the doors of the city, this is an oasis of freshness, it is calm and a rest that this halt at the entry to the gardens, past the field of the dead, in the middle of the cisterns and their immense enclosures.

Cisterns, truly the source of the life in these extreme countries of thirst! Surrounded by long walls, as are our cemeteries, they are large rectangular
308 spaces built and cemented up to one meter above the ground. Domes bulge out

from place to place, filling the paved enclosure like tombs; a square opening yawns at the top of each dome: these are the cisterns!

At a distance, the city is profiled, high and white, its notched walls, behind are the gardens with their cypresses and their supple palm trees, and, in the enclosure where the tanks of water sleep, waiting for someone's jug to be plunged, some Arabs in burnous form a biblical group, indolently lying there, without the uniform of a spahi extended among them, an indigenous *spahis* escaped from the camp and come, also, to surprise the women, because they refuse one and the other to draw from the cisterns, their jug of ground on the shoulder, mysterious veiled Orientals.

Nomads with the hips rolled up in bluish cotton fabrics, little girls with eyes already wet with kohl and all murmuring with heavy jewels of money from shoulders to ankles, Moors in long shrouds and careful step, all enter the enclosure of the cisterns.

309 Similar to a cortège of slow white phantoms in this place full of 'tombs', they process between the domes, and with indolence of attitude and gestures... (All in all, one would write millenia, and, indeed, these attitudes and gestures, for four thousand years and more, have not changed), they attach their jug to a cord, lower it into the cistern, wait, leaning for one moment, then raise it up and position it suspended over their back by their wet cord, ...and the men sprawled there, look at them... Then, it is an old Arab escorted by two small children who in his turn comes to draw there; it intends to make the donkey drink, the family donkey which has remained on the road, and it is a joy that this wasted and empty old man helped these two still awkward children to operate the jug, the cord and the bucket; then come some other women and then some camel drivers.

Everybody comes to supply himself, water is rare in the countryside: the cistern attracts and brings together from all around the Moor and the nomad, the desert and the city, the brush and the mosque: it is the place where one meets the women, and Rébecca still offers water to the camel of Eliézer.

310 In the country of sand and palm trees, the loves of Jacob are those of Hassen and of Ahmed Ben Ali; the East is stationary here; for thirty centuries, nothing has moved.