

TUNISIA
and the
Modern Barbary Pirates

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PARADISE," ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS AND A MAP

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Preface

(pp vii - ix)

THE authorities on Tunisia are not worth enumerating. Those in English belong to a former generation ; those in French are prejudiced and stupid. A Frenchman is either an hireling scribe, glorifying the blunders of his country under the specious nickname of civilization, or a tedious tourist, whose soul cannot soar above the details of his provender and his flea-bites. He will exclaim over a telegraph pole or squander sentiment upon the memory of a sandwich, but for instruction, description, wit or common sense we must look elsewhere.

Accordingly, I may claim to cover new ground.

It is possible that I may be deemed pessimistic, but I am at the least unprejudiced. Until I had travelled into the interior of Tunisia, I was disposed to believe that the French might be doing a work feebly analogous to our own in India and Egypt. Care was taken that the worst scandals should be withheld from my observation, but I have now seen enough to convince me that the administration of Tunisia is as rotten as that of the French Republic.

My book serves three purposes, (1) It will be an indispensable companion to those travellers who are tired of the beaten European track and desire to see something of golden Africa and a race of native gentlemen. I do not love tourists, but I believe I shall have served them faithfully, even though I only persuade them to remain away. (2) Much more important, I have exposed Lord Salisbury's deplorable sacrifice of British prestige and commerce; I have indicated a possible avenue to retrieving lost opportunities and eventually ousting the modern Barbary pirates, the inheritors of the selfish traditions of Rome, from a land where they have unwarrantably trespassed. (3) I have paid a tribute to the last survivors of that grand mediaeval race, which has bequeathed to us whatever civilization we may possess and which shall yet, inshallah, live to restore a portion of its departed glories.

I crave special attention for the passages referring to the caravan trade across the Sahara. To the fascinating subject of Tripoli I hope I may return later on.

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V.

TANGIER, 1st January, 1899.

Chapter VII

THE INSIDE OF THE CUP AND THE PLATTER

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The Interior - Accommodation - Fonduks - Vermin - Fantasias - Art - Bicycles - An Itinerary - Tunis to Susa - Susa - Susa to Kairwan - Kairwan - Sabra - Susa to Sfax - El Jem – Sfax Fortifications - Gabes - A Sandstorm - Wells - Jerba – Sbeitla - Thala - El Kef - Beja - The Mejerda - Dugga - Bizerta.

The half-way stopping-place is at El-Jem, whose amphitheatre comes next to the Coliseum in size, and is superior to it in preservation. It describes a vast ellipse, over 160 yards across ; but its chief use at present seems to be as a receptacle for all the garbage of the neighbourhood, and no attempt has been made to render the exploration of its galleries either safe or agreeable, nor is there anything to prevent the Arabs from carrying away stones for building material, as they have been accustomed to do for generations. The schoolmaster is bound to put up travellers, who may rely on monastic accommodation and good plain fare at hotel prices.

The journey on is through an even drearier plain until the approach to Sfax and its seven thousand gardens. For my part, if I were advising a friend of mine, I would bid him buy photographs of El-Jem Amphitheatre in Tunis, and proceed from Tunis to Sfax (if, indeed, he must go there) by boat.

By the time I had reached Sfax, I had Sfax come reluctantly to the conclusion that, under present conditions, travel in the interior is almost out of the question. Apart from the trouble of buying horses, tents, provisions, and other concomitants of exploration, it would not be agreeable to stray far from our consulates under the evil eye of suspicious officials, who might at any time be driven to arbitrary action through excess of zeal. It would be so easy to arrest an inconvenient wanderer on a pretext of espionage, and a tardy release would be but imperfect redress. But I do not hesitate to recommend the journey along the coast, which offers a series of fascinating scenes at the cost of little discomfort.



SFAX : MARKET OUTSIDE THE WALLS.
(Photograph by MRS. VIVIAN.)

Sfax pleased me vastly. It is not alluring from the sea, presenting only an array of tawdry European houses straggling over a sandy waste. But the old Arab town, with its jagged Saracen wall, its narrow lanes, through none of which a carriage can pass, its varied street scenes, its fantastic balconies, its wonderful green gateways, and its strange arched bazaars, is a constant delight. At Susa and Kairwan the dinginess of the drab costumes contributed to a depressing impression, but at Sfax the urchins were brilliantly polychrome. The outlines of the town were not so soft as at Tunis, but they were far more brilliantly cheerful, and harmonized with the dazzling sun on the white-washed walls. Many children wore parti-coloured cloths, the right half scarlet and the left half Cambridge blue, or one side purple and the other salmon pink, like glorified clowns. The men wore gigantic turbans, mostly green, which implies a claim to descent from the Prophet, and they conveyed an air of festivity by the large pink roses or geraniums poised behind their ears. I recognised many types of face which were familiar to me from the Arabian Nights, and more than one sea-dog who was certainly a pirate in the good old times. Sfax is perhaps best known in France from its association with the various notorieties of the Zola case. The best house in the town is pointed out as having been the abode of Esterhazy, and it is amusing to note that the principal shop is kept by a man named Dreyfus. The Greek fishermen are so important a

colony there that many of the coffee-houses bear the word *Ξενοδοχείον* and other inscriptions in the Hellenic character. Encouraged by the acquiescence of Europe in the fortification of Bizerta, the French Government is now about to turn Sfax into a military and naval stronghold. Unlike Bizerta, which possesses the disadvantages of being easily blockaded, Sfax will make an excellent naval station. The islands of Kerkenna supply it with a natural rampart, as well as easy outlets to the north and south. Its position constitutes it an answer, if not a menace, to Malta ; and we may here, perhaps for the first time, feel anxiety at the presence of the French in Tunisia. On the 22nd of March, 1898, a tender was accepted for the construction of barracks to accommodate ninety sailors, as well as powder and torpedo magazines. The present expenditure is ,3,200, and the works are to begin at once. The intention is to follow them up with far more extensive fortifications later on.



BREAD-STALL IN THE OASIS OF GABES.
(*Photograph by MRS. VIVIAN.*)

The land journey from Sfax to Gabes is over such bad roads and so desolate a tract of country that it is wiser to go by sea. The Italian service of boats is well appointed, but if the weather be bad, many might resent the trial of spending eight hours at anchor outside the canal which leads to the harbour of Sfax, and the landing at Gabes by means of small boats a mile away from shore.



OASIS OF GABES: INTERIOR OF A HOUSE.
(Photograph by Mrs. Vivian.)

I really think I prefer Gabes to any other place in Tunisia. It consists of a cluster of poor houses built to minister to the wants of the French garrison, and a tropical array of palm trees of every size. There are delightful gardens, where pomegranates, bananas, bamboos, and many luxuriant (lowers abound. And the Arab villages of the oasis are as surprising by their architecture as by their hospitality. I traversed strange underground streets of exceeding darkness, flanked by boulders which might well puzzle an archaeologist. Some were well-formed capitals of columns, like those of the walls of El-Jem amphitheatre ; others were megalithons furnished with round holes, such as have been rashly identified with Baal worship in Tripoli. Nearly all were full of fossils. The streets were so low that I had to stoop frequently as I walked, but I was told that camels can and do pass through them. Most of the houses are built on two stories the lower a mere courtyard with cattle-sheds, the upper a rude terrace with adjoining hovels for the families. Where wood is necessary, planks of palm trees are generally used with reckless extravagance.

The Arabs of the interior do not veil or mew up their women, and I was allowed to enter freely into every house. I was made welcome with many polite speeches, and excited quite as much curiosity as I experienced. Two missionary ladies who accompanied the party aroused much astonishment by confessing they were unmarried, and surprise was expressed that I did not add them to my harem. I was much commiserated for the shortcomings of my Arabic, and told that any one who spoke no Arabic might as well be dumb. The women had tattoo marks on their chins in the shape of an imperial, a light tattoo mark on the tips of their noses, rows of little pigtailed matted over their foreheads, and every variety of amulet, from the ubiquitous " hand of Fatima " to rosaries of coloured glass and long leather cases containing spells against serpents. I was dismissed with many blessings and pats on the back, my hostess remarking that all strangers were good people, save only the Jews, who were all rascals.

Chapter VIII

TRADE AND AGRICULTURE

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Vulture - Princes - Bazaars - Industries - Saddlery - Sheshias – Dyeing - Tanners - Carpets - Perfumes - Arms - Potteries - Haifa grass - Trade with the interior - Rhadames - Rhat The Tuaregs - Agricultural Methods - Habbus - Wells - The Cactus - Vines - Olives - Fisheries - Sponges - Pulps.

Three kinds of sponges are found off Tunisia, varying in price from a shilling to a sovereign, and are taken in three different ways. The Arabs and Sicilians use a kind of trident at the end of a pole, sometimes as much as fifteen yards long. If there be the slightest ripple, it is impossible to see through the water. Until twenty years ago these fishermen secured the necessary calmness by pouring a few drops of oil on the surface of the water ; but this was an extravagant plan, and now they generally use a tin cylinder, some twelve by twenty-four inches, provided at the end with a piece of glass. By dipping this below the surface of the water, it is possible to see the bottom as clearly as if the surface were perfectly calm. Having made out where the best sponges are, a fisherman halts his boat and plunges his trident straight down, when a slight twist suffices to uproot and secure a sponge. The Greeks use a gangava, or drag, which is a kind of frame with a net in the middle. Three sides of it are of wood and the other is a strong iron bar. It is attached to a rope and dragged along the bottom of the sea by the motion of the boat, tearing up the sponges and collecting them in the net. As soon as it is full, the boat becomes difficult to propel, the net is brought up, and its contents, consisting of sponges, all manner of shells, and even large fish, are taken out and sorted before the drag is let down again. This is a very extravagant and destructive method of fishing, for it roots up a great many sponges which it does not collect. The Turkish Government has long forbidden it at Tripoli, but in Tunisian waters it is only restricted by a close season in March, April and May. The natives of Jerba and the Kerkenna islands prefer the more sporting method of diving. This only takes place at a depth of twelve or fifteen feet, and each diver is provided with a knife, to defend himself against sharks, and with a net at his waist to carry the sponges. 1000 natives, 700 Greeks and 800 Sicilians are engaged upon the sponge fisheries, and the Government takes care to collect a substantial revenue from their labours, over 4,000 a year being paid for the right to fish, besides a duty of nearly 2d. the lb. on every sponge exported.

Some 65,000 lbs. of pulps are sold every year at Sfax alone, and their collection forms an important industry all along the coast. They are taken by divers, or by spearing, or in

wickerwork traps. The pulp is an evil-looking and evil tasting mollusc, which is largely consumed in Greece, particularly during Lent. When it has been caught, a hard membrane is removed from its head, which is then beaten with several hundreds of blows, to complete the killing of the creature and render its flesh somewhat less like a brick-bat. Then any remains of sea-water are squeezed out and it is hung up to dry in the sun.