

# Seven Weeks in Tunisia and Algeria

with the itinerary and trip expenses.

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## Chapter II

From Tunis to the Djérid  
(pp.73-83)

Finally we arrive in Sfax: not a breakdown! The "*manitou*" of L\_\_\_\_\_ continues to protect us.

The next day it abandoned us; this last day of February was the most gloomy of the journey: a bleak sky, constant rain, cold winds. The Kairouanis could rejoice, the prayers of their Imams had persuaded Allah, it was raining.

So what shall I say of the city? Have you ever seen a lightly dressed Parisian woman surprised [74] by a summer storm? Her dress clings to her legs, her straw hat collapses, the flowers fade and the poor girl takes on the air of a soldier of the army at the salute.

And the eastern towns in the rain. Oh! these clouds, thick and low, are abnormal in the country of light! The rain from Holland has come to Sfax, it's against sense!

These blue and white houses running with water, these cloths that earlier simulated fringed draperies, now filthy rags miserable from the rain, these districts of bleeding beef, the sheep heads hanging on iron spikes from the stalls oozing red into the ditches, these men in white robes stained with mud who, wearing yellow *babouches*, wade through watered down garbage, how sad, how ugly!

Natives crowd under canopies, motionless, waiting for it to clear, the sunshine does not come, or, the burnous lifted, the pink stockings flecked with black spots descend the street with long strides amid debris carried by streams under the splattering from gutters that discharge water from the terraces. Donkeys make their way with heads lowered, dogs shelter at the corners of doors; only camels, in single file, swinging their long necks, advance unimpeded [75] to the fondouk where soggy manure exhales an indescribable odor.

How is it possible to be interested in a Mauresque door, an arch opening onto a street, an elegant *moucharabyeh*: it's raining!

Sfax is the only town which in 1881 presented our troops with serious resistance; Admiral Garnaut had to bombard it, they had to blow up the doors and fight in the streets; we lost about fifty men.

If Kairouan is one of the holiest cities of Islam, Sfax has the honor of having a large number of descendants of the Prophet.

Only there have we seen the green turban reserved for them. Is this origin truly authentic, I doubt it, and probably many wearers of green turbans would be embarrassed to give their genealogy.

However, it is not impossible, for if the two women of Muhammad bore him children, they gave him nine, of which eight were from Khadija alone

Anyway, the sons of the Prophet had no doubt reckoned on the protection of their ancestor to defend them against the Roumis; they missed this protection and it does not seem to accompany all the others, because we saw the green turban wrapped around the chest of a single porter, dressed in a modest *gadroun*. [76]

This is a sort of tunic with red wool cap, decorated with white trimmings, common among the people. It does not come below the knees. The brisk walk of the Sfaxiens contrasts sharply with solemn slowness of Kairouan.

It is an extraordinary thing, they seem to have something to do and they hurry through the streets almost as Europeans. They gesticulate, speak loud and fast; are these truly Arabs despite their green turbans?

As Kairouan, as Sousse, Sfax (I mean the native town) is surrounded by walls that form a rectangle of six hundred yards by four hundred. These crenellated walls, flanked by square towers, with alcoves, projections, are higher than fifteen feet and they explain the confidence the Sfaxiens had in their strength. They give the city an imposing appearance. As with other Tunisian cities Sfax contains lively souks and picturesque streets.

Most homes have several floors, and some, Mauresque doors with arches embellished with yellow and blue tiles.

Guided by the pharmacist that we met in the car, we walk the streets, we drink *kahoua*, we watch and stroll despite the rain. L. ..., [77] naturally, buying jewelry, we visit an Arab home, the Driba (the *Caid's* office), very pretty with its colonnades, its tiles and stucco arabesques, we skirt the low walls of the ancient mosque whose columns are disappearing under plaster and lime and we finally enter the Ouzara, the native court.

We are fortunate: the cause is amusing, and Z... brings us up to date. When a husband has divorced his wife and delivered before the *cadi* the honored formula: "I divorce you to the third degree, you are no more mine than a dead body or the flesh of swine," if later he regretted it, the Koran (Sura 11-230) states: "The husband may not retake his wife unless she has married another husband, and when he repudiates her in turn."

An annoying condition, they agree. So what does the husband do? He seeks a sympathetic friend who married his wife, respects her, divorces her the next day and the circle is complete. In the absence of a willing friend to fill that quite ridiculous role, he will find a *huila*, that is to say a man who, for money, will be a good husband "white", a chaste professional.

Bou-Krardi relied on a friend and the friend took his role seriously, very seriously: the friend denies it, but Bou-Krardi asserts. A brawl followed the explanation, and Bou-Krardi was beaten. [78] Here are the two men in court, both talking at once and the *chaouch* unable to calm them. Bou-Krardi, whose right eye is abominably "poached", makes great gestures and speaks loudly; the friend puts his hand on his heart and protests even higher. Here comes a witness: hardly had he started talking when the two opponents interrupt and show him their fists. Everyone laughed, the *cadi* himself. What did he say?

Mr. Z... unfortunately, did not hear. The *Cadi* finally rendering his sentence. Both pay the fine. The friend leaves, silent and stiff-Bou Krardi is angry, he mutters threats. Poor

Boo-Krardi! The fact is that the poor fellow had no chance, tonight he probably will get revenge on his wife.

Here is a recalcitrant debtor. Back home what delays to obtain justice! Months and sometimes years pass before the judges decide your dispute; it requires bailiffs, attorneys, lawyers, papers and records. Tell me about Arabic justice: "You owe me so much. - No. - Yes, come to court". And the Cadi decides immediately and the recalcitrant is taken to jail until he pays what he owes.

Is this justice is not equal to our own? Over a thousand years ago Caliph Omar set the rules in a famous letter and [79] the advice that he gives to judges: "Do not give in to movements of impatience and boredom, do not treat litigants with contempt" could be read with profit by many of our judges.

It is claimed that the Arab judge always makes the award on behalf of whoever has more "honor".

Our guide argues that this is a great exaggeration; he has seen many times poor people have reason against large bonnets, or, to be exact, large turbans.

There often is preferential treatment, that is indisputable. Are there not those in our country and would they not decide to adopt the ideal justice, that of Bridoye who described trials as throws of the dice?

I talked about prison for a debt denied; it must be even less for the penalty. Past midnight, every Arab found outside is locked up and if he is surprised at this ungodly hour leaving a cafe, he "cut" of his three months in prison; a drunken man will not get away with less than six months and one we have seen earlier escorted by the crowd is sure of his case.

He is fortunate if while waiting to appear before the cadi his parents are bringing him food through the bars of the jail, without which, though he should remain there for several days he would fast, unless his fellow prisoners [80] share with him what they receive.

The Beylical court feeds its condemned, but it does not deal with defendants. How many months in prison taste of D... for door knocker would he condemn a poor devil? The door knockers of Sfax, without being artistic, are original in their form of a horseshoe (the horseshoe brings good luck). D... wanted to bring one or two, and instructed the pharmacist to get him them, it would cost a few pennies.

Upon going to Sfax, we learned that the native Z...whom he had sent, had found it much easier to get them free, and had been seized when he removed them.

In a cafe we became acquainted with the *Bouka*, eau de vie fig with aniseed, a favorite liqueur of the Israelites.

We also tasted *lagmi* or palm wine. That's palm sap. It is collected by cutting the top of the tree. The beheading is sometimes fatal, but usually the tree recovers and after the operation there remains a bottleneck in the trunk where it occurred. Palms will tolerate this twice and even three times this cutting of the head.

A palm tree provides about nine liters per day and the *lagmi* harvest lasts two months and [81] a half, or about seven hundred liters, which cost an average of five cents a liter. The *lagmi* is drunk in three different conditions: soft, semi-sweet, and fermented. In the first two states it is an insipid and sugary drink; upon fermentation of the *lagmi* it could easily be confused with white wine and has for it the advantage of not being forbidden by the Koran.

Despite the weather, I maintained a good impression of Sfax. Yet the city is very poor in monuments. Can we give this name to a few mosques and insignificant minarets from height of which the muezzins yell their calls to Allah with the sounds of a raucous poorly lubricated gate hinge? But the walls give a strange feudal illusion.

From the Fondouk located at Bab-Dahraoui, this illusion is accentuated and I do not know why I say illusion because the reality is what we have before us. Nothing has changed here for a thousand years, not even man, and it is like this that Damascus, Jerusalem, Damietta endure the appearance of the crusades of Godfrey of Bouillon and Tancred.

I have spoken only of the indigenous Sfax, it would be unfair not to say a word about the new city which leans against the walls.

Three thousand Europeans live here, but its streets [82] traced between palm trees, its projected avenues, its future streets, indicated by markers, are those of a city of 30,000 inhabitants.

The founder "has seen large;" hospital, post offices, especially the theater, a pleasant free copy of the Mauresque style, are worthy of a great city and the streets of modern houses stretch between three and four upper floors.

Sfax appears to promise exceptional prosperity; the sale of oil supplied by countless olive trees (three million it is said) that line up in its suburbs, it adds the Gafsa phosphate transport and fishing for octopus and sponges on the shallow sea beds nearby. Sponge fishing occupies two thousand individuals, half of them Sicilian and Maltese, and causes the circulation of one million 500,000 francs on the market of Sfax; the octopus there annually brings 30,000 kg of dried squid, which are shipped mainly to Austria and Greece.

Also the port of Sfax is less deserted than that of Sousse. This port, dug in 1897, was indispensable; previously the most humble boats could not approach the city, as the beach of sand has so slight an incline.

The tide, something strange in the Mediterranean, operates here in a perceptible way, and the two meters between ebb and flow cover and uncover [83] large expanses that are used for fixed wattle fish traps; there are about twelve hundred of them including those of Kerkennah, sandy islands located about twenty kilometers away.

From Tunis we have always, in making our way south, traveled parallel to the sea we will now push inland to the West.

Thirty years ago, crossing the 205 miles which separate Sfax from Gafsa was a "difficult and dangerous" expedition; I use the expressions of the doctors Tirant and Rebatel who did it in 1874, and which, they say, was only able to succeed because they were accompanied by a M. Mattei, known and respected in the country.

When they returned to Sfax, they were "waited on and complimented by the entire French colony." The country was then constantly traversed by marauding tribes and raids were incessant.

Everything has changed ...