

## On the Fringe of a War . Nights of Suspense at the Door of Tripoli.

(p.4)

"Express" Special Correspondent.  
SFAX, NOV. 12.

Two elderly Orientals—one a Turk, in frock-coat and tarbush, the other an Arab, robed and hooded in the graceful draperies of the East—sat at a marble-topped table in the principal open-air cafe here and strove to impress me with their poverty.

We had agreed, since the Tripolitan frontier is our common object, to travel together, and the question under discussion was, "Who shall bear the greatest burden of the expense?" The Arab, well known for a wealthy olive merchant of Ben Ghardan, was reciting the praises of a magnificent stallion which, would I but pay his fare to the frontier, he would "make over to me as a gift."

Suddenly there came the clatter of horses' feet upon the road, and the olive merchant's golden promises were broken off. Five men, in blood-red cloaks, swung round the corner, riding upon white stallions and bearing swords and carbines. They trotted briskly between the avenue of palms, and disappeared in the direction of the Arab quarter.

Presently they were followed by a larger company of riders. Another troop, still wearing the flaunting cloak of the Spahis, debouched from a cross-street: The night was

filled with the ring of iron-shod hoofs and the flutter of scarlet draperies. There was something reminiscent of the Apocrypha in the pale gleam of the white horses against the feathery palms.

Yet these men ("El Askar," my Arab vis-a-vis called them) were guardians, not disturbers of the peace. For, though there is little likelihood of an "emente" at Sfax, such as made such havoc the other day in Tunis, we are too near the seat of the war to be free of apprehension; and hence armed riders guard us in our sleep, and see to it that the Arab quarter is abed and locked in by ten o'clock at night. A specially strong body mounts guard over the Italian Consulate. And the gates of Sfax are locked at night for the first time since 1881.

### **Outnumbered By Natives.**

Undoubtedly the alleged Italian outrages in Tripoli have shaken the security of Christian life in Northern Africa; but, as I say, here there is no very great danger, because the Arabs are concerned in garnering an unusually rich olive crop, and have no wish to pay the price of misbehaviour. Yet, on the eighth of this month, when riot broke loose in Tunis, there were ugly mutterings in Sfax as well, and the European community, then guarded by fewer than 150 soldiers, were mightily disturbed.

They are a timid population, mostly Italians and Maltese Jews, and they are vastly outnumbered by the natives. Sfax has in all perhaps seventy thousand inhabitants, and of these not seven thousand claim European nationality.

The French Consul acted promptly—even brusquely. He impounded Si Mohamed Masoudi, kept him as a hostage at the French Consulate, and roundly told him that he would be held responsible for any disturbance among the Arabs.

Masoudi said, "If you think I am not strong enough to keep order, find some one else. I will resign."

But the French Consul refused to hear of this. He said that, if the Khalifa chose, the Khalifa could keep order; that if he did not choose, he should be the first to suffer; but that, if he kept his countrymen in check, he should be proportionately rewarded.

This my prospective fellow-travellers retailed to me as the latest gossip of Sfax.

And their prophecy that would assuredly be no trouble here is probably reliable.

ALAN OSTLER.

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