

A MOTOR FLIGHT THROUGH ALGERIA AND TUNISIA

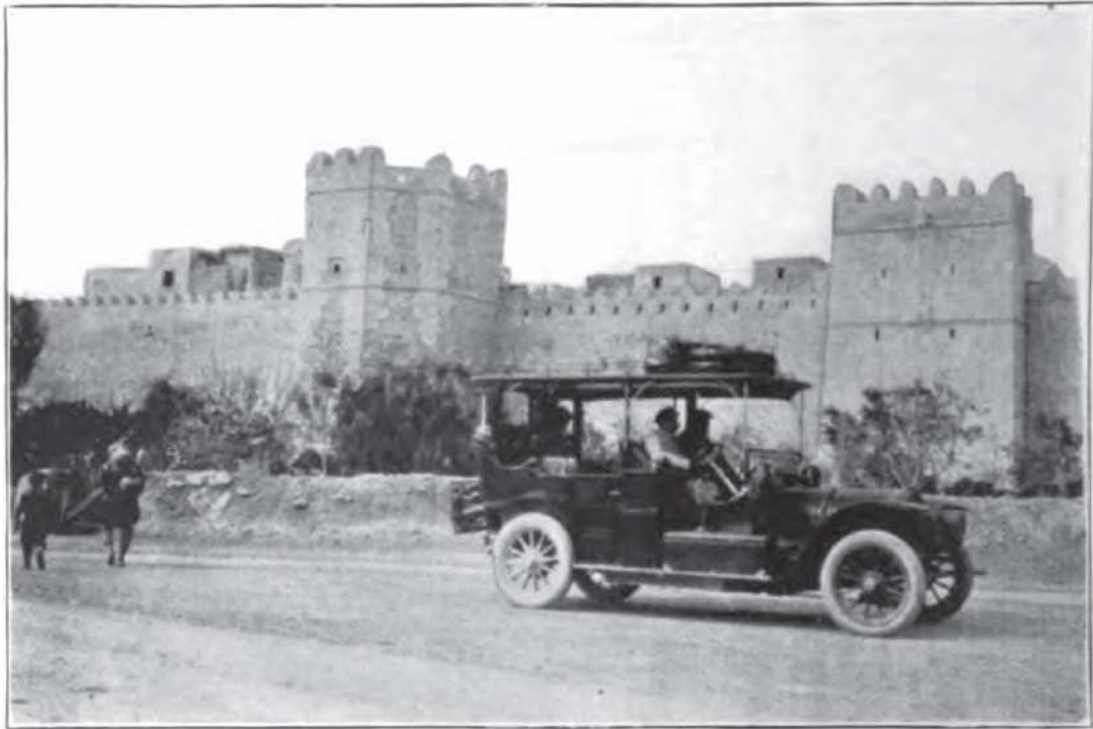
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After the clamors of the small girl with the derbouka had been satisfied, the Two went out to the car, followed by a group of curious natives. Near the car stood a number of large camels, unusually peaceful in appearance, their humps and most of their backs covered with a great basket-like mat of dried grass,— the first evidence of any care for these wretched animals which the travellers had seen in this country. Across the plain again, and through more acres of olive-trees, the car drew near Sfax, the scent of its gardens filling the now almost quiet air. The road ran by many of these gardens, their fruit trees visible through openings in the high banks or mud walls which were crowned with the prickly pear which makes an impenetrable fence. These gardens of Sfax yield many roses and other flowers cultivated for the essence which is distilled for perfume. In places near the town, the Commander observed many large, oblong, high, white platforms, plastered over, with a depression in the centre, where there was a large opening. They were Arab cisterns for rain water.

The road now became more animated, with laden donkeys, a camel or two and many natives trudging along in the dust which was rising in clouds from flocks of sheep and goats. Soon the walls and towers of Sfax, one hundred and twenty-nine kilometres from

Sousse, became visible. The car ran near the blue sea; the harbor was full of shipping and fishingboats drawn up beside the long stone quay. The European quarter lies outside the mediaeval-looking walls which enclose the old Arab city. The car drew up before a rather pretentious hotel, the landlady of which, reinforced by a waiter or two, greeted the travellers in a most ladylike and amiable manner. The accommodations she offered them, however, were not of the same engaging quality, and they hastened to leave the little, dark, dirty rooms assigned them as soon as they had shaken the sand from their clothes. They went for a walk down by the picturesque shipping at the quays which the Commander wished to see, leaving the old town to be visited in the morning.

"The little I have learned about this town," said the Other-one, as they walked down the street to the harbor, "is this:— Sfax is the ancient Taparura, a city of Phoenician origin. Until the eighth century, Arab historians say, it was a flourishing and important city with monumental buildings, manufactories, rich people, beautiful gardens, and productive fisheries. In recent times it was the only place on the coast which offered any resistance to French occupation. A French squadron of nine ironclads and four gunboats soon silenced the guns of the kasba, and then the town submitted. Since then (1881), trade and commerce have made rapid advancement in Sfax. The modern name comes from the Arabic word which means *cucumber* — *fakous*,— on account of the quantities of this vegetable which grow in this neighborhood."

As they came down to the quay, which was swarming with a picturesque population, they stopped to look at the boats, when a man standing near addressed them in their own tongue, expressing himself well, but with a slight accent.

"You are strangers here? You find this an interesting harbor? I may be able to tell you something about the fisheries here which you may like to know. Here you see fishing and sponge boats of all sorts and this town is certainly an important place for the industry. The configuration of the coast is very flat. The tide covers and uncovers widely for over two kilometres, and this is favorable for the establishment of fisheries fixed by wicker fencing. Besides these, there are certain special fisheries in the region — that of polyps, for instance—which are mostly exported to Greece; and that of sponges, which bring here many Greek and Italian fishermen. The fishing for sponges occupies here alone six hundred Sicilian vessels, fifty Greek boats, and six hundred and fifty native boats, in the season from January first to the first of October. They collect the sponges with the trident, or with a dragging net and by divers.

"Besides the fisheries, there is the great olive industry. In ancient times the olive-tree made the riches of the country, and it has taken on much development in the last century. The native population here has proved to have exceptional qualities. P. Bourde says: 'It seems as if the spirit of the antique planters had been perpetuated in this most intelligent

and industrious people. Without any teaching from outside, with only their own observations, they have arrived at such a degree of perfection in the olive culture that European agricultural science has nothing to add to their methods.'

"You will find the old city very interesting. Get a young native who speaks French to show you about, which he will do for a very small fee. He is better than the self-important guides from the hotels. There is a fine mosque with a high minaret, but you can't go into it. The streets are narrow and very dirty but you will find them very picturesque, though noisy, and the *souks* are very animated.

"The long brown coat the natives wear mostly, with the heavy, cream-colored embroidery, is called the *gandoura*. The green turbans are worn by descendants of the Prophet, or by those who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca. You will see the native dandies in picturesque clothes, the *gandoura* of pale greens, blues, or dull reds, with beautiful embroidery on them, in contrasting colors."

Thanking this most communicative and agreeable man, the Two walked on down the long quay. The sky was now of a pomegranate color and the slender masts of the fishing-boats were etched against it. Some boats with yellow-brown lateen sails set, were dropping out of the harbor. Late as it was, many fishermen were cleaning their boats or getting their nets in order for the morrow — old, bronzed Sicilians with gold hoops in their ears, swarthy Greeks, and natives in ragged, rough *gandouras*, all jabbering so that the tower of Babel would not have been a circumstance to it. Farther up the quay, a freight boat was unloading some queer-looking, huge bundles and packages. The Two wandered on until the color faded out of the sky and the old sailors ceased from their labors. Then they left the fascinating place to seek their uninteresting room at the pretentious hotel.

In the morning the sun was shining down with great brilliance and heat, and the sky was a vivid blue. The white houses of the town were dazzling under it. The one-eyed guide at the hotel was so insistent that the travellers could do no more than take him, and he turned out less obnoxious and more intelligent than they had expected.

They went up through the gate of the Diwan in the great crenellated walls, and entered into another life as distinct from the European as can well be imagined — streets filled with a population most picturesque and an animation as vivid as any the travellers had yet seen. There was much frying and cooking going on at that early hour — enough, it seemed to the Other-one, for the provision of the entire city of Sfax. In little dens, fat and pasty-looking natives skilfully manipulated great pans of boiling oil, and dropped therein various tidbits which sizzled and smelled rather good, though mysterious and uninviting as to appearance. The Other-one was minded to try a certain sort of pancake which certainly looked rather appetizing. A skinny boy with a red skull-cap and a dirty

white *gandoura*, at an order from the guide took some thin dough out of a great jar and beat it, with an egg, in a small cup until it was light and foamy; then he handed it to the fat cook presiding there, who dropped it into a large pan of boiling oil over a charcoal fire. The dough bubbled and sputtered and then rose to a light and brown puffy pancake, which the cook ladled out onto a dirty plate, and which, after all, the Other-one decided she did not want—to the surprise and pleasure of the guide, who, having handed over the sou for it, could not let it be lost and burned his mouth with it in a hasty attempt to swallow it without being seen.

Then he hurried the two up the narrow street by the Great Mosque, its facade ornamented with a series of small arches. Here are the souks under long covered galleries, with the little dens in which are exposed all the varied articles that go to make up the Eastern bazaar, each trade by itself. Some booths were gay with high-backed, embroidered saddles and other leather articles red, blue, and yellow; and here, in one or two booths, hung those enormous hats of straw, some nearly three feet across, decorated with leather cut in various designs, and great bunches of tassels around the brim. Down on the Desert the travellers had seen one or two of these. There was an animated crowd surging through these *souks* and the dandies in their *gandouras* of delicate colors embroidered in contrasting tones, with a rose or a carnation stuck behind the ear, walked, or rather, lounged indolently along. The Other-one thought these flowers a luxury of the well-to-do until she noticed that even the dirty black Soudanese in their ragged *gandouras*, and the gamins, too, nearly all, wore the flower behind the ear; and generally it was the carnation. It was certainly most agreeable to come in out of the hot sun under the cool shade of these covered souks, but when the guide saw that his patrons did not care for purchasing, he hurried them away and through a gate which, he said, was the Bab Djebli. They came out upon the market-place outside the wall. Just under the agreeable shade of these high walls was a motley assemblage of dealers and workers in metal, blacksmiths, dyers, and others, with all the implements of their labor or calling spread out before them. Here the vender of palm wine — a sweet, rather sickly drink made from the palm sap — drove a thriving trade. Here was the greatest animation. Some natives were gathering together some sheep and goats, evidently for a sale, and there was much guttural gabbling and violent gesture. Beyond another gate was a *fondouk* for camels and two or three of the unwieldy creatures were coming out of the great open entrance. Beyond this one could see the green of many gardens, with white villas showing through the trees.

The guide proposed, with much eagerness, that they should visit a beautiful garden owned by a very rich man — a friend of his, he said, where they would be welcomed with pleasure and where essences from many flowers were distilled.

"No!" said the Commander, "we must go, but if you want the perfume of these flowers, there it is." They were passing a little den which had on its shelves an array of those fascinating little gilt bottles of the Orient and just then an old Arab was handing to the grave, turbaned, presiding genius there, a great basket of rose petals.

"Here, certainly, one can get the real attar of rose," said the Other-one, and she asked the guide to buy her a small bottle of it. Certainly it was much cheaper than in the souk of the perfumer at Tunis. But the Commander fretted with impatience at the slow movements of the grave Oriental as he dropped the precious essence in one of the tiny gilt bottles in a most provokingly slow way from a thick glass dropper.

Soon the crenellated walls of Sfax were left far behind, and the car was rolling down on the veritable Desert, where there were many camels to be seen — great creatures feeding, for a wonder, at their ease. There were caravans on the road, and the car brought fear to moving nomad families. There were many wayside wells where picturesque groups were reposing, or drawing water by means of a scraggy donkey or mule hitched to a long rope going over a high framework of wood; at the other end of the rope was a great bag of cowskin which dropped far below with a splash, as the donkey or mule approached the well, and came up brimming with water as he walked away. At one place was a woman tugging at the rope with her blue draperies flying, while two or three men lounged near. Once or twice the Commander stopped the car and leaped quickly out, as he caught the gleam of a necklace or a bracelet of unusual pattern. Then ensued that method of bargaining in which he was an adept, and as usual, too, it was the man who took the silver pieces the Commander handed out.

Now, afar, the travellers saw the line of the great *chotts* or salt lakes, of which they had previously caught a glimpse on the road to Touggourt. They are below the level of the sea, and extend nearly four hundred kilometres. Once or twice the Motorists really saw a mirage. In the distance across the shimmering heat of the sand, a long line of glistening water appeared, and groves of palms giving promise of delightful shade; then they faded away as the car moved on.