

Two Years Under the Crescent

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SHEIK MAHOMET LABRAM
From Mairata's letter, "Scout of the Sabre"

CHAPTER II

TO TRIPOLI, THE UNKNOWN

My journey from London to Tunis in September, 1911, was uneventful enough—its continuation from there to Sfax equally so. Sfax seems to be the end of all things to the traveller sensible at all to comfort, as the railway terminates there. Ahead of me was the seductive illusion of green fields and olive groves, which I knew only too soon gave way to the wastes of the desert; to my left the blue waters of the Mediterranean. My destination of course was Tripoli, or as near to it as any means of conveyance would carry me. I had Zwarra in my mind as a desirable spot, but it was some 250 miles by water, and at least another hundred or so by land. Their respective disadvantages were put before me by those whom I took into my confidence in no particularly encouraging manner.

By the land route the likely danger to be encountered was one or another of the prowling bands of Arab brigands, naturally restless and disturbed by conditions of war, and more likely than usual to act upon the offensive, unless the escort were adequate for defence. At sea there were at least seventy Italian boats—battleships, cruisers, torpedo boats, [6] and others—keeping a ceaseless vigil for any contraband of war, and as my credentials consisted entirely of a letter of introduction from the Turkish Embassy in London to the Commander-in-Chief of the Turkish forces outside Tripoli, it did not seem likely that any one of them who might happen to waylay me would consider me to be in every respect the most desirable person to be allowed to proceed.

Sfax is an ancient walled seaport, earlier associated with piracy, but as its more modern attractions include a fairly good hotel, I made my way there to consider my future movements over the present material considerations of a good meal. It was the last of its kind for many a day. Circumstances seemed rather to suggest the sea route as being the one easier to arrange for, and as this coincided more with my inclinations I was not loath to encourage them. A servant at the hotel told me of a friend of his, to whom I was subsequently introduced, who, with his brother and two sons, ran a small six-ton boat which happened to be at that moment in the harbour. Their interests were fishing and the collection of a grass called halfa, from which is made ropes and matting. For both of these industries they had local rights, so that they were fairly well known, a circumstance not altogether in favour of my project, which indeed for the moment I was not anxious to confide to them.

Mohammed, the captain, was a thick-set, pleasantlooking Arab of about sixty years of age. I [7] commented upon his genial and rotund appearance, and he assured me that he had little else to do than to get fat. He had a house and gardens in Sfax, and three wives to look after them, with plenty of time to eat sweetmeats and enjoy themselves. In spite of all this affluence the bait of a sovereign tempted him to

consent to take me with his crew for a night's fishing to the two Kergulan Islands, the banks of which were included in his fishing rights, and which lay some thirty miles off the coast.

We started about ten o'clock, a beautiful starlight night, with unfortunately little wind. We were not allowed to drift out of the harbour without observation, for we were immediately followed by the Customs steam launch, which hailed us and asked our business.

I told them that we were going to get the nets off the islands, and they appeared to be satisfied.

Once out at sea I felt that my journey had started in real earnest, and wrapping myself around with my overcoat as best I could, I settled myself down to a somewhat restless night in the open boat. It was not particularly cold, but I was glad enough to feel the warmth of the rising sun, and sorry enough to find that, although we had a good supply of food on board, we had forgotten to bring any coffee.

Mohammed endeavoured to console me with the assurance that there would be plenty of coffee, plenty of everything, upon the islands ; in fact from his description I imagined that we were going to be refreshed at some place like a Tunisian open-air café.

[8] We arrived at the smaller of the two islands about noon, and anchored a little way off the shore. Our boat only drew a few feet of water, so that one of the crew very quickly waded ashore and secured a small boat that was lying there. The landing-stage was most primitive, consisting of large tied-up bundles of grass, which gave a very insecure footing. Once landed we started off to find the village, which, the captain assured me, was about two miles inland.

It was tiring walking—a cloudless sky, burning sun, and hot sand into which the feet sunk and held.

Of herbage there was very little, a blade of grass to every square yard or so. There were a few sheep about, but what they feed on I cannot think. If they rely upon the grass I imagine that they would have to perambulate an area of about thirty miles to collect enough for one meal. There were clusters of date palms, but the fruit was only half ripe — nice to look at, but horrible to taste. The palms grow from six or ten feet to fifty feet high, so that the fruit from some of the smaller trees was easily accessible. To the many people to whom this delightful fruit is only known as it is sold in this country, it would come as a surprise to know how it is constantly consumed where it is grown, before it is fit to eat. I picked some here ; it was then late in September. They broke off quite short, and in taste were acrid in the extreme. I wanted refreshment badly, but not of that order.

We soon came in sight of the village, a typical Arab collection of one-storied, flat-roofed houses, built of sun-dried mud bricks and rough stones. A motley collection of human beings came out to meet us. It scarcely seemed possible, but very few of them had ever seen a white man before, as it appears that the islands have not the best of reputations, and indeed there is little reason for anyone but a native to call there. Followed by a procession of loafers, Mohammed escorted me to his boasted cafe, which was

closed in consequence of its owner's indulgence in his midday siesta. I was glad enough to sit down outside and rest under its shady wall within a crowded semicircle of admirers, whilst the boys were sent off to hunt for its proprietor. He was soon discovered, and came hurrying along, full of apologies, with the key of the broken-down shanty in his hand. The main room was furnished with rough high benches around the walls for those who elected to avail themselves of their use, and matting upon the floors for those who preferred to recline. We selected the latter, and whilst we had our coffee the Sheik, or head man of the village, was sent for, that he might be intimated of the arrival of an unexpected visitor.

He had probably heard of it, for he appeared almost immediately, dressed in the picturesque combined garment of head-gear and cloak, called a hram, invariably worn by the Arab, varying little excepting in size and quality.

He received us with an enthusiastic welcome, a welcome that instinctively put me upon my guard, [10] fortunately for myself, as I will relate. His hospitality was profuse, considering the limitations of the bill of fare. He was determined that we should eat together before we parted, and as I was exceedingly hungry I was not reluctant to avail myself of the suggestion, and I was not particularly critical of the dish. It consisted of a concoction of mullet prepared in a stew-pan, seasoned with a great deal of pepper. We boasted no cutlery, so that on the principle that fingers were made before forks, we proceeded to use them to the best possible advantage ; and I may add that, under the circumstances, we succeeded very well indeed. The conversation was interesting, but necessarily somewhat limited, as my contribution to it was in French, and that not of the best, to one of the boys who conveyed it, more or less literally, to my host in Arabic.

As the afternoon wore on, and it was near sunset, I became anxious to resume my journey ; indeed I might say start it, as this visit to the island was more or less in the way of a subterfuge. Directly I gave expression to the desire my host insisted upon sending for donkeys, and as I had no wish for a repetition of the sandy walk, I thought it an excellent suggestion.

I sauntered around this quaint village whilst the animals were being found, and was interested in the discovery of a building in the course of erection, particularly as the large stones necessary for the purpose were being carried from some distance by [11] three or four women. Upon inquiry I learned that this was the extended residence of a somewhat wealthy merchant who had gone away to purchase a new wife, and that this extension of the building was for her accommodation. As the masons themselves appeared to be somewhat lethargic in their movements I had the curiosity to inquire as to their rate of pay, and was told that they had none at all, but simply worked for their food in return for their services. This circumstance appeared to me to excuse somewhat their lack of enthusiasm. After about an hour the animals arrived, wonderfully like circus donkeys, with saddles like small tables such as one has been accustomed to see performers jump upon through rings of tissue paper. But it was a great deal better

squatting upon even such a saddle as this than tramping through the sand, so that I promptly mounted one of them.

When we arrived at the coast, as it was getting dusk, our small party was augmented by a most undesirable individual, a sinister-looking person with a cast in his eye, who appeared to be on quite familiar terms with my host. The meeting was obviously by arrangement, but there seemed to be no excuse for failing to return courtesies extended, so I invited them on board to have whatever meal we could prepare at the moment. It was not at all bad either, a dish known to the Arabs as *cous cous*. It is a mixture of semolina flavoured with saffron, and anything edible is introduced without further qualification. Fish, [12] fowl, vegetable, and ground, corn with oil, salt, and pepper for seasoning. All this is served up in one common earthenware bowl, and I should imagine it to be one of the most primitive dishes that has ever survived ancient culinary methods.

After the meal I gave my guests cigarettes and coffee, and I later wished that I had limited the liquid refreshment to that harmless and invigorating beverage. But in an evil moment I remembered that I had a supply of spirits in my baggage, and foolishly I produced a bottle of whisky and a bottle of rum. The whisky could not have been better, but the rum was indifferent, and it had a most undesirably enlivening effect upon my friends. The conversation may have been hampered by the unsatisfactory manner in which it had to be conducted, but it suffered from no lack of interest. At every fresh libation the Arabs became more and more excited, and when I saw the boy looking worried and confused, and when he failed to translate to me the voluble remarks which were being made, I began to become very curious as to their import. I leaned back and smoked my cigarette in silence for some little time, but when I found that the storm of words was rather rising than subsiding, without any comment I corked the bottles and locked them away in my bag. This action was not appreciated, and the sinister-looking scoundrel looked fiercer and more sinister-looking than ever. The Sheik looked a bit [13] dangerous too, so that with the idea of bringing matters to a crisis, and in the most casual manner that I could assume, I brought my revolver unobtrusively from my back pocket and proceeded to make a careful examination of it. It had the desired effect, for both the Arabs immediately sprang to their feet, the villainous-looking person making one jump from his seat in the boat right into the sea and waded quickly ashore, whilst the Sheik with small ceremony of leave-taking followed him in the boat. We were only a hundred feet or so from the shore, and when they had landed they began, with many gesticulations, shouting to Mohammed. I did not like it, and insisted upon knowing something of what they had said, and also insisted that we should lift the anchor and get off at once. Mohammed was so reticent as to the nature of the conversation, and his account of it so obviously untruthful, that I tackled the boy, and it was not until violent threats had been added to the demands that I induced him to say anything. He then told me that the Arabs had suggested that I was a wealthy Englishman travelling for pleasure, and that I probably had plenty of gold in my

possession, which indeed I had. They wanted at once to overpower me and cut my throat, but apparently the sight of the revolver frightened them. They evidently thought either that I understood something of what they had said, or that I guessed their purpose. I [14] further elicited the information that when they had called out from the shore they had told Mohammed that on no account must he leave the coast, as in the morning they would return armed, and with further assistance to accomplish their purpose. I turned to Mohammed and told him without much flattery what I thought of him, and what I would do to him unless he set sail immediately. He protested that he feared this Sheik, and the consequences of disobeying him, as he was a powerful and influential man.

I gave him clearly to understand that I had more interest in my own future movements than concern as to the possible consequences to him, and that unless he lifted the anchor and set sail at once I should most certainly shoot him. I emphasized the argument by again fondling my revolver, and it apparently persuaded him, for in a very short time we were sailing quietly away from the island in a pleasant breeze. It was a fine night, and I felt disinclined for sleep. My confidence in Mohammed was not very secure either, and I was anxious to lose no more time before explaining to him what I wanted, and persuading him to give me his assistance.

He listened with gesticulations of dissent as he gradually realised what I required. It was impossible, he said ; the chance of being detained by the Italians was practically a certainty, and the journey was too long and too dangerous. But I used all the persuasive [15] appeals that I could invent, and I backed them up with an offer of another five sovereigns, which I produced and jingled, to the one which I had already promised, and eventually to my delight Mohammed reluctantly consented to chance it.

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