



Old Junk

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One day we found Sfax. I went ashore at Sfax, interested in a name quite new to me. The guide-book did not even mention it; perhaps it was not worth while; no ruins, mummies, trains or hotels there, of course. Maybe it was only the name of a man, or a grass, or a sort of phosphate. Sfax! Well, anyhow, I had long wished for Africa, anywhere in Africa, and here I was, not eager to get home again, but not disinclined. What I had seen of it so far was a rather too frequented highway opposite the coast of Europe—a complementary establishment. Progress had macadamised it. Commerce and its wars had graded and uniformed and drilled its life. Its silent people marched in ranks, as it were, along mapped roads foredoomed, and its mills went round. Its life was expressed for export. It was on the way to Manchester and success. Of all the infernal uses to which a country can be put there is none like development. Let every good savage make incantation against it, or, if to some extent he has been developed, cross himself against the fructification of the evil. As for us whites, we are eternally damned, for we cannot escape the consequences of our past cleverness. The Devil has us on a complexity of strings, and some day will pull the whole lot tight. But Sfax! Had I escaped? Was there a chance?

I found a city wall, a huge battlement, ancient and weathered, like an unscalable cliff, and going through its gate was entering the shadows of a cave. Out of the glare of the sun I went into the gloom of deep, narrow, and mysterious passages. The sun was only on the parapets and casements, which leaned towards each other confidentially, and left only a ragged line of light above. These alley-ways were crowded with camels, asses, and strange men. An understanding and sneering camel in a narrow passage will force you to take what chance there is of escape in desecrating a mosque, while Moslems watch you as the only Christian there, or of going under its slobbering mouth and splay feet. It does not care which.

It was market-day in Sfax. There were little piles of vivid fruit beside white walls where a broad ray of sunlight found them. There were silversmiths at work, tent-makers, and the makers of camel harness. The tanners had laid skins for us to walk over. There were exotic smells. I went exploring the crooked turnings with an indifference which was studied. I was getting an interesting time, but was distinctly conscious of eyes, a ceaseless stream of eyes that floated by, watchful though making no sign. Several times I found myself jostled with some roughness. It occurred to me that I had heard on the ship that Sfax was the only town which had offered resistance to the French; its men have a fine reputation throughout Tunisia, which they do something now and then to maintain, in consequence. They certainly appeared a sturdy and virile lot. They were

not listless, like the Arabs of Algeria, who have nothing to show for themselves but the haughty and aloof bearing of the proud but beaten.

Having discovered that the enemy was vulnerable though strong, the men of Sfax go through the day now with the directed activity of those who once had got the worst of it, but have a hope of doing better next time. They gave me a lively and adventurous scene. They moved with silent and stealthy quickness. Their eyes glanced sideways from under their cowls. Their hands were hidden under their jibbahs. A few of them stared with the hate of the bereft. It is not possible to face everybody in a press which moves in all directions, and I was the only European who was there.

Passing a mosque, where I noticed the Moslems had attempted, but had not completed, the obliteration of some representations of birds,--so the mosque was once, evidently, a place where other gods had been worshipped,--I hesitated, wishing to look closer into this curiosity, but recollected myself, and was passing on. An Arab in the turban of one who had been to Mecca was squatting cross-legged on the old marble pavement outside the mosque, and I just took in that he was a fine venerable fellow with an important beard, with a look of wisdom and experience in his steady glance from under the strong arches of his eyebrows that made me wish I knew Arabic, and could squat beside him, and gossip of the wide world. As I turned he said quietly, "Good day!"

Now I thought perhaps I was bewitched, but turned and looked at him. "How are you?" he asked. At that moment, when his eyes looking upward had a smile of understanding mischief, and in such an alien city as Sfax, I was prepared to declare there is but one God, and Mahomet is His prophet. For that sort of thing comes easy to me; and would have been quite true, as far as it went. Then I went back to him, and fearing that after all I might be addressing but the parrot which had already exhausted its vocabulary, I tried it on him: "Shall I take my boots off here, father, or may I sit down with you?"

"Sit down," he said.

He was a man of medicine. He sold there prophylactics against small-pox, adultery, blindness, the evil eye, sterility, or any other trouble which you thought threatened you. If a man feared for the faithfulness of his spouse, it seems Father the Hadj could secure it with a charm, and so allow him to spend the night elsewhere in perfect enjoyment and content. That is what the quiet old cynic told me, and invited me to inspect his display of amulets and fetishes, coloured glass tablets with Arabic inscriptions, and a deal of stuff which looked unreasonable to me, articles the holy man either could not or would not resolve into sense.

His English, which he had learned as a shipping agent for the pilgrim traffic, soon reached its narrow limits, to my sorrow. When it left common objects and we wished to compare our world (for there is no doubt he was an experienced and understanding elder who knew to within a little what he might expect of his God and of his fellows), we were left smiling at each other, and had to guess the rest. Yet at least the bazaar could witness this good Moslem of age and admitted wisdom sitting opposite a dubious Christian in a companionable manner; and there was that testimony to my advantage. They even watched him draw his finger across his throat in serious and energetic pantomime, and saw me nod in grave appreciation, when he was trying to make me understand what was his sympathy for the Christian conquerors of Sfax.

I went outside the landward gate of the city, and looked out over the level of brilliant sand which stretched out from there to Lake Tchad. What a voyage! What a lure! Perhaps there is no more perilous journey on earth than that, and if a traveller would vanish into the past, into such Oriental countries as the voyagers of Hakluyt saw with wonder, then to leave Sfax, and go across country to the Niger, would equal what once came of fooling with the arcana of the Djinn. Though, after all, one would like to emerge again, to tell the tale to the children; and the whole dubiety of it is in that last difficulty. It is almost certain the magic would be too powerful.

About the bright yellow sea of the desert which came up to the high cliffs of the town, the squatting camels made dark hummocks. Strings of donkeys converged on the city gate bearing water-pots and baskets of charcoal. Sometimes a line of camels swayed outwards through the crowd, disappeared among the shrines, going south. Watching such a caravan go was the same as watching a ship leave port.

By the wayside was a huckster. He banged a tomtom till he had gathered a crowd from the loose concourse of men who had come long journeys with esparto grass, or gums and ostrich plumes, and much else from the secret region inland. He was selling cotton shirts, and was an entertaining villain. By the corners of his mouth his humour was leery. He did not laugh, but his grimaces were funny. The variegated crowd and that huckster was too enticing, and forgetting I had not seen one of my own kind since leaving the ship, and that my face among those black and brown masks was as loud as the tomtom, I mingled my outrageous tourist tweeds with the graceful folds of the robes. The huckster kept glancing at me, and from grave sidelong glances that crowd of men went to the extraordinary length of grim smiles. Suddenly I recognised the trick of that Arab cheapjack. It may be seen at work in Crisp St. Poplar, when a curious and innocent Chinaman joins the group about the fluent quack.

As soon as dignity permitted I passed on, and my dignity did not keep me waiting for any length of time.

Uncertain, and not a little nervous, I wandered among some plantations of olives and false peppers, where the domes of the tombs floated like white bubbles on the foliage. Here an Arab beckoned to me, and told me he had been watching me for some time--for he was an English medical missionary in disguise--and warned me that these gardens and shrines were quite the wrong place to wander in alone. It appears that only a few days since the flame of insurrection flashed down the bazaar, licked up a few French soldiers who happened to be there, and had almost got a hold before the garrison appeared and doused it. He took me to his house, with its windows heavily barred, for there his predecessor had been murdered. (If this could happen at the starting-place for Lake Tchad, then let the idea go.)

From the flat roof of the doctor's house I smelt the dung of ages, fought with legions of flies, and looked down on a large quadrangle of hay and stable muck, where camels had carefully folded themselves on the ground, and chewed reflectively, their eyes half closed; and large drowsy asses mechanically fanned their ears at the loathly swarms. The missionary surmised that the caravanserai below was the perfect reflection of one we had heard more about, which once was at Bethlehem. The square was enclosed with flat-roofed stables, and it being a busy time they were all occupied. The first one, immediately below us, was filled with a family of Kabyles, which consisted chiefly of a magnificent virago of a wife, tattooed, with a fine gold ring in her nostrils, who seemed to have a trying life with her mild and contemplative old husband. She had more children than one could count without giving the matter that close attention which might be misinterpreted. She cradled them in the manger every night. Loud as her voice was, though, I could almost hear the old man smile as he walked away from her. They had two contemptuous camels who never lifted an eyelid when she raised her voice to them, but chewed calmly on, with faces turned impassively towards the New Jerusalem of camels, where viragoes are not; and several resigned asses who appeared to have handed their souls back to their Maker, because souls are but extra trammels in this place of sorrow.

Next door to them was a regular tenant who bred goats, and fed them out of British biscuit-tins. Beyond them the stable was occupied by a party of swarthy ruffians who had arrived with a cargo of esparto grass. In the far corner, a family, crowded out, had been living for weeks under a structure of horrible rags. Smoke, issuing from a dozen seams, gave their home the look of a smouldering haycock.