

VANISHED CITIES OF NORTHERN AFRICA

By

MRS. STEUART ERSKINE

With 8 colour and 32 black-and-white illustrations by

MAJOR BENTON FLETCHER

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CHAPTER XIV

SFAX AND THE LESSER SYRTIS

WHY is it that some places take one's fancy so much more than others ? The natural advantages of a place, the surroundings, the buildings, may be no more beautiful or remarkable than those of many others, but there is a mysterious something that attracts, which is rather difficult to define.

Sfax has a special attraction for me. It is a strange place, picturesque and rather homely in character, inhabited by people who are curious and very friendly. In spite of the grim, battlemented walls that surround the Arab Medina, there is something free and lively about it, a breath of the sea that blows health-giving air into the crowded streets. The peculiar character of the town, the fascination of its busy, crowded streets, made me forget all about the vanished city of Taparura, which it has replaced. Bother the past ! For the moment, the present is much more entertaining.

Truth to tell, very little is known of the past history of Sfax, other than we have found in so many records of vanished cities in all this region. Phoenicia, Rome, warring tribes of Arabs, Spanish ships sailing in the bay, corsairs and Turks, all the usual elements are here that made history in Northern Africa. Other places on this coast have had more stirring histories.

Susa was the scene of more dramatic events, such as the landing of Hannibal and his return after the disaster at Zama ; from Mahdia he set forth on his exile, from which he was never to return ; and not far off are the ruins of Thapsus, where Caesar vanquished the Pompeians, after marking time for three months hereabouts. Sfax was often taken and sacked ; it was under the rule of the various Arab dynasties as well as under that of Byzantium and Sicily ; but there is little that need detain us. Turning over the pages of the journal of Sheikh At Tidjani, written in the fourteenth century and published in French in the *Journal Asiatique* of 1852, I find a story which may find a place here as having a certain dramatic interest. It might safely furnish a theme for a Grand Guignol sketch.

Sheikh At Tidjani begins by praising the town of Sfax and the country round, which he says is called the Sahel on account of the depth of the shade of the trees that are planted all along its length and breadth. He then remarks (I cannot help

resenting this) that a certain prince called Sfax the Curse of God, and that when he told people he disliked to go to the Curse of God they set out immediately for Sfax. An ill-natured story, evidently invented by someone who had a grudge against the place.

The Sheikh also noticed the double ramparts of Sfax between which, then, as now, several horsemen could ride abreast, and he remarked that the Byzantine owners of Sfax held sovereignty over a hundred thousand towns, villages and forts. When they wanted to raise an army all they had to do was to demand a golden dinar and a horseman from each one. As M. Cagnat says somewhere, the astonishment that one feels when looking at the fortifications set up by the Byzantines in Africa, is only equaled by the reflection that they were not able to defend themselves against the Arabs.



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THE STREET OF THE BLACKSMITHS, SPAX.

But to get to the story.

King Roger of Sicily attacked and took Sfax in the year 543 of the Hegira ; when he left he took with him two hostages, of whom one was Sheikh About Hassan-al-Feriani, the prefect of police. He entrusted the government of the town to the son of this man, Omar, thinking, doubtless, that the son would behave honourably to save his father from punishment. His scheme, however, clear as it was, miscarried. Al-Feriani took leave of his son with

these words : "I am getting old, and the time of my death is drawing near ; I will give my life for the Mussulmans. If any opportunity offers, rise up against the Christians and massacre them."

When opportunity served, Omar obeyed his father's instructions : he fell on the Christians and massacred them without pity. When William of Sicily, son of King Roger, heard of this terrible event, he dispatched a messenger to Sfax, with instructions to tell Omar that his father would die if he did not instantly submit.

The messenger returned to Sicily with a strange story. He said that he could not land at Sfax because immediately after the ship came into port the sea gate was opened with a great noise, and a multitude of people ran out, crying, "Allah Akbar!"

They carried with them a coffin which they placed on the quay, and Omar read prayers over it, afterwards receiving condolences from those who accompanied him. The ceremony completed, the coffin was carried in, the people followed it, and the gates were closed.

When the envoy sent in the King's message and asked to be taken to Omar to receive the answer, he was told that the Governor was too busy receiving condolences on the death of his father, and it was further explained to him that the coffin he had seen symbolised that of the old Sheikh.

"The scene that you have witnessed is the reply to your message!"

The King was furious. Al-Feriani was forthwith hanged, and met his death reciting the* Qur'an with his last breath.

A grim drama, showing the spirit of sacrifice side by side with the undying hatred of the Christian that animated the followers of the Prophet. Sfax, as we see it to-day, is a cheerful, busy town, pleasant and picturesque even in the modern quarter. The hotel where we stayed looks out on to a square planted with little trees, which has white houses on either side, and the modern Moorish building in which the interesting collection of mosaics and Roman remains is housed, just opposite. The

Boulevard de France, with its double avenue of tall palm-trees, leads to the Rue de la Republique, at the end of which is the walled Arab town. It is here that the charm begins to work.

The covered Suq and the adjoining streets run up and down hill ; in the former are to be found many things always seen in Arab markets, together with some that are peculiar to the town. Not only is Sfax a regular hive of workers, it is also a depot for outside industries, which include oil, wool, dates and sponges. It is, of course, a centre of the fishing industry, and in the streets set apart for different corporations can be seen the blacksmiths and dyers and others that drive a flourishing trade here. The busy scene presented by almost any street in the Medina is in direct contrast to the usually accepted idea of Oriental laziness : the population works cheerfully, and can be seen at work, as much of it is carried on in the open street.

Take the Blacksmiths' Street, of which we have a characteristic drawing, showing the typical wooden balconies on the houses that are reached by an outer staircase, turning the tenements into what is, practically, a series of flats. Looking down the street you see, facing you, the whitewashed minaret of the Zaou'ia of Sidi Abd-al-Kader, in the upper part of which, under the crowning metal dome, is a funny little wooden gallery painted bright red. This is a very unusual feature and one that we had not seen anywhere else, as the gallery in which the mueddhin calls to prayer is always composed of the same stone as the minaret itself. The minarets of Sfax, with these queer little painted galleries, give the place an original air, as do the balconies in the Rue des Forgerons.

Up and down the busy street a crowd of people pass, coming from the country by the gate near the zaou'ia, or through the Suq from the opposite direction. The male Sfaxiote usually wears the brown gadroun, a woollen blouse, woven in the town, and some of them wear the green turban, showing that they belong to the tribe of the Prophet. On foot or on donkey back they go their ways, exchanging remarks with the denizens of the street, talking loudly, with sweeping gestures, as their way is. A youth with a tray, on which he has a store of flat cakes for sale, is more than usually persistent in his request not only for a photograph, but for a proof to be sent to him.

"Prenez ma table" he said persuasively in his funny French, "Take my table," seeming to be more anxious to have his "table" immortalised than himself. The

children crowded round him, and the result was not so good as it might have been, but the print was duly posted to an address in the Suq.

The blacksmiths' forges in this street are interesting, because of the prehistoric bellows that they use; there are also yards behind the houses where camels and donkeys are stabled. If you are tired of the business quarter of Sfax you can wander in the Jewellers' Street and perhaps pick up some curious old Oriental jewellery : wherever you go you are sure to find something amusing. Traces of vanished Taparura are hard to find. Bits of the olden city are used in the Turkish Qasba and in the rather beautiful old mosque, which one is not allowed to enter. The exterior of this mosque, that dates from the thirteenth century, has arcadings in the plaster and some Cufic lettering ; otherwise, in its intense simplicity, it is almost unadorned. The Driba, or Hall of Justice, has an interesting interior, which can be visited. More attractive, to my mind, are the quays, where sailors congregate, who may have been fishing for octopus or connected with the sponge divers, or merely occupied with the ordinary industries of a seaside town. In the evening, when the crowd had dispersed and the sun was pouring its last level rays through the lateen-rigged fishing boats, parked up' in rows along the mole, the scene was changed. The dying sun outlined each mast and bulwark and furled sail with gold ; a sort of golden haze glowed beyond the mass of the ships, merging sea and sky in one radiance of light. And then a little rowing-boat, in which were two men and a woman, put out to sea, bound on some faery quest, no doubt. What else could take them out at this hour when everything appeared romantic, unusual ? The sun dipped lower and the glory faded, and the little boat disappeared into the dusk.

At the other end of the Lesser Syrtis is an island, from which many of the sailors, occupied in the extensive fishery of the bay, are drawn. The island of Djerba, formerly known as the Isle of Meninx, has a certain literary flavour about it derived from the writings of Flaubert and others, who speak of it as the Island of the Lotophagi, another old title, indicating the habits of the islanders, who fed on the fruit of the lotus. That such a habit should strike one as romantic is evident. Not only do we picture to ourselves moon-eyed individuals, lying beside a still pool, stretching out pale hands to the lilies lying on the face of the water, but we remember that the lotus is the symbolic flower of Egypt and that tradition said whoever ate of its fruit forgot their country.

It is rather a drop from these altitudes to discover that a very common plant known as the Zizyphus Lotus, which has a barely edible fruit, once grew here though it now appears to be extinct. So the lotus eaters of Djerba exist rather in the imagination than in reality.

The island has had a more than usually exciting history ; its possession was eagerly disputed by all those who had intentions of raiding the coast. Normans of Sicily, Spaniards, Turks, Arabs, each have held it in turn ; a Turkish admiral and his lieutenant, the celebrated pirate Dragut, took it from the Spaniards by a ruse and massacred the garrison. The mound of human skulls that they made after the battle formed a grim war memorial in Djerba until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Dragut's first exploit was the taking of five Venetian galleys in the waters of Paxos ; after peace was concluded between Venice and the Porte he seems to have turned his attention elsewhere, being specially annoying always to the Spaniards. Among the desperate characters that he collected round him in the island of Djerba were people of many nationalities, who perhaps ate the fruit of the lotus and forgot their birthplaces to become members of a body of Barbary pirates. The more peaceful inhabitants of these days are also of mixed nationality Greeks and Italians, who come for the sponge-diving, Turks and Berbers and Arabs but there is no necessity for them to forswear their native land.

Andrea Doria, in command of fifty-five galleys belonging to the fleet of the Emperor Charles V, sailed up and down the Lesser Syrtis, calling at all the ports, searching for Dragut ; but not a trace of the corsair could be found.

Doria's nephew and reputed heir, Giannettino, who wanted to do something to ingratiate himself with his uncle, hearing that Dragut might often be found on the coast of Sardinia, set out in search of him. When his fleet suddenly appeared in La Giralata, a harbour between Calvi and Bastia, he saw Dragut sitting quietly on the shore, dividing up booty and prisoners among his henchmen. The blow was too sudden ; Dragut, with all his courage and his quick resourcefulness, could do nothing. His Turkish bandits fled up into the hills, the rest refused to fight ; he himself was taken prisoner and presented by the triumphant Giannettino to Uncle Andrea. Andrea promptly put the pirate chief in prison and loaded him with chains, where he was visited by Parisot, who was later Grand Master of the Knights of Malta.

"Fortune of war" said Parisot, who had himself been chained to his oar in one of Dragut's galleys.

"Change of luck" was the laconic reply.

In 1543, a few years after this incident, Barbarossa succeeded in ransoming his favourite, and Dragut lost no time in getting back to his old haunts on the island of Djerba. He asked for an armed galleot with a fighting crew, which he obtained, and in four years he owned a fleet. He kept a fakir who cast the horoscope of each expedition that he carried out, or perhaps it would be more correct to say that he cast a horary figure ; and his luck for a long time was proverbial. Some of his exploits, like his midnight storming of Mahdia, were famous, and would have done credit to many a legitimate commander. The Sultan, whose forces he had insulted, gave him permission to have a beacon at the prow of his galley and allowed him a pension. Truly an attractive scoundrel, whose memory lingers about the waters of the Lesser Syrtis !

On the way to Gabes and Djerba, a visit must be paid to the tremendous olive plantations round about the Toual-ach-Cheridi, distant only a few miles from Sfax. The main part of these scientifically-planted and cared-for olives belongs to French capitalists, who are interested in the oil trade. The result is overpowering rather than beautiful. From the top of some rising ground a view of this great plantation is obtained ; it extends for miles and miles, as far as the eye can see. The olives are planted diagonally on red earth ; the monotony of the whole scene is indescribable. Excellent as a commercial enterprise it is not attractive to the passer-by, because the olives are not fine specimens of trees. There is none of the beauty of gnarled stems and twisted branches that we see in the older olive-groves of Italy or the south of France.