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DE
JASMIN

ILLUSTRATIONS DE
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The Jasmine Necklace

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Sketches of Sfax

I like the feeling of surprise that you experience on a journey, each morning, when you open your window on a new landscape. The day before, it was too late to make anything out. I arrived with the tiredness of a journey traveled, the lassitude of sightseeing and the only thing desired was the obliteration of it all; but after a few hours of rest, of the spirit as of appetite, one precipitates towards the unknown, waiting, behind the still closed shutters. What a disillusion when I push them, this morning! A waste ground, surrounded by streets traced at right angles, a few puny trees wrapped with an iron sheath; beyond this place, a square building whose walls are covered in a smooth and thin coating, pierced with regular windows, crenelated, which in the oddest way reconciles the Arab style and the European style. Above this p137 building that I am assured is the town hall of Sfax, a minaret rises. Why a minaret?

To give an Eastern appearance? But the minaret, in the mind of the Moslem, is reserved for the mosque, as the bell-tower, in our villages, is for the church. The muezzin goes up there, six times per day, to announce the hours of the prayer. If we, us Europeans, build a public edifice in a Moslem city, this one is truly in the Moslem spirit of things! Let us try to understand their major reason and, under pretext of "local colour", let us not employ them wrongly or askew, with a significance contrary to the scruples of the inhabitants. What will we risk going without, while seeking to reach the end towards which we work. It is deplorable that Western civilization appears only by misinterpretations, vulgarities or junk. If it is unable to show that, what reason would have it to accept the domination of the other?

In the town hall, the mosaics discovered around Sfax have been gathered. The taste with which they are presented proves that we understands the Roman civilization better than that Islam; undoubtedly because it is, to a certain extent, a type of Western civilization. How can we explain the attention given to it, over a long period, in detriment to that of the Moslem? A varnish passed over these mosaics revives their colors of them. This clarity, which resembles that of moisture, p138 communicates a pleasant feeling of freshness to us. The subjects represented inform us about the situation of these mosaics in the house. Some make us penetrate to the most secret areas; their precision does not leave us any doubt about the reality of the worship of Venus and Love that Christian morals had not yet succeeded in discrediting. The scenes of the circus at El Djemm have an important place there, to the minute detail: one sees, for example, the children who moved from steps to steps offering the spectators fruits and refreshments. The importance

of the shells, fish, and marine scenes has long been spoken of relative to the decoration to the country; one recognizes the square sailing boats like those of the Greeks and the Latin sailing boats like those of the Italians; the tuna abounds, being the favorite fishing catch of all the coast as far as Monastir,. One craftsman even imagined them as coachmen and racing. I distinguish the sea parrot, which one hardly ever fishes, in the Mediterranean, except at the mouth of the Nile or towards Tripolitania.

Now I stroll around the port. It does not have a solution for the continuity between art and life. I believe I have under my eyes the models which the mosaicists copied, drawing from nature as an immense decorative grammar. This is the time when the boats return. Slowly, their single sail slips headfirst onto the bank, reflecting in the calm water of the channel some of the its crimson paint. I attend the unloading of the fish, hearing them fall one by one on the paving stones, with a gentle sound. Large baskets, made of hoops to which cords are attached, dry with the sun. Along the p139 quay, merchants sort carefully through the sponges fished by the Greeks, in the vicinity of the Kerkennah islands. At the door of the market, the Jews buy white shells that they will reduce to powder, in order to polish the gems and make them more brilliant.

I am inclined to stay at this port, to gather from here some gestures, attitudes, from the things that endure, identical to each other and those which preceded them. The return of the boats, of the sailors, the distribution of the fish, are similar to the rites of centuries ago. Nowhere better proves the eternal renewal of all things, nowhere can one get closer to this *character* which is an aspiration of our deformed intelligences, our corrupted, worn-out hearts. The masts are arrayed densely one against the other and form brown braids in the sky like the mesh of a net, the sea air is saturated with iodine and salt, filtered through odors of oil, an feature at the same time dense and in flux, suggesting to me, each time I notice them, a difficult reconciliation between the need for stability and the spirit of adventure. The sailors are the nomads of the sea, returning to a given point of immense space.

But here slaves. Here, they are not in chains, in the literal sense of the word; at least, they morally carry the invisible chain of the subjugated occupations, no longer through the cycle of the seasons, the variation of the weather, the whim of the sea, but with the time marked by a clock, the signal which instructs a machine. I am now on the phosphate loading quay; the pulleys squeak, the driving belts turn, loose and

insidious, the conveyor belts slide the stores to the cargo ships. My glance follows
p140 them, from the heap of yellow sand to the red and black steamers whose bright color
floats through an impalpable dust. I consider the pace of the native labourers who
come and go in the middle of this turbid atmosphere; it is fast and clipped like that of
our soldiers, our factory workmen. They have unlearned their rhythm. Soon they will
be lost in the cursory rate of our uniform movements. The nobility of the gestures
and attitudes, which made man almost a god, will be humiliated by a machine, of
which, after fifty years, nothing will remain except a rusted carcass.

Therefore, while there is still time, let us seek to satisfy our eyes on a beauty that
is about to disappear.

Where could we find it besides the Arab city which, in Sfax as in Sousse and
Tunis, hides behind its walls and holds itself apart, away from the shore? The
images are press on you as rapidly as prints in a wallet. Leaf through them with
fingers as light as possible, so as to not strain yourself.

These ramparts, I hold them as splendid walls, stripped of their history and able,
in their unified grandeur, to free our aesthetics from all gentleness, to temper it and
sharpen it again.

A bastion projects its buttress. Its lines are not perpendicular to the ground, but
slightly oblique. I associate this pyramidal form with that of the houses that I saw, on
the way from El Djemm, in the suburbs of Sfax. Do they remind one of Egypt?...

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In a recess some pottery from Jerba is heaped, a delicate piece of clay, more pale
than the coating of the wall. That uses very fine shades of beige and pink. At the
scale of the fortress, these hundreds of vases appear unimportant. I approach. Some
are the size of a man. The merchant occupies his leisure time braiding thin cord. He
rolls the bits of esparto between the palms of his hands. There is in his gesture
something of the potter or the pastrycook: the same dexterity in mixing a malleable
substance like clay or flour.

I am not comfortable until after passing the bent corridor which, under the bell-
tower with the clock of Bab Diwan, leads to the indigenous city. In front of me, a man
carries hot bread, piled up on a plate. I am their odorous wake.

Nowhere so much as near the large mosque, are these satisfactions of the sense of smell granted to you. Of the mosque itself, I know nothing but the black hole of the large door open on the forbidden mystery. False niches divide the wall into compartments; their arc is underlined by a curl of denticules [toothed ornamentation] in the Egyptian style. A relatively low terrace supports this wall. On top the merchants are squatted, selling perfumes, clothed in tunics of soft tones, mauves, blue, orange. They sell perfume of jasmine, amber or rose.

God made three things to be loved: women, perfumes, prayer...

p142 The same picturesque entertainment as in Sousse and Tunis, with nuances peculiar to a population of which many claim to descend from the Prophet and wear the green turban; they spend part of the day in the souks, another in the gardens outside the walls, and the third with their wives in their houses in the suburbs. A fabric held by cords over a junction, a Negress dressed in white sitting on a stone pathway holding on her knees a goblet with a mixture of flour, oil and bread the color of mustard, a Jew who waits on the threshold of its residence for the passage of the divine, some beggars in dirty rags in front of a studded door, stall of a butcher, bundles of vegetables, plates of parsley garnished with lemon sections, all attract me and pour into my memory a series of images that, still remain, months later, as clear as the first day.

A noise grows, moves away... The cortege of a zaouia follows the arched souk, illuminated from the top by round attic windows. The green flag, inclined, passes in front of my eyes, in a splash of sun, even as the sound of the voices bursts in my ears. The men pressing against each others, each one putting his hand on the shoulders of the one in front, proceed in front of me in the attitude of blind men. Blindness or illumination?

Close to the northern gate. The souk of the [vans], sieves made from iron wire, the p143 muzzles of camels, their skins fitted with belts, tar, anything serves to load, to carry, to wrap, to bandage the wounds made by the pack frames. Close to the land, these things are to do with the caravan. Close to the sea, concerning navigation: braiders of ropes, merchants of amphoras and sponges.

In the neighbourhoods of the door of North, also, the souk of the cartwrights, the blacksmiths. The blacksmiths of Sfax, they are as famous as the manufacturers of chechias in Tunis. Only these are still able to forge convex nets, to pass their skills to their apprentices, as they learned from their Masters, the old designs of which one counts ten at most, but which is of such character that one cannot look them without also imagining a small Arab window in a large wall, and the eyes of a woman shining behind the black bars.

Their souk extends into the open air; the noise of the hammers and their vibration in turn strident or dull, according to whether they strike anvil or the reddened part. The faint odor of charcoal mingles with that of tar. Dark faces appear at the back of the workshops, in the varied lighting of daylight and flame. An old man with a white beard holds a rose between the thumb and forefinger, breathing it with pleasure. A child, large and beautiful like Eliacin in the Temple, activates the bellows; his hand lightly holding the iron ring of wire at the end of the rod, he draws on it and his burning eyes focus on the busy street...

A merchant of kaoua ["qahweh"=coffee] announces his passage while tinkling the p144 glasses together that he holds loosely on the end of his fingers. Here also they manufacture plough shears, and garden shovels. With a small axe they also cut the pieces of wood which will be the handles of the shovel and the plough. A porch gives access to a smoked-filled patio, with curved arches. Donkeys are still used here; they anticipate the hour when they will return with their Masters to the gardens in the suburbs. Hens thread between their feet; two of them render the mutual service of scratching each other. A gray foal does not leave its mother who follows each one of its movements and restrains it, when it moves too far, by putting its head over its neck, like a hook.

The path goes under an archway. In the shade of the passage, on a stone bench, a man sits, an inkstand and inkpot laid out in front of him, on a pile of two books. A soothsayer. For some *sous* he will tell you, given two solutions, the one you must choose. Nobody believes any more in the soothsayer; nobody, except the veiled Bedouin woman, dressed in white, who stops him under the arch, places her basket on the stone bench. She dared not approach the man, because I am watching, and waits until I make the pretence of moving away. The soothsayer knows it well, hiding in the shadows, so as to encourage those who, by human respect, no longer dare to ask him advice...

Bab Jebali. The north gate. From there twelve roads diverge towards the suburbs of Sfax, towards the small houses in the Egyptian style where Sfaxiens live during p145 the night with their wives, towards the gardens where they cultivate the jasmine and roses, towards the stills where they distil their perfumes, towards the oil mills where they crush their olives, towards the olive trees which supply their mills. Placing myself here, at five o'clock, I will see them to escape, them and their small donkeys, like the innumerable characters in an escape from Egypt.

I crossed the gate. No contrast was more dramatic. On this side of the ramparts, there was only massed images, detailed, tableaux drawn in bright colors on neutral backgrounds, groupings of well draped figures, ornamental motifs; I suppose that the idea of the miniature, so precise and yet so fresh, had to present itself to artists who lived in Eastern cities, surrounded by walls. Beyond, on the contrary, the vision relaxes. The landscape is finally returned to this vastness against which the city endeavoured to fight by limiting its horizon and its activity. The ramparts of which I only saw fragments masked by shops are here spread themselves with the serenity of something which seems to speak a secret language, because we have lost its meaning. Their mass is gently illuminated at this hour by the reflection of the sandy terrain which extends ahead, and merges imperceptibly with the cemeteries, to mix with them in the countryside.

Men come and go, dressed in robes. They make an accentuated but soft feature p146 on the beige background of the earth. The atmosphere envelops them all, calmly.

There is no other life besides the projections of the bastions, now and then, on the ramparts, and the harsh spot of the cupolas in the cemeteries. These koubas are raised above the other tombs, like the important facts over a banal existence. They do not indicate, as amongst us, the advantages of wealth, but announce a life entirely dedicated to the preparation for the next one. Only the acts of a man make him a saint, a *marabout*. When he dies, the notables of its tribe declare to the habous what he is famous for; and the habous grant the money necessary for its erection, and then the maintenance of these koubas.

A burial. At the head, those who are reciting the prayers; then the stretcher carried on the shoulders of four men, the body of the deceased wrapped in a white fabric, very new, which is covered by a green silk. The parents follow, the wool burnous folded back over the head. They cross the waste grounds, strewn with primitive shacks. The ramparts acquire the grandeur of a biblical image. In spite of myself I

compare the satisfied air, the almost rich costume of those who recite the prayers and the sad face, the poor dress, of those who pay for what they are reciting.

Death mixes with life, life with death. Between one and the other there are none of those barriers which, amongst us, seem to indicate an impenetrable mystery. The cemeteries are at leisure, spreading without knowing exactly where they start and where they finish. I wander among these grounds which are furnished with the makeshift shops, under tents of camel hair. Here they sell what the souks cannot easily accomodate. I circumvent heavy granite grinding stones. I pass a little boy who carries eggs in an esparto *koufa*, then another who with his two hands holds a p147 dish from which onions with green stems protrude. They advance with gravity as if they were responsible for a stone from Mecca. Three men, one in a white burnous, another in gray, the last in brown, form a peripatetic group.

A blind old man, guided by a child. He holds a thin hand. His Turkish slippers separate from the foot, at each step. As long as we do not rediscover the beauty of these Homeric gestures, we will not be worthy of living.

The market of the animals. Sheep, small donkeys, horses, some camels. One of them lifts its head above the others, in a slow movement of hope. Another opens its greenish mouth, showing some yellow teeth...

A circle of beautiful negros, with a dazed air, surrounds a blind musician, clothed in white, blowing in a kind of bagpipe. A woman dressed in black sings the counterpart with him while accompanying the rhythm on a tambourine. *Do, si, do, la, si, la, si la*. The repetition of these notes dulls me. I would like to react; but with each measure, I feel more and more riveted to the ground and thus I remain for a long time, a long time, until the musicians, after tendered me their wooden bowl, go elsewhere...

Another circle. In the center, a man trhashes around, reciting Arab verses, which he interrupts regularly by three blows of the hand striking a tambourine. A small p148 donkey suddenly passes, carrying two children; they halt their mount to look at, but without descending; the animal, curiously, pushes its muzzle between the spectators.

A large patch of blue, like a gray blue of flax: a stall of these striped cotton fabrics are known as helala. They are woven in Ksar-Helal, beside the sea, close to Sousse, for women.

Five o'clock. I returned to Bab Jebali, to observe the Sfaxiens leaving. I place myself outside, in order to them see emerging, them and their donkeys. The small shoes of the mounts resound under the arch. The uninterrupted trampling of these fine legs, slipping on the greasy cobblestones, their perpetual intersection, is something obsessive, like the rhythm of the musicians that I heard that very hour. Their eyes shine gently in the shade; except for the irreverence, I would readily compare them with those of the women, behind the *moucharabiehs*: the same wet languor, with a nuance of interrogation. As they approach the exit, they flicker in a rather comic manner, with one ear is upright and the other drooping. It would be said that the animals, fearing too sharp a light, approach askew. But outside, what a recovery! I watch, at the passage from shadow to light, the waistcoats of white silk, a yellow buttercup, violet, orange or pistachio, the release of tones of color, the sudden illumination of the costume on the glossy robe of the animal.

There are certainly as many manners of holding oneself on an ass as there are to p149 prepare sheep. One sits between the two baskets, squaring the legs as he can, in front; another lets them hang to with ground; a third crosses them on the spine; a fourth rides sidesaddle, one leg hanging, the other folded up on the neck. An old man takes a child in croup; sometimes the child follows, pricking the hindquarters of the animal with a sharpened stick for a goad. A whole family escort it, and I think then of the fable of the miller, his son and the ass. Especially at certain times the biblical aspect of things arises; at others times, their humorous character; in this continuous procession, one finds a little of everything, of spirit as well as poetry.