

HENRY BLACKBURN

ARTISTS AND ARABS; OR,
SKETCHING IN
SUNSHINE

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Henry Blackburn

Artists and Arabs; Or, Sketching in Sunshine

ARGUMENT

The advantage of winter studios abroad, and the value of sketching in the open air; especially in Algeria.

'The best thing the author of a book can do, is to tell the reader, on a piece of paper an inch square, what he means by it.' – Athenaeum.

CHAPTER I. ON THE WING

BY the middle of the month of July, the Art season in London was on the wane, and by the end of August the great body of English artists had dispersed, some, the soundest workers perhaps, to the neighbourhood of Welsh mountains and English homesteads, to – 'The silence of thatched cottages and the voices of blossoming fields.'

From the Tweed to the Shetland Isles, they were thick upon the hills; in every nook and corner of England, amongst the cornfields and upon the lakes; in the valleys and torrent beds of Wales, the cry was still 'they come.'

On the continent, both artists and amateurs were everywhere. Smith toiling across the Campagna with the thermometer at 95 (his reward a quiet pipe at the 'café Greco' when the sun goes down) is but a counterpart of a hundred other Smiths scattered abroad. In the galleries of Florence and Rome no more easels could be admitted, and in Switzerland and Savoy the little white tents and 'sun-umbrellas' glistened on the mountain side. Brown might be seen rattling down an *arrête* from the Flegère, with his *matériel* swung across his back, like a carpenter's basket, after a hard day's work sketching the Aiguilles that tower above the valley of Chamounix; and Jones, with his little wife beside him, sitting under the deep shade of the beech-trees in the valley of Sixt.

We were a sketching party, consisting of two, three or four, according to convenience or accident, wandering about and pitching our tent in various places away from the track of tourists; we had been spending most of the summer days in the beautiful Val d'Aosta (that school for realistic work that a great teacher once selected for his pupil, giving him three months to study its chesnut groves, 'to brace his mind to a comprehension of facts'); we had prolonged the summer far into autumn on the north shore of the Lago Maggiore, where from the heights above the old towns of Intra and Pallanza we had watched its banks turn from green to golden and from gold to russet brown. The mountains were no longer *en toilette*, as the French express it, and the vineyards were stripped of their purple bloom; the wind had come down from the Simplon in sudden and determined gusts, and Monte Rosa no longer stood alone in her robe of white; the last visitor had left the Hôtel de l'Univers at Pallanza, and our host was glad to entertain us at the rate of four francs a day 'tout compris' – when the question came to us, as it does to so many other wanderers in Europe towards the end of October, where to go for winter quarters, where to steal yet a further term of summer days.

Should we go again to Spain to study Velasquez and Murillo, should we go as usual to Rome; or should we strike out a new path altogether and go to Trebizond, Cairo, Tunis, or Algeria?

There was no agreeing on the matter, diversity of opinion was very great and discussion ran high (the majority we must own, having leanings towards Rome and *chic*; and also 'because there would be more fun'); so, like true Bohemians, we tossed for places and the lot fell upon Algeria.

The next morning we are on the way. Trusting ourselves and our baggage to one of those frail-looking little boats with white awnings, that form a feature in every picture of Italian lake scenery, and which, in their peculiar motion and method of propulsion (the rower standing at the stern and facing his work), bear just sufficient resemblance to the Venetian gondola to make us chafe a little at the slow progress we make through the smooth water, we sit and watch the receding towers of Pallanza, as it seems, for the livelong day. There is nothing to relieve the monotony of motion, and scarcely a sound to break the stillness, until we approach the southern shore, and it becomes a question of anxiety as to whether we shall really reach Arona before sundown. But the old boatman is not to be moved by any expostulation or entreaty, nor is he at all affected by the information that we run great risk of losing the last train from Arona; and so we are spooned across the great deep lake at the rate of two or three miles an hour, and glide into the harbour with six inches of water on the flat-bottom of the boat amongst our portmanteaus.

From Arona to Genoa by railway, and from Genoa to Nice by the Cornice road – that most beautiful of all drives, where every variety of grandeur and loveliness of view, both by sea and land, seems combined, and from the heights of which, if we look seaward and scan the southern horizon, we can sometimes trace an irregular dark line, which is Corsica – past Mentone and Nice, where the 'winter swallows' are arriving fast; making a wonderful flutter in their nests, all eagerness to obtain the most comfortable quarters,¹ and all anxiety to have none but 'desirable' swallows for neighbours. This last is a serious matter, this settling down for the winter at Nice, for it is here that the swallows choose their mates, pairing off wonderfully in the springtime, like grouse-shooting M.P.s in August.

A few hours' journey by railway and we are at Marseilles, where (especially at the 'Grand Hotel') it is an understood and settled thing that every Englishman is on his way, to or from Italy or India, and it requires considerable perseverance to impress upon the attendants that the steamer which sails at noon for Algiers is the one on which our baggage is to be placed, and it is almost impossible to persuade the driver of a fiacre that we do *not* want to go by the boat just starting for Civita Vecchia or Leghorn.

On stepping on board it almost seems as if there were some mistake, for we appear to be the only passengers on the after deck, and to be looked upon with some curiosity by the swarthy half-naked crew, who talk together in an unknown tongue; notwithstanding that at the packet office in the town we were informed that we could not secure berths for certain.

We have several hours to wait and to look about us, for the mail is not brought on board until three in the afternoon, and it is half-past, before the officials have kissed each other on both cheeks and we are really moving off – threading our way with difficulty through the mass of shipping which hems us in on all sides.

The foredeck of the *Akhbar* is one mass of confusion and crowding, but the eye soon detects the first blush of oriental colour and costume, and on nearer inspection it is easy to distinguish a few white bournouses moving through the crowd. There are plenty of Zouaves in undress uniforms, chiefly young men, with a superfluity of medals and the peculiar swagger which seems inseparable from this costume; others old and bronzed, who have been to Europe on leave and are returning to join their regiments. Some parting scenes we witness between families of the peasant order, of whom there appear to be a number on board, and their friends who leave in the last boat for the shore. These, one and all, take leave of each other with a significant 'au revoir,' which is the key-note to the whole business, and tells us (who are not studying politics and have no wish or intention, to trouble the reader with the history or prospects of the colony) the secret of its ill-success, viz.: – that these colonists *intend to come back*, and that they are much too near home in Algeria.

Looking down upon the fore-deck, as we leave the harbour of Marseilles, there seems scarcely an available inch of space that is not encumbered with bales and goods of all kinds; with heaps of rope and chain, military stores, piles of arms, cavalry-horses, sheep, pigs, and a prodigious number of live fowls.

On the after-deck there are but six passengers, there is a Moorish Jew talking fluently with a French commercial traveller, a sad and silent officer of Chasseurs with his young wife, and two lieutenants who chatter away with the captain; the latter, in consideration of his rank as an officer in the Imperial Marine, leaving the mate to take charge of the vessel during the entire voyage. This gentleman seems to the uninitiated to be a curious encumbrance, and to pass his time in conversation, in sleep, and in the consumption of bad cigars. He is 'a disappointed man' of course, as all officers are, of whatever nation, age, or degree.

The voyage averages forty-eight hours, but is often accomplished in less time on the southward journey. It is an uncomfortable period even in fine weather, just too long for a pleasure trip, and just

¹ Necessary enough, to be protected from the cold blasts that sweep down the valleys, as many invalids know to their cost, who have taken houses or lodgings hastily at Nice.

too short to settle down and make up one's mind to it, as in crossing the Atlantic. Our boat is an old Scotch screw, which has been lent to the Company of the *Messageries Impériales* for winter duty – the shaft hammering and vibrating through the saloon and after-cabins incessantly for the first twenty-four hours, whilst she labours against a cross sea in the Gulf of Lyons, indisposes' the majority of the company, and the captain dines by himself; but about noon on the next day it becomes calm, and the *Akhbar* steams quietly between the Balearic Islands, close enough for us to distinguish one or two churches and white houses, and a square erection that a fellow-traveller informs us is the work of the 'Majorca Land, Compagnie Anglaise.'

In the following little sketch we have indicated the appearance in outline of the two islands of Majorca and Minorca as we approach them going southward, passing at about equal distances between the islands.

The sea is calm and the sky is bright as we leave the islands behind us, and the *Akhbar* seems to skim more easily through the deep blue water, leaving a wake of at least a mile, and another wake in the sky of sea gulls, who follow us for the rest of the voyage in a graceful undulating line, sleeping on the rigging at night unmolested by the crew, who believe in their good omen.

On the second morning on coming on deck we find ourselves in the tropics, the sky is a deep azure, the heat is intense, and the brightness of everything is wonderful. The sun's rays pour down on the vessel, and their effect on the occupants of the fore-deck is curious to witness. The odd heaps of clothing that had lain almost unnoticed during the voyage suddenly come to life, and here and there a dark visage peeps from under a tarpaulin, from the inside of a coil of rope, or from a box of chain, and soon the whole vessel, both the fore and after-deck, is teeming with life, and we find at least double the number of human beings on board that we had had any idea of at starting.

But the interest of every one is now centred on a low dark line of coast, with a background of mountains, which every minute becomes more defined; and we watch it until we can discern one or two of the highest peaks, tipped with snow. Soon we can make out a bright green, or rather as it seems in the sunlight, a golden shore, set with a single gem that sparkles in the water. Again it changes into the aspect of a little white pyramid or triangle of chalk on a green shore shelving to the sea, next into an irregular mass of houses with flat roofs, and mosques with ornamented towers and cupolas, surrounded and surmounted by grim fortifications, which are not Moorish; and in a little while we can distinguish the French houses and hotels, a Place, a modern harbour and lighthouse, docks, and French shipping, and one piratical-looking craft that passes close under our bows, manned by dark sailors with bright red sashes and large earrings, dressed like the fishermen in the opera of Mas-aniello. And whilst we are watching and taking it all in, we have glided to our moorings, close under the walls of the great Mosque (part of which we have sketched from this very point of view); and are surrounded by a swarm of half-naked, half-wild and frantic figures, who rush into the water vociferating and imploring us in languages difficult to understand, to be permitted to carry the Franks' baggage to the shore.

Taking the first that comes, we are soon at the landing steps and beset by a crowd of beggars, touters, idlers and nondescripts of nearly every nation and creed under heaven.

CHAPTER II. ALGIERS

'Ah oui, c'est qu'elle est belle avec ces châteaux forts,
Couchés dans les près verts, comme les géants morts!
C'est qu'elle est noble, Alger la fille du corsaire!
Un réseau de murs blancs la protège et l'enserre.'

THE first view of the town of Algiers, with its pretty clusters of white houses set in bright green hills, or as the French express it, 'like a diamond set in emeralds,' the range of the lesser Atlas forming a background of purple waves rising one above the other until they are lost in cloud – was perhaps the most beautiful sight we had witnessed, and it is as well to record it at once, lest the experience of the next few hours might banish it from memory.

It was a good beginning to have a stately barefooted Arab to shoulder our baggage from the port, and wonderful to see the load he carried unassisted.² As he winds his way through the narrow and steep slippery streets (whilst we who are shod by a Hoby and otherwise encumbered by broadcloth, have enough to do to keep pace with him, and indeed to keep our footing), it is good to see how nobly our Arab bears his load, how beautifully balanced is his lithe figure, and with what grace and ease he stalks along. As he slightly bows, when taking our three francs (his 'tariff' as he calls it), there is a dignity in his manner, and a composure about him that is almost embarrassing. How he came, in the course of circumstances, to be carrying our luggage instead of wandering with his tribe, perhaps civilization – French civilization – can answer.

The first hurried glance (as we followed our cicerone up the landing steps to the 'Hôtel de la Régence,' which faces the sea) at the dazzlingly white flat-roofed houses without windows, at the mosques with their gaily painted towers, at the palm-trees and orange-trees, and at the crowd of miscellaneous costumes in which colour preponderated everywhere, gave the impression of a thorough Mahommedan city; and now as we walk down to the *Place* and look about us at leisure, we find to our astonishment and delight that the Oriental element is still most prominent.

The most striking and bewildering thing is undoubtedly the medley that meets the eye everywhere: the conflict of races, the contrast of colours, the extraordinary brightness of everything, the glare, the strange sounds and scenes that cannot be easily taken in at a first visit; the variety of languages heard at the same time, and above all the striking beauty of some faces, and the luxurious richness of costume.

First in splendour come the Moors (traders looking like princes), promenading or lounging about under the trees, looking as important and as richly attired as was ever Caliph Haroun Alraschid.

They are generally fair and slight of figure, with false effeminate faces, closely-shaven heads covered with fez and turban, loose baggy trousers, jacket and vest of blue or crimson cloth, embroidered with gold; round their waists are rich silken sashes, and their fingers are covered with a profusion of rings. Their legs are often bare and their feet are enclosed in the usual Turkish slipper.

This is the prominent town type of Moor or Jew, the latter to be distinguished by wearing dark trousers, clean white stockings, French shoes, and a round cloth cap of European pattern. There are various grades, both of the Moors and Jews, some of course shabby and dirty enough; but the most dignified and picturesque figures are the tall dark Arabs and the Kabyles, with their flowing white bournouses, their turbans of camel's hair, and their independent noble bearing. Here we see them

² It is generally admitted, we believe, that a vegetable diet will not produce heroes,' and there is certainly a prejudice in England about the value of beef for navvies and others who put muscular power into their work. It is an interesting fact to note, and one which we think speaks volumes for the climate of Algeria, that this gentleman lives almost entirely on fruit, rice, and Indian corn.

walking side by side with their conquerors in full military uniform and their conquerors' wives in the uniform of *Le Follet*, whilst white-robed female figures flit about closely veiled, and Marabouts (the Mahom-medan priests) also promenade in their flowing robes. Arab women and children lounge about selling fruit or begging furtively, and others hurry to and fro carrying burdens; and everywhere and ever present in this motley throng, the black frock-coat and chimney-pot hat assert themselves, to remind us of what we might otherwise soon be forgetting, – that we are but four days' journey from England.

There is noise enough altogether on the *Place* to bewilder any stranger; for besides the talking and singing, and the cries of vendors of fruit and wares, there is considerable traffic. Close to us as we sit under the trees, (so close as almost to upset the little tables in front of the cafés), without any warning, a huge diligence will come lunging on to the *Place* groaning under a pile of merchandise, with a bevy of Arabs on the roof, and a party of Moorish women in the 'rotonde'; presently there passes a company of Zouaves at quick step, looking hot and dusty enough, marching to their terrible tattoo; and next, by way of contrast again, come two Arab women with their children, mounted on camels, the beasts looking overworked and sulky; they edge their way through the crowd with the greatest nonchalance, and with an impatient croaking sound go shambling past.

The 'Place Royale' faces the north, and is enclosed on three sides with modern French houses with arcades and shops, and when we have time to examine their contents, we shall find them also principally French. Next door to a bonnet-shop there is certainly the name of Mustapha over the door, and in the window are pipes, coral, and filagree work exposed for sale; but most of the goods come from France. Next door again is a French café, where Arabs, who can afford it, delight in being waited upon by their conquerors with white aprons and neck-ties.

The background of all this is superb: a calm sunlit sea, white sails glittering and flashing, and far to the eastward a noble bay, with the Kabyle mountains stretching out their arms towards the north.

At four o'clock the band plays on the *Place*, and as we sit and watch the groups of Arabs and Moors listening attentively to the overture to 'William Tell,' or admiringly examining the gay uniforms and medals of the Chasseurs d'Afrique – as we see the children of both nations at high romps together – as the sweet sea-breeze that fans us so gently, bears into the newly constructed harbour together, a corvette of the Imperial Marine and a suspicious-looking raking craft with latteen sails – as Marochetti's equestrian statue of the Duke of Orleans, and a mosque, stand side by side before us – we have Algiers presented to us in the easiest way imaginable, and (without going through the ordeal of studying its history or statistics) obtain some idea of the general aspect of the place and of the people, and of the relative position of conquerors and conquered.

As our business is principally with the Moorish, or picturesque side of things, let us first look at the great Mosque which we glanced at as we entered the harbour, and part of which we have sketched for the reader.

Built close to the water's edge, so close that the Mediterranean waves are sapping its foundations – with plain white shining walls, nearly destitute of exterior ornament, it is perhaps 'the most perfect example of strength and beauty, and of fitness and grace of line, that we shall see in any building of this type.'³ It is thoroughly Moorish in style, although built by a Christian, if we may believe the story, of which there are several versions; how the Moors in old days took captive a Christian architect, and promised him his liberty on condition of his building them a mosque; how he, true to his own creed, dexterously introduced into the ground plan the form of a cross; and how the Moors, true also to their promise, gave him his liberty indeed, but at the cannon's mouth through a window, seaward.

The general outline of these mosques is familiar to most readers, the square white walls pierced at intervals with quaint-shaped little windows, the flat cupola or dome, and the square tower often

³ This beautiful architectural feature of the town has not escaped the civilizing hand of the Frank; the last time we visited Algiers we found the oval window in the tower gone, and in its place an illuminated French clock!

standing apart from the rest of the structure as in the little vignette on our title-page, like an Italian campanile. Some of these towers are richly decorated with arabesque ornamentation,' and glitter in the sun with colour and gilding, but the majority of the mosques are as plain and simple in design as shown in our large sketch.

Here, if we take off our shoes, we may enter and hear the Koran read, and we may kneel down to pray with Arabs and Moors; religious tolerance is equally exercised by both creeds. Altogether the Mahomedan places of worship seem by far the most prominent, and although there is a Roman Catholic church and buildings held by other denominations of Christians, there is none of that predominant proselytizing aspect which we might have expected after thirty years' occupation by the French! At Tetuan, for instance, where the proportion of Christians to Mahomedans is certainly smaller, the 'Catholic church' rears its head much more conspicuously.

In Algiers the priestly element is undoubtedly active, and *Soeurs de Charité* are to be seen everywhere, but the buildings that first strike the eye are not churches but mosques; the sounds that become more familiar to the ear than peals of bells, are the Muezzin's morning and evening salutation from the tower of a mosque, calling upon all true believers to —

'Come to prayers, come to prayers,
It is better to pray than to sleep.'

The principal streets in Algiers lead east and west from the *Place* to the principal gates, the Bab-Azoun and the Bab-el-Oued. They are for the most part French, with arcades like the Rue de Rivoli in Paris; many of the houses are lofty and built in the style perhaps best known as the 'Haussman.' Nearly all the upper town is still Moorish, and is approached by narrow streets or lanes, — steep, slippery, and tortuous,⁴ which we shall examine by-and-bye.

The names of some of the streets are curious, and suggestive of change. Thus we see the 'Rue Royale,' the 'Rue Impériale' there is, or was until lately, a 'Place Nationale,' and one street is still boldly proclaimed to be the 'Rue dé la Révolution'!

In passing through the French quarter, through the new wide streets, squares and inevitable boulevards, the number of shops for fancy goods and Parisian wares, especially those of hairdressers and modistes, seems rather extraordinary; remembering that the entire European population of Algeria, agricultural as well as urban, is not much more than that of Brighton. In a few shops there are tickets displayed in different languages, but linguists are rare, and where there are announcements of the labels have generally a perplexing, composite character, like the inscription on a statue at the Paris Exhibition of 1867, which ran thus 'Miss Ofelia dans Amlet.'

Before we proceed further, let us glance at the general mode of living in Algiers, speaking first of the traveller who goes to the hotels.

The ordinary visitor of a month or two will drop down pleasantly enough into the system of hotel life in Algiers; and even if staying for the winter he will probably find it more convenient and amusing to take his meals in French fashion at the hotels, ringing the changes between three or four of the best, and one or two well-known cafés, There is generally no table-d'hôte, but strangers can walk in and have breakfast or dine very comfortably at little tables '*a part*,' at a fixed hour and at a moderate price. The rooms are pleasant, cool, and airy, with large windows open to the sea.

Everything is neatly and quietly served, the menu is varied enough, with good French dishes and game in abundance; the hosts being especially liberal in providing those delicious little birds that might be larks or quails, — which in Algiers we see so often on the table and so seldom on the wing.

⁴ It may be interesting to artists to learn that in this present year 1868, most of the quaint old Moorish streets and buildings are intact — neither disturbed by earthquakes nor 'improved' out of sight.

INGLIS

SPOKEN

Half the people that are dining at the 'Hôtel d'Orient' to-day are residents or habitués; they come in and take their accustomed places as cosily, and are almost as particular and fastidious, as if they were at their club.

There is the colonel of a cavalry regiment dining alone, and within joking distance, five young officers, whose various grades of rank are almost as evident from their manner as from the number of stripes on their bright red kepis ranged on the wall of the salon. A French doctor and his wife dine vis-à-vis, at one table, a lady *solitaire* at another; some gentlemen, whose minds are tuned to commerce, chatter in a corner by themselves; whilst a group of newly-arrived English people in the middle of the room, are busily engaged in putting down the various questions with which they intend to bore the viceconsul on the morrow, as if he were some good-natured house-agent, valet-de-place, and interpreter in one, placed here by Providence for their especial behoof. But it is all very orderly, sociable, and comfortable, and by no means an unpleasant method of living for a time.

There is the *cercle*, the club, at which we may dine sometimes; there are those pretty little villas amongst the orange-trees at Mustapha Supérieure, where we may spend the most delightful evenings of all; and there are also the Governor's weekly balls, soirées at the consulate, and other pleasant devices for turning night into day, in Algiers as everywhere else – which we shall be wise if we join in but sparingly. And there are public amusements, concerts, balls, and the theatre – the latter with a company of operatic singers with weak lungs, but voices as sweet as any heard in Italy; and there are the moonlight walks by the sea, to many the greatest delight of all.

The ordinary daily occupations are decidedly social and domestic; and it may be truly said that for a stranger, until he becomes accustomed to the place, there is very little going on.

You must not bathe, for instance, on this beautiful shelving shore. 'Nobody bathes, it gives fever,' was the invariable answer to enquiries on this subject, and though it is not absolutely forbidden by the faculty, there are so many restrictions imposed upon bathers that few attempt it; moreover, an Englishman is not likely to have brought an acrobatic suit with him, nor will he easily find a 'costume de bain' in Algiers.

There is very little to do besides wander about the town, or make excursions in the environs or into the interior (in which latter case it is as well to take a fowling-piece, as there is plenty of game to be met with); and altogether we may answer a question often asked about Algiers as to its attractions for visitors, that it has not many (so called), for the mere holiday lounge.

But for those who have resources of their own, for those who have work to do which they wish to do quietly, and who breathe more freely under a bright blue sky, Algiers seems to us to be *the* place to come to.

The 'bird of passage,' who has unfortunately missed an earthquake, often reports that Algiers is a little dull; but even he should not find it so, for beyond the 'distractions' we have hinted at, there is plenty to amuse him if he care little for what is picturesque. There are (or were when we were there), a troop of performing Arabs of the tribe of 'Beni Zouzoug,' who performed nightly the most hideous atrocities in the name of religious rites: wounding their wretched limbs with knives, eating glass, holding burning coals in their mouths, standing on hot iron until the feet frizzled and gave forth

sickening odours, and doing other things in an ecstasy of religious frenzy which we could not print, and which would scarcely be believed in if we did.⁵

There are various Moorish ceremonies to be witnessed. There are the sacrifices at the time of the Ramadhan, when the negro priestesses go down to the water side and offer up beasts and birds; the victims, after prolonged agonies which crowds assemble to witness, being finally handed over to a French *chef de cuisine*.

There are the mosques to be entered barefoot, and the native courts of law to be seen. Then if possible, a Moor should be visited at home, and a glimpse obtained of his domestic economy, including a dinner without knives or forks.

An entertainment consisting entirely of Moorish dances and music is easily got up, and is one of the characteristic sights of Algiers. The young trained dancing girls, urged on to frenzy by the beating of the tom-tom, and falling exhausted at last into the arms of their masters; (dancing with that monotonous motion peculiar to the East, the body swaying to and fro without moving the feet); the uncouth wild airs they sing, their shrieks dying away into a sigh or moan, will not soon be forgotten, and many other scenes of a like nature, on which we must not dwell – for are they not written in twenty books on Algeria already?

But there are two sights which are seldom mentioned by other writers, which we must just allude to in passing.

The Arab races, which take place in the autumn on the French racecourse near the town, are very curious, and well worth seeing. Their peculiarity consists in about thirty Arabs starting off pell-mell, knocking each other over in their first great rush, their bournouses mingling together and flying in the wind, but arriving at the goal generally singly, and at a slow trot, in anything but racing fashion.

Another event is the annual gathering of the tribes, when representatives from the various provinces camp on the hills of the Sahel, and the European can wander from one tent to another and spend his day enjoying Arab hospitality, in sipping coffee and smoking everywhere the pipe of peace.

These things we only hint at as resources for visitors, if they are fortunate enough to be in Algiers at the right time; but there are one or two other things that they are not likely to miss, whether they wish to do so or not.

They will probably meet one day, in the 'Street of the Eastern Gate,' the Sirocco wind, and they will have to take shelter from a sudden fearful darkness and heat, a blinding choking dust, drying up as it were the very breath of life; penetrating every cavity, and into rooms closed as far as possible from the outer air. Man and beast lie down before it, and there is a sudden silence in the streets, as if they had been overwhelmed by the sea. For two or three hours this mysterious blight pours over the city, and its inhabitants hide their heads.

Another rather startling sensation for the first time is the 'morning gun.' In the consulate, which is in an old Moorish house in the upper town, the newly arrived visitor may have been shown imbedded in the wall a large round shot, which he is informed was a messenger from one of Lord Exmouth's three-deckers in the days before the French occupation; and not many yards from it, in another street, he may have had pointed out to him certain fissures or chasms in the walls of the houses, as the havoc made by earthquakes; he may also have experienced in his travels the sudden and severe effect of a tropical thunderstorm.

Let him retire to rest with a dreamy recollection of such events in his mind, and let him have his windows open towards the port just before sunrise, – when the earthquake, and the thunder, and the bombardment, will present themselves so suddenly and fearfully to his sleepy senses, that he will bear malice and hatred against the military governor for evermore.

⁵ Since writing the above, we observe that these Arabs (or a band of mountebanks in their name), have been permitted to perform their horrible orgies in Paris and London, and that young ladies go in evening dress to the 'stalls' to witness them.

But it has roused him to see some of the sights of Algiers. Let him go out at once to the almost deserted *Place*, where a few tall figures wrapped in military cloaks are to be seen quietly sidling out of a door in the corner of a square under the arcades, – coming from the club where the gas is not quite extinguished, and where the little green baize tables are not yet put away for the night;⁶ and then let him hurry out by the *Bab-el-Oued* and mount the fortifications, and he will see a number of poor Arabs shivering in their white bournouses, perched on the highest points of the rocks like eagles, watching with eager eyes and strained aspect for the rising of the sun, for the coming of the second Mahomet. Let him look in the same direction, eastward, over the town and over the bay to the mountains far beyond. The sparks from the chariot-wheels of fire just fringe the outline of the Kabyle Hills, and in another minute, before all the Arabs have clambered up and reached their vantage ground, the whole bay is in a flood of light. The Arabs prostrate themselves before the sun, and '*Allah il Allah*' (God is great) is the burden of their psalm of praise.

But Mahomet's coming is not yet, and so they return down the hill, and crowd together to a very different scene. The officers whom we saw just now leaving the *Place*, have arrived at the Champ de Mars, the drill-ground immediately below us, and here, in the cool morning air, they are exercising and manoeuvring troops. There are several companies going through their drill, and the bugle and the drum drown the Muezzins' voices, who, from almost every mosque and turret in the city, repeat their cry to the faithful to 'Come to prayers.'

⁶ How often have we seen in the Tuileries gardens, the bronzed heroes of Algerian wars, and perhaps have pitied them for their worn appearance; but we shall begin to think that something more than the African sun and long marches have given them a prematurely aged appearance, and that absinthe and late hours in a temperature of 90° Fahrenheit may have something to do with it.

CHAPTER III. THE MOORISH QUARTER – OUR STUDIO

WE said, in the last chapter, that in Algiers there was very little going on for the visitor or idler; but if the traveller have anything of the artist in him, he will be delighted with the old town. If he is wise he will spend the first week in wandering about, and losing himself in the winding streets, going here, there, and everywhere on a picturesque tour of inspection. His artistic tendencies will probably lead him to spend much time in the Moorish cafés, where he may sit down unmolested (if unwelcomed) for hours on a mat, and drink his little saucer of thick, sweet coffee, for which he pays one sou, and smoke in the midst of a group of silent Moors, who may perchance acknowledge his presence by a slight gesture, and offer him their pipes, but who will more frequently affect not to see him, and sit still doing absolutely nothing, with that dignified solemnity peculiar to the East.

He will pass through narrow streets and between mysterious-looking old houses that meet over head and shut out the sky; he will jostle often in these narrow ways, soft plump objects in white gauze, whose eyes and ankles give the only visible signs of humanity; he may turn back to watch the wonderful dexterity with which a young Arab girl balances a load of fruit upon her head down to the market place; and he will, if he is not careful, be finally carried down himself by an avalanche of donkeys, driven by a negro gamin who sits on the tail of the last, threading their way noiselessly and swiftly, and carrying everything before them;⁷ and he will probably take refuge under the ruined arch of some old mosque, whose graceful lines and rich decoration are still visible here and there, and he will in a few hours be enchanted with the place, and the more so for the reason that we have already hinted at, viz.: – that in Algiers he is *let alone*, that he is free to wander and 'moon' about at will, without custodian or commissionaire, or any of the tribe of 'valets de place.'

He may go into the Grand Divan; or into the streets where the embroiderers are at work, sitting in front of their open shops, amongst heaps of silks, rich stuffs and every variety of material; or where the old merchant traders, whose occupation is nearly gone, sit smoking out their lazy uncommercial lives.

He may go to the old Moorish bath, in a building of curious pattern, which is as well worth seeing as anything in Algiers; and, if an Arabic scholar, he may pick up an acquaintance or two amongst the Moors, and visit their homes when their wives are away for the day, on some mourning expedition to a suburban cemetery. He may explore innumerable crooked, irregular streets, with low doorways and carved lattices, some painted, some gilt; the little narrow windows and the grilles, being as perfectly after the old type as when the Moors held undivided possession of the city.

One old street, now pulled down, we remember well; it was the one always chosen for an evening stroll because it faced the western sea, and caught and reflected from its pavement and from its white walls, the last rosy tints of sunset, long after the cobblers and the tinkers in the lower town had lighted their little lanterns, and the cafés were flaring in the French quarter. It was steep and narrow, so steep, in fact, that steps were made in the pavement to climb it, and at the upper end there was the dome of a mosque shining in the sun. It was like the child's picture of 'Jacob's ladder,' brighter and more resplendent at each step, and ending in a blaze of gold.

We are often reminded of Spain in these old streets; there are massive wooden doors studded with iron bosses or huge nails as we see them at Toledo, and there is sometimes to be seen over them, the emblem of the human hand pointing upwards, which recalls the Gate of Justice at the entrance to the Alhambra at Granada.

⁷ How different from what we read of in *Æothen*. The cry is not, 'Get out of the way, O old man! O virgin! – the Englishman, he comes, he comes!' If we were to push an old man out of the way, or, ever so little, to forget our duty to a fair pedestrian, we should be brought up before the Cadi, and fined and scorned, by a jury of unbelievers!

The Moors cling to their old traditions, and the belief that they will some day reconquer Spain is still an article of faith. But if ever the Moors are to regain their imaginary lost possessions in Spain, they must surely be made of sterner stuff than the present race, who, judging from appearances, are little likely to do anything great.

There are little shops and dark niches where the Moors sit cross-legged, with great gourds and festoons of dried fruits hanging above and around them; the piles of red morocco slippers, the oddshaped earthenware vessels, and the wonderful medley of form and colour, resembling in variety the bazaars at Constantinople, or carrying us in imagination still further East.

Other sights and sounds we might mention, some not quite so pleasant but peculiarly Eastern; and we should not forget to note the peculiar scent of herbs and stuffs, which, mingled with the aroma of coffee and tobacco, was sometimes almost overpowering in the little Covered streets; and one odour that went up regularly on Sunday mornings in the Moorish quarter that was not incense, and which it took us a long time to discover the origin of – an Arab branding his donkeys with his monogram!

Everything we purchase is odd and quaint, irregular or curious in some way. Every piece of embroidery, every remnant of old carpet, differs from another in pattern as the leaves on the trees. There is no repetition, and herein lies its charm and true value to us. Every fabric differs either in pattern or combination of colours – it is something, as we said, unique, something to treasure, something that will not remind us of the mill.⁸

If we explore still further we shall come to the Arab quarter, where we also find characteristic things. Here we may purchase for about thirty francs a Kabyle match-lock rifle, or an old sabre with beautifully ornamented hilt; we may, if we please, ransack piles of primitive and rusty implements of all kinds, and pick up curious women's ornaments, beads, coral, and anklets of filagree work; and, if we are fortunate, meet with a complete set or suit of harness and trappings, once the property of some insolvent Arab chief, and of a pattern made familiar to us in the illustrated history of the Cid.

In the midst of the Moorish quarter, up a little narrow street (reached in five or six minutes from the centre of the town) passing under an archway and between white walls that nearly meet overhead, we come to a low dark door, with a heavy handle and latch which opens and shuts with a crashing sound; and if we enter the courtyard and ascend a narrow staircase in one corner, we come suddenly upon the interior view of the first or principal floor, of our Moorish home.

The house, as may be seen from the illustration, has two stories, and there is also an upper terrace from which we overlook the town. The arrangement of the rooms round the courtyard, all opening inwards, is excellent; they are cool in summer, and warm even on the coldest nights, and although we are in a noisy and thickly populated part of the town, we are ignorant of what goes on outside, the massive walls keeping out nearly all sound. The floors and walls are tiled, so that they can be cleansed and cooled by water being thrown over them; the carpets and cushions spread about invite one to the most luxurious repose, tables and chairs are unknown, there is nothing to offend the eye in shape or form, nothing to offend the ear – not even a door to slam.

Above, there is an open terrace, where we sit in the mornings and evenings, and can realise the system of life on the housetops of the East. Here we can cultivate the vine, grow roses and other flowers, build for ourselves extempore arbours, and live literally in the open air.

From this terrace we overlook the flat roofs of the houses of the Moorish part of the city, and if we peep over, down into the streets immediately below us, a curious hum of sounds comes up. Our neighbours are certainly industrious; they embroider, they make slippers, they hammer at metal work, they break earthenware and mend it, and appear to quarrel all day long, within a few feet of us; but as we sit in the room from which our sketch is taken, the sounds become mingled and subdued

⁸ The little pattern at the head of this chapter was traced from a piece of embroidered silk, worked by the Moors.

into a pleasant tinkle which is almost musical, and which we can, if we please, shut out entirely by dropping a curtain across the doorway.

Our attendants are Moorish, and consist of one old woman, whom we see by accident (closely veiled) about once a month, and a bare-legged, bare-footed Arab boy who waits upon us. There are pigeons on the roof, a French poodle that frequents the lower regions, and a guardian of our doorstep who haunts it day and night, whose portrait is given at Chapter V.

Here we work with the greatest freedom and comfort, without interruption or any drawbacks that we can think of. The climate is so equal, warm, and pleasant – even in December and January – that by preference we generally sit on the upper terrace, where we have the perfection of light, and are at the same time sufficiently protected from sun and wind.

At night we sleep almost in the open air, and need scarcely drop the curtains at the arched doorways of our rooms; there are no mosquitoes to trouble us, and there is certainly no fear of intrusion. There is also perfect stillness, for our neighbours are at rest soon after sundown.

Such is a general sketch of our dwelling in Algiers; let us for a moment, by way of contrast, return in imagination to London, and picture to ourselves our friends as they are working at home.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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