THE GREAT SAHARA.

CHAPTER I.


EMBARKED on the densely crammed “Lonqṣor,” we encountered a motley crowd of passengers. Military officers, Government officials, Zouaves, soldier convicts, horned cattle, no near relatives of the Durham ox; greyhound-like sheep, larger in the horn than in any other limb; German colonist families, generally comprising three generations; dogs, a sprinkling of turbaned Moors, and a dozen dark-looking Jesuits in shovel hats and long cassocks, composed the medley assemblage. Government passengers having prior claim, we contented ourselves with fore sleeping-cabins, and the privilege of entering the saloon and promenading aft. Vain indulgence, with families bivouacking over the whole deck. Happily, the swell of the Gulf of Lyons, after leaving the fine headlands which encompass Marseilles, rendered our dinner-party select. Not so the sleeping-berths at night. We found our dog-holes tenanted, and in vain sent the steward to eject the
intruders; at length the intervention of the lieutenant
of the watch drew forth, after protracted discussion, one
priestly occupant from P.'s berth, behind whom lay
secreted a good-natured-looking burly monk, with mous-
tache and flowing beard—a true Friar Tuck. Then it
transpired that every one had got into the wrong berth,
and a general action of ejectment was instituted. A
young lady was nearly expelled from a mattrass on the
floor of the ladies' cabin by a youthful Jesuit, who in-
sisted upon priority of claim. I indignantly protested,
and offered my cabin to the lady, whereupon the young
disciple of Loyola quietly suggested that it was un-
necessary to disturb her, and promptly ensconced him-
self in my niche. After a speedy expulsion of the
ecclesiastic, I was permitted to remain unmolested;
while under and on the tables, arranged like the cargo
of a slave-ship, lay packed the majority of the pas-
sengers. The more fortunate of ourselves baked in our
berths till morning, many, I trust, with consciences less
troubled than their stomachs.

The rest of the voyage was on a calm sea and without
incident. A Sunday on board a foreign ship realises the
sensation of solitude in a crowd. Seated on the taffrail
for quiet reading, I found myself by the side of an
American, the correspondent of a New York paper, and
a freethinker. Sceptics, it is to be hoped, are not more
common in America than in France, but they are cer-
tainly more obtrusive. A Frenchman seems scarcely
to take the trouble to think at all: the other appears
uneasily anxious to confirm himself in unbelief by dis-
cussion, and is careless of offending the convictions of
those whom he meets, by propounding his theories in
their baldest form. My companion held universal redemption,
and ridiculed the great doctrines of Christianity,
asserting Scripture to be a mere Jewish history, exag-gerated by national prejudices. I attempted to meet him by metaphysical and a priori arguments, when P., joining in, silenced if he did not convince him by Scriptural quotations. “Fools make a mock at sin.”

The course of the steamer lay close by the island of Minorca, and we peered with our glasses into the magnif-icent harbour of Mahon, once an advanced post of England, and now eagerly coveted by our Gallic neigh-bours. Its acquisition will be one great step towards the realization of the French lake, lying as it does half way between Europe and Africa, and within 50 miles of the direct course of all vessels up the Mediterranean.

We were reminded that autumn was now setting in by the numerous flocks of migratory birds which passed us on their way southwards, chiefly familiar English summer visitants, whitethroats and warblers, and many short-toed larks and pipits.

Early next morning we dropped anchor in the port of Algiers, so familiar by description to every reader. The first glimpse vividly recalls the tales of our childhood. That white triangular patch, cut as it were out of the mountain side, and fringed with the richest and darkest verdure, might be still the nest of corsairs and the hopeless prison of Christian captives. But on entering the harbour all such pictures of the imagination vanish before healthier realities. A stupendous breakwater and mole, the work of the French Government, now rapidly approaching completion, offers a safe refuge for the finest navy that ever floated on the Mediterranean; and in lieu of the ensign of the pirate craft, the bright tri-color of France and the flags of many a peaceful trader flutter from a triple row of masts. One old corsair, carefully repaired from time to time, till her
timbers are now probably not more original than those of the “Victory” at Portsmouth, alone remains in the inner harbour, supporting an imperial pennant; an historic remnant of that extinct trade which provoked English chastisement, and palliated French conquest. The deep trenches and massive earthwork batteries, which form the modern enceinte, do not catch the eye, while the crumbling Moorish walls still mark the limit of the inhabited portion of the town. The French extensions have been only on the water’s edge, where handsomely built faubourgs have spread themselves like wings on each side. In fact, the ground-plan of Algiers is not unlike a bird spread out, the old city representing the body, and the long mole which runs out to the Admiralty, once an island, forming the neck and head.

After much wrangling and deafening vociferations of the Moorish or Koulougli boatmen, we were landed on the Pècherie, our passport receipts having been handed to us as we descended the ship’s side. We mounted the long steps leading to the grand square, flanked by the now neglected batteries, which once formed the defence of the city, and which shattered with terrific effect the fleet of Lord Exmouth; and reaching the summit of the steps, found ourselves in the small square of the Place Mahon, now merely the cab-stand of Algiers, but interesting as being exactly on the site of the ancient Christian slave-market. What strange untold romance of misery—hopeless misery—of crime, rapine, and lust, lies for ever buried beneath that spot! Adjoining this is the grand square, now rejoicing in the appellation of “Place du Gouvernement,” but preserving, in the half-obliterated titles of “Place Royale,” “Place Républicaine,” a record of the political inspirations which Algiers has successively received from the centre of French civilization.
When we arrived, a fair was being held preparatory to the annual "course," and the square was filled with booths crowded with showy and tinselly Parisian manufactures. French, Spaniards, and Jews jostled each other in gay holiday attire; and Bedouins, shrouded in their white burnouses, flitted silent and majestic like ghosts amid the throng. The old palace of the Deys had just been demolished, and the opening afforded a splendid view of the upper or Moorish city, rising with its white and flat-roofed houses, tier above tier, over the plain, far as the eye could reach in the clear moonlight. In front, leaning over the parapet, we enjoyed a commanding view of the port and roadstead, with Cape Matifou at the further extremity of the bay. Almost in the centre of the square stands a colossal equestrian statue of the late Duce d'Orléans, from the design of Marochetti, erected in 1842 by the civilians and army of Algeria, now only an historic monument of a dynasty which has passed from power and from memory. The revolutionary government of 1848 sent orders to have this statue destroyed, but the population of Algiers, and even the military, rose en masse, and by force prevented the officials from carrying out their intentions. On the pedestal are two spirited bas-reliefs, one representing the forcing of the pass of the Col de Mouzaia, the other the capture of the citadel of Anvers. On the opposite side of the steps of the Pècherie, on the site of the forum of the Roman city of Icosium, stands the Grand Mosque Djemmaâ Djedid. It has a handsome minaret at the west end, and a crescent-surmounted dome over the centre. The story is told that the architect was an Italian captive, to whom the Dey promised freedom if he should succeed in erecting the most handsome mosque in El Djedzar. During its
construction it was remarked to the Dey that the edifice was in the shape of a cross, upon which on the day of its completion he beheaded the unfortunate designer. Close to the entrance is a Mohammedan tribunal, where the kadi may be daily seen administering the justice of the Koran, and settling the disputes of the wrangling daughters of Moslem, who recount their grievances from veiled lips through a small lattice window.

Lower down the street is the Grand Mosque or Djemâa Khebir, a very handsome edifice, with a row of light marble columns supporting the arcade of the street in front, but without the great dome which relieves the other mosque. The arches of the interior are partly Saracenic and partly semicircular. Europeans and even females are freely permitted to enter any of the mosques in Algiers on taking off their shoes at the entrance, where an attendant supplies them with slippers. The effect of the rows of light shafts and arches is fine, but the interior has a bare appearance, being without any other furniture than the lamps slung from the roof, a wooden pulpit near the centre, and the floor laid with matting and ragged Turkey carpets here and there. These two mosques are the cathedrals of two different sects of Mussulmans—the Maleki, to which belong most of the Turks and Moors of Algiers; and the Hanefi, which numbers amongst its adherents all the Algerian Arabs. They differ in their ritual, but not in their doctrines; and, unlike the other Mohammedan sects, do not anathematize each other. There are also small mosques belonging to the sect of Ali, and the “Khramisine” or fifth sect, who are looked upon as heretics, and are as bitterly hated as the Shafi and Wahabi of Arabia.

Let us return to the Grand Place, ascend the hill but
a few yards, and we find ourselves transported into narrow lanes, under vaulted archways so contracted that frequently two foot passengers can only with difficulty pass each other. In the days of Moslem rule it was the privilege of any Moor in ascending these streets to seize the first Jew he met and compel him to bear him on his shoulders to his destination.* These alleys are flanked with houses, whose iron-barred and grated doorways forbid the curious stranger, and show no windows to the street. Paris and Constantinople are here truly in grotesque juxta-position; the East and the West, Christianity and Mohammedanism, have met and submitted to dwell side by side, but as yet with no more amalgamation than oil and water. It is precisely this isolation of nations which gives its peculiar charm to Algiers. Passing down again from the upper town, with its zigzag lanes, into the arcaded Bab-Azoun or Bab-el-Oued, we see the proud and sturdy Moor, with his shaven temples, fez,† and red turban, loose trousers and rich slashed jacket, sitting moody, pipe in hand, as he presides over his little tobacco or silk shop. Next comes the Jew, with the immutable features of his race; his dress equally distinctive—black turban,‡ large and loose trousers, fastened above the knee, of a most brilliant hue; jacket equally bright, but always a contrast in colour; and long stockings, which the Moor never wears. The arcades are filled with tall and brawny Arabs, wrapped in their burnouses and camel’s hair head-gear, proud and stately in their gait, jostling with the roguish-looking Maltese in his long red cap, and the Andalusian or Valencian with his high-crowned hat, shawl,

* A somewhat clumsy version of the Persian ḍerahān.——Herod. viii. 98.
† In Algeria called “chachia.”
‡ Called the “zemla.”
and matted sandals, and all enlivened by the restless and ever-moving groups of soldiers in every uniform known to France—Zouave, Chasseur d’Afrique, Tirailleurre Indigène, dashing hussar, line, and artillery; all are crowded together here. Enter one of those innumerable omnibuses which ply for ever along the streets and carry you a couple of miles for three or four sous, you will find yourself between a Jewish and Moorish lady. The beauty of the latter cannot be described, as she carefully conceals with her haïk all except her bright black eyes and the hennaed tips of her fingers. The beauty of the former is not to be told, for her red and gold cap and her embroidered but shapeless robe display more than enough to disgust. Opposite sit a turbaned Moor and Zouave; and in the further corners a Bedouin and a Spaniard are endeavouring to carry on a conversation in a language composed of a jargon of French, Arabic, and Spanish, and familiarly known in Africa as the “lingua saber.”

The day after our arrival Algiers turned out to enjoy a grand military spectacle. It was a day of marching and countermarching, of drumming and trumpeting, to celebrate the landing of the governor-general, le Maréchal Randon, from Kabylie, whence he had returned in a frigate. Poor Kabyles! in vain have they struggled to maintain the independence they had preserved intact since the days of Carthage and Rome. They seem destined to the same fate as the heroes of the Caucasus, though with less sympathy and greater civil virtues. But for this time the French general has turned his back on the few remaining mountain fortresses, leaving them to his lieutenants, while all that was fertile, weak, or helpless has been devastated to provide decorations and promotions for the
Armée de l’Afrique. As a pendant to his triumphant entry, the ambulance waggon laden with sick and wounded traversed the streets from the Port Militaire to the hospitals in dreary procession for four hours after nightfall.

The next evening we happened to take a moonlight walk outside the gate of Bab-el-Oued. Here is the most truly Oriental scenery to be found close to Algiers. On the left are dark wooded heights studded with flat-roofed dwellings, white-domed tombs shaded by ancient palm-trees, and small fields enclosed by hedges of aloe; while on the right the tranquil sea slumbers in the moonlight. On this road lies the cemetery of St. Eugène, the principal Christian burial-place. Here we turned. A covered cart drove slowly up to meet us. It was accompanied by three hospital orderlies in fatigue dress, and so filled with coffinless bodies that the cover would not close; limbs protruded; the very stench betrayed its contents. The cemetery gates were opened; we were sharply refused admission, but the silent dead drove in, and the portals were quickly locked upon them. It is reported that the mortality is fearful among the young regiments just returned from Kabylie—2000 fever-stricken and 400 wounded have entered the hospitals. A few are buried every morning with military pomp, but, to prevent panic, the dead-room is cleared every evening, and its contents then flung into the pit, bereft of the honours of a Christian’s or a soldier’s burial. But what matters it? The ‘Akbār’* tells no tales inconvenient to government; the peasant friends of Jean Marie hear in a few months that he has died a soldier’s death, covered with glory, and the conscription soon fills his place.

* The Algerian government journal.
A touching anecdote was related to me to-day respecting a minor incident of the war. A Zouave sergeant had been shot at an outpost near Tiziouzoum. The perpetrator of the deed could not be discovered. An old man, however, was seized an hour or two afterwards near the spot, brought before the general and accused of the murder. He was in Kabyle costume, but denied having ever been armed, and stated that, though a Kabyle, he was of a tribe in the province of Oran in alliance with the French, and was actually on his way to the camp to see his son, a soldier in their service, in the regiment of Tirailleurs Indigènes. The incredulous tribunal replied that this was an easy story to tell, that he could without difficulty have concealed or thrown away his arms in the ravine, and cross-questioned him as to where he had spent the previous days. A stranger to the locality, his replies were not satisfactory, whereupon he was ordered to be remanded. But the Zouaves were discontented, and clamoured for vengeance for a comrade’s blood. On this the general gave way and assented to his execution at once. The old man was dragged forth and shot “sans cérémonie.” Next day the truth of his story was ascertained. His son, like a true Moslem, made no outward sign of indignation, but was carefully watched for a week lest he should desert. Still he betrayed no such design. But nine days afterwards he disappeared, taking with him to the Kabyles nine comrades and twenty muskets. Happily he has not yet been found to share his father’s fate.

Another story to show the prompt severity of French military discipline in war time. A party of native cavalry, Spahis, on a night march had received orders on no account to smoke, lest their pipes should betray them to the enemy. The officer in the rear smelt