

In A Tunisian Oasis, Aldous Huxley

## IN A TUNISIAN OASIS

Waking at dawn, I looked out of the window. We were in the desert. On either side of the railway an immense plain, flat as Holland, but tawny instead of green, stretched out interminably. On the horizon, instead of windmills, a row of camels was silhouetted against the grey sky. Mile after mile, the train rolled slowly southward.

At Tozeur, when at last we arrived, it had just finished raining—for the first time in two and a half years—and now the wind had sprung up; there was a sandstorm. A thick brown fog, whirled into eddies by the wind, gritty to the skin, abolished the landscape from before our smarting eyes. We sneezed; there was sand in our ears, in our hair, between our teeth. It was horrible. I felt depressed, but not surprised. The weather is always horrible when I travel.

Once, in a French hotel, I was accused of having brought with me the flat black bugs, of whose presence among my bed-clothes I complained to a self-righteous proprietress. I defended myself with energy against the impeachment. Bugs—no; I am innocent of bugs. But when it comes to bad weather, I have to plead guilty. Rain, frost, wind, snow, hail, fog—I bring them with me wherever I go.

I bring them to places where they have never been heard of, at seasons when it is impossible that they should occur. What delightful skating there will be in the Spice Islands when I arrive! On this particular journey I had brought with me to every place on my itinerary the most appalling meteorological calamities. At Naples, for example, it was the snow. Coming out of the theatre on the night of our arrival, we found it lying an inch deep under the palm trees in the public gardens.

And Vesuvius, next morning, glittered white, like Fujiyama, against the pale spring sky. At Palermo there was a cloud-burst. 'Between the Syrtes and soft Sicily' we passed through a tempest of hail, lightning and wind. At Tunis it very nearly froze. At Sousse the wind was so violent that the stiff board-like leaves of the cactuses swayed and trembled in the air like aspens. And now, on the day of our arrival at Tozeur, it had rained for the first time in thirty months, and there was a sandstorm. No, I was not in the least surprised; but I could not help feeling a little gloomy.

Towards evening the wind somewhat abated; the sand began to drop out of the air. At midday the brown curtain had been impenetrable at fifty yards. It thinned, grew gauzier; one could see objects at a hundred, two hundred yards. From the windows of the hotel bedroom in which we had sat all day, trying—but in vain, for it came through even invisible crannies—to escape from the wind-blown sand, we could see the fringes of a dense forest of palm trees, the dome of a little mosque, houses of sun-dried brick and thin brown men in flapping night-shirts walking, with muffled faces and bent heads, against the wind, or riding, sometimes astride, sometimes sideways, on the bony rumps of patient little asses.

Two very professional tourists in sun helmets—there was no sun—emerged round the corner of a street. A malicious gust of wind caught them unawares; simultaneously the two helmets shot into the air, thudded, rolled in the dust. The two professional tourists scuttled in pursuit. The spectacle cheered us a little; we descended, we ventured out of doors.

A melancholy Arab offered to show us round the town. Knowing how hard it is to find one's way in these smelly labyrinths, we accepted his offer. His knowledge of French was limited; so too, in consequence, was the information he gave us. He employed what I may call the Berlitz method. Thus, when a column of whirling sand rose up and jumped at us round the corner of a street, our guide turned to us and said, pointing: 'Poussière.' We might have guessed it ourselves.

He led us interminably through narrow, many-cornered streets, between eyeless walls, half crumbled and tottering.

'Village,' he explained. 'Très plaisant.' We did not altogether agree with him.

A walk through an Arab village is reminiscent of walks through Ostia or Pompeii. Roman remains are generally in a better state of preservation, and cleaner; that is all. One is astonished to see, among these dusty ruins, white-robed families crouching over their repasts.

Our guide patted a brown mud wall.

'Briques,' he said, and repeated the word several times, so that we might be certain what he meant.

These bricks, which are of sun-dried mud, are sometimes, on the façades of the more considerable houses, arranged in a series of simple and pleasing patterns—diamonds, quincunxes, hexagons. A local art which nobody now takes the trouble to practise—nobody, that is, except the Europeans, who, with characteristic energy, have used and wildly abused the traditional ornamentation on the walls of the station and the principal hotel. It is a curious and characteristic fact that, whenever in Tunisia one sees a particularly Oriental piece of architecture, it is sure to have been built by the French, since 1881. The cathedral of Carthage, the law courts and schools of Tunis—these are more Moorish than the Alhambra, Moorish as only Oriental tea-rooms in Paris or London can be Moorish. In thirty years the French have produced buildings more typically and intensely Arabian than the Arabs themselves contrived to do in the course of thirteen centuries.

We passed into the market-place.

'Viande,' said our guide, fingering as he passed a well-thumbed collop of mutton, lying among the dust and flies on a little booth.

We nodded.

'Très joli,' commented our guide. 'Très plaisant.' Noisily he spat on the ground. The proprietor of the booth spat too. We hurried away; it needs time to grow inured to Tunisian habits. These frightful hoickings in the throat, these sibilant explosions and semi-liquid impacts are almost the national music of the country.

There are in the desert of southern Tunisia three great oases: Gabes by the sea, a little north of that island of Djerba which is, traditionally, the classical Island of the Lotus Eaters; Tozeur, to the west of it, some seventy miles inland; and Nefta, fifteen miles west of Tozeur, the starting-point of the caravans which trade between southern Tunisia and the great oases of the Algerian Sahara, Biskra and Touggourt. These oases are all of much the same size, each consisting of some six or seven thousand acres of cultivated ground, and are all three remarkable for their numerous and copious springs. In the middle of the desert, suddenly, a hundred fountains come welling out of the sand; rivers run, a network of little canals is dug. An innumerable forest of date palms springs up—a forest whose undergrowth is corn and roses, vines and apricot trees, olives and pomegranates, pepper trees, castor-oil trees, banana trees, every precious plant of the temperate and the subtropical zones.

No rain falls on these little Edens—except on the days of my arrival—but the springs, fed from who knows what distant source, flow inexhaustibly and have flowed at least since Roman times. Islanded among the sands, their green luxuriance is a standing miracle. That it should have been in a desert, with here and there such islands of palm trees, that Judaism and Mohammedanism took

their rise is a thing which, since I have seen an oasis, astonishes me. The religion which, in such a country, would naturally suggest itself to me would be no abstract monotheism, but the adoration of life, of the forces of green and growing nature. In an oasis, it seems to me, the worship of Pan and of the Great Mother should be celebrated with an almost desperate earnestness. The nymphs of water and of trees ought surely, here, to receive a passionate gratitude. In the desert, I should infallibly have invented the Greek mythology. The Jews and the Arabs discovered Jahweh and Allah. I find it strange.

Of the three great Tunisian oases, my favourite is Nefta. Gabes runs it close for beauty, while the proximity of the sea gives it a charm which Nefta lacks. But, on the other hand, Gabes is less fertile than Nefta and, socially, more sophisticated. There must be the best part of two hundred Europeans living at Gabes. There is dancing once a week at the hotel. Gabes is quite the little Paris.

The same objection applies to Tozeur, which has a railway station and positively teems with French officials. Nefta, with fourteen thousand Arabs, has a white population of a dozen or thereabouts. A hundred Frenchmen can always make a Paris; twelve, I am happy to say, cannot. The only non-Arabian feature of Nefta is its hotel, which is clean, comfortable, French and efficient. At Nefta one may live among barbarians, in the Middle Ages, and at the same time, for thirty francs a day, enjoy the advantages of contemporary Western civilization. What could be more delightful?

We set off next morning by car, across the desert. From Tozeur the road mounts slightly to a plateau which dominates the surrounding country. The day was clear and sunny. We looked down on the green island of Tozeur—four hundred thousand palm trees among the sands. Beyond the oasis we could see the chotts, glittering in the sun. The chotts are shallow depressions in the ground, at one time, no doubt, the beds of considerable lakes. There is no water in them now; but the soil is furred with a bright saline efflorescence. At a distance, you could swear you saw the sea. For the rest, the landscape was all sand and lion-coloured rock.

We bumped on across the desert. Every now and then we passed a camel, a string of camels. Their owners walked or rode on asses beside them. The womenfolk were perched among the baggage on the hump—a testimony, most eloquent in this Mohammedan country, to the great discomfort of camel riding. Once we met a small Citroën lorry, crammed to overflowing with white-robed Arabs. In the Sahara, the automobile has begun to challenge the supremacy of the camel. Little ten-horse-power Citroëns dart about the desert. For the rougher mountainous country special six-wheeled cars are needed, and with caterpillar wheels one may even affront the soft and shifting sand of the dunes. Motor buses now ply across the desert. A line, we were told, was shortly to be inaugurated between Nefta and Touggourt, across two hundred kilometres of sand. In a few years, no doubt, we shall all have visited Lake Tchad and Timbuctoo. Should one be glad or sorry? I find it difficult to decide.

The hotel at Nefta is a long low building, occupying one whole side of the market-square. From your bedroom window you watch the Arabs living; they do it unhurriedly and with a dignified inefficiency. Endlessly haggling, they buy and sell. The vendor offers a mutton chop, slightly soiled; the buyer professes himself outraged by a price which would be exorbitant if the goods were spotlessly first-hand.

It takes them half an hour to come to a compromise. On the ground white bundles doze in the sun; when the sun grows too hot, they roll a few yards and doze again in the shade. The notables of the town, the rich proprietors of palm trees, stroll past with the dignity of Roman senators. Their garments are of the finest wool; they carry walking sticks; they wear European shoes and socks, and on their bare brown calves—a little touch entirely characteristic of the real as opposed to the literary East—pale mauve or shell-pink sock suspenders. Wild men ride in from the desert.

Some of them, trusting to common sense as well as Allah to preserve them from ophthalmia, wear smoked motor goggles. With much shouting, much reverberant thumping of dusty, moth-eaten hides, a string of camels is driven in. They kneel, they are unloaded. Supercilious and haughty, they turn this way and that, like the dowagers of very aristocratic families at a plebeian evening party. Then, all at once, one of them stretches out its long neck limply along the ground and shuts its eyes.

The movement is one of hopeless weariness; the grotesque animal is suddenly pathetic. And what groanings, what gurglings in the throat, what enormous sighs when their masters begin to reload them! Every additional package evokes a bubbling protest, and when at last they have to rise from their knees, they moan as though their hearts were broken. Blind beggars sit patiently awaiting the alms they never receive. Their raw eyelids black with flies, small children play contentedly in the dust. If Allah wills it, they too will be blind one day: blessed be the name of Allah.

Sitting at our window, we watch the spectacle. And at night, after a pink and yellow sunset with silhouetted palm trees and domes against the sky (for my taste, I am afraid, altogether too like the coloured plates in the illustrated Bible), at night huge stars come out in the indigo sky, the cafés are little caves of yellow light, draped figures move in the narrow streets with lanterns in their hands, and on the flat roofs of the houses one sees the prowling shadows of enormous watch-dogs. There is silence, the silence of the desert: from time to time there comes to us, very distinctly, the distant sound of spitting.

Walking among the crowds of the market-place or along the narrow labyrinthine streets, I was always agreeably surprised by the apathetically courteous aloofness of Arab manners. It had been the same in Tunis and the other larger towns. It is only by Jews and Europeanized Arabs that the tourist is pestered: through the native quarters he walks untroubled. There are beggars in plenty, of course, hawkers, guides, cab drivers; and when you pass, they faintly stir, it is true, from their impassive calm. They stretch out hands, they offer Arab antiquities of the most genuine German manufacture, they propose to take you the round of the sights, they invite you into their fly-blown vehicles.

But they do all these things politely and quite uninsistently. A single refusal suffices to check their nascent importunity. You shake your head; they relapse once more into the apathy from which your appearance momentarily roused them—resignedly: nay, almost, you feel, with a sense of relief that it had not, after all, been necessary to disturb themselves. Coming from Naples, we had been particularly struck by this lethargic politeness.

For in Naples the beggars claim an alms noisily and as though by right. If you refuse to ride, the cabmen of Pozzuoli follow you up the road, alternately cursing and whining, and at every hundred yards reducing their price by yet another ten per cent. The guides at Pompeii fairly insist on being taken; they cry aloud, they show their certificates, they enumerate their wives and starving children. As for the hawkers, they simply will not let you go. What, you don't want coloured photographs of Vesuvius? Then look at these corals. No corals? But here is the last word in cigarette holders.

You do not smoke? But in any case, you shave; these razor blades, now . . . You shake your head. Then toothpicks, magnifying glasses, celluloid combs. Stubbornly, you continue to refuse. The hawker plays his last card—an ace, it must be admitted, and of trumps. He comes very close to you, he blows garlic and alcohol confidentially into your face. From an inner pocket he produces an envelope; he opens it, he presses the contents into your hand. You may not want corals or razor blades, views of Vesuvius or celluloid combs; he admits it. But can you honestly say—honestly, with your hand on your heart—that you have no use for pornographic engravings? And for nothing, sir, positively for nothing. Ten francs apiece; the set of twelve for a hundred. . . .

The touts, the pimps, the mendicants of Italy are the energetic members of a conquering, progressive race. The Neapolitan cabman is a disciple of Samuel Smiles; the vendors of pornographic post cards and the sturdy beggars live their lives with a strenuousness that would have earned the commendation of a Roosevelt. Self-help and the strenuous life do not flourish on the other shore of the Mediterranean. In Tunisia the tourist walks abroad unpestered. The Arabs have no future.

And yet there were periods in the past when the Arabs were a progressing people. During the centuries which immediately followed Mohammed's apostolate, the Arabs had a future—a future and a most formidable present. Too much insistence on the fatalism inherent in their religion has reduced them to the condition of static lethargy and supine incuriousness in which they now find themselves. That they might still have a future if they changed their philosophy of life must be obvious to anyone who has watched the behaviour of Arab children, who have not yet had time to be influenced by the prevailing fatalism of Islam. Arab children are as lively, as inquisitive, as tiresome and as charming as the children of the most progressively Western people. At Nefta the adult beggars and donkey drivers might leave us, resignedly, in peace; but the children were unescapable. We could never stir abroad without finding a little troop of them frisking around us. It was in vain that we tried to drive them away; they accompanied us, whether we liked it or no, on every walk, and, when the walk was over, claimed wages for their importunate fidelity.

To provide tourists with guidance they did not need—this, we found, was the staple profession of the little boys of Nefta. But they had other and more ingenious ways of making money. Close and acute observers of tourists, they had made an important psychological discovery about this curious race of beings. Foreigners, they found out, especially elderly female foreigners, have a preposterous tenderness for animals. The little boys of Nefta have systematically exploited this discovery. Their methods, which we had frequent opportunities of observing, are simple and effective. In front of the hotel a gang of little ruffians is perpetually on the watch.

A tourist shows himself, or herself, on one of the balconies: immediately the general of the troop—or perhaps it would be better to call him the director of the company, for it is obvious that the whole affair is organized on a strictly business footing—runs forward to within easy coin-tossing distance. From somewhere about his person he produces a captive bird—generally some brightly coloured little creature not unlike a goldfinch. Smiling up at the tourist, he shows his prize. 'Oiseau,' he explains in his pidgin French. When the tourist has been made to understand that the bird is alive, the little boy proceeds, with the elaborate gestures of a conjurer, to pretend to wring its neck, to pull off its legs and wings, to pluck out its feathers. For a tender-hearted tourist the menacing pantomime is unbearable.

'Lâche la bête. Je te donne dix sous.'

Released, the bird flaps ineffectually away, as well as its clipped wings will permit. The coins are duly thrown and in the twinkling of an eye picked up. And the little boys scamper off to recapture the feebly fluttering source of their income. After seeing an old English lady blackmailed out of a small fortune for the ten-times-repeated release of a single captive, we hardened our hearts whenever birds were produced for our benefit. The little boys went through the most elaborately savage mimicry. We looked on calmly. In actual fact, we observed, they never did their victims any harm. A bird, it was obvious, was far too valuable to be lightly killed; goldfinches during the tourist season laid golden eggs. Besides, they were really very nice little boys and fond of their pets. When they saw that we had seen through their trick and could not be induced to pay ransom, they grinned up at us without malice and knowingly, as though we were their accomplices, and carefully put the birds away.

The importunity of the little boys was tiresome when one wanted to be alone. But

if one happened to be in the mood for it, their company was exceedingly entertaining. The exploitation of the tourists was a monopoly which the most active of the children had arrogated, by force and cunning, to themselves. There was a little gang of them who shared the loot and kept competitors at a distance. By the time we left, we had got to know them very well.

When we walked abroad, small strangers tried to join our party; but they were savagely driven away with shouts and blows. We were private property; no trespassing was tolerated. It was only by threatening to stop their wages that we could persuade the captains of the Nefta tourist industry to desist from persecuting their rivals. There was one particularly charming little boy—mythically beautiful, as only Arab children can be beautiful—who was the object of their special fury. The captains of the tourist industry were ugly: they dreaded the rivalry of this lovely child. And they were right; he was irresistible. We insisted on his being permitted to accompany us.

'But why do you send him away?' we asked.

'Lui méchant,' the captains of industry replied in their rudimentary French. 'Lui casser un touriste.'

'He smashed a tourist?' we repeated in some astonishment.

They nodded. Blushing, even the child himself seemed reluctantly to admit the truth of their accusations. We could get no further explanations; none of them knew enough French to give them. 'Lui méchant. Lui casser un touriste.' That was all we could discover. The lovely child looked at us appealingly. We decided to run the risk of being smashed and let him come with us. I may add that we came back from all our walks quite intact.

Under the palm trees, through that labyrinth of paths and running streams, we wandered interminably with our rabble of little guides. Most often it was to that part of the oasis called the Corbeille that we went. At the bottom of a rounded valley, theatre-shaped and with smooth steep sides of sand, a score of springs suddenly gush out. There are little lakes, jade green like those pools beneath the cypresses of the Villa d'Este at Tivoli. Round their borders the palm trees go jetting up, like fountains fixed in their upward aspiring gesture, their drooping crown of leaves a green spray arrested on the point of falling. Fountains of life—and five yards away the smooth unbroken slopes of sand glare in the sun.

A little river flows out from the lakes, at first between high banks, then into an open sheet of water where the children paddle and bathe, the beasts come down to drink, the women do their washing. The river is the main road in this part of the oasis. The Arabs, when they want to get from place to place, tuck up their night-shirts and wade. Shoes and stockings, not to mention the necessity for keeping up their dignified prestige, do not permit Europeans to follow their example. It is only on mule-back that Europeans use the river road. On foot, with our little guides, we had to scramble precariously on the slopes of crumbling banks, to go balancing across bridges made of a single palm stem, to overleap the mud walls of gardens. The owners of these gardens had a way of making us indirectly pay toll for our passage across their property.

Politely, they asked us if we would like a drink of palm wine. It was impossible to say no; we protested that we should be delighted. With the agility of a monkey, a boy would fairly run up a palm tree, to bring down with him a little earthenware pot full of the sap which flows from an incision made for the purpose at the top of the stem, in the centre of the crown of leaves. The pot, never too scrupulously clean, was offered to us; we had to drink, or at least pretend to drink, a horribly sickly fluid tasting of sugared water slightly flavoured with the smell of fresh cabbage leaves. One was happy to pay a franc

or two to be allowed to return the stuff untasted to the owner.

I may add here that none of the drinks indigenous to Nefta are satisfactory. The palm juice makes one sick, the milk is rather goaty, and the water is impregnated with magnesia, has a taste of Carlsbad or Hunyadi Janos, and produces on all but hardened drinkers of it the same physiological effects as do the waters of those more celebrated springs. There is no alternative but wine. And fortunately Tunisia is rich in admirable vintages. The red wines of Carthage are really delicious, and even the smallest of vins ordinaires are very drinkable.

A fertile oasis possesses a characteristic colour scheme of its own, which is entirely unlike that of any landscape in Italy or the north. The fundamental note is struck by the palms. Their foliage, except where the stiff shiny leaves metallically reflect the light, is a rich blue-green. Beneath them, one walks in a luminous aquarium shadow, broken by innumerable vivid shafts of sunlight that scatter gold over the ground or, touching the trunks of the palm trees, make them shine a pale ashy pink through the subaqueous shadow. There is pink, too, in the glaring whiteness of the sand beyond the fringes of the oasis. Under the palms, beside the brown or jade-coloured water, glows the bright emerald green of corn or the deciduous trees of the north, with here and there the huge yellowish leaves of a banana tree, the smoky grey of olives, or the bare bone-white and writhing form of a fig tree.

As the sun gradually sinks, the aquarium shadow beneath the palm trees grows bluer, denser; you imagine yourself descending through layer after darkening layer of water. Only the pale skeletons of the fig trees stand out distinctly; the waters gleam like eyes in the dark ground; the ghost of a little marabout or chapel shows its domed silhouette, white and strangely definite in the growing darkness, through a gap in the trees. But looking up from the depths of this submarine twilight, one sees the bright pale sky of evening, and against it, still touched by the level, rosily-golden light, gleaming as though transmuted into sheets of precious metal, the highest leaves of the palm trees.

A little wind springs up; the palm leaves rattle together; it is suddenly cold. 'En avant,' we call. Our little guides quicken their pace. We follow them through the darkening mazes of the palm forest, out into the open. The village lies high on the desert plateau above the oasis, desert-coloured, like an arid outcrop of the tawny rock. We mount to its nearest gate. Through passage-ways between blank walls, under long dark tunnels the children lead us—an obscure and tortuous way which we never succeeded in thoroughly mastering—back to the square market-place at the centre of the town. The windows of the inn glimmer invitingly. At the door we pay off the captains of industry and the little tourist-smasher; we enter. Within the hotel it is provincial France.

For longer expeditions entailing the use of mules or asses, we had to take grown-up guides. They knew almost as little French as the children, and their intelligence was wrapped impenetrably in the folds of fatalism. Talking to an Islamically educated Arab is like talking to a pious European of the fourteenth century. Every phenomenon is referred by them to its final cause—to God. About the immediate causes of things—precisely how they happen—they seem to feel not the slightest interest. Indeed, it is not even admitted that there are such things as immediate causes: God is directly responsible for everything.

'Do you think it will rain?' you ask, pointing to menacing clouds overhead.

'If God wills,' is the answer.

You pass the native hospital. 'Are the doctors good?'

'In our country,' the Arab gravely replies, in the tone of Solomon, 'we say that doctors are of no avail. If Allah wills that a man shall die, he will die. If

not, he will recover.'

All of which is profoundly true, so true, indeed, that it is not worth saying. To the Arab, however, it seems the last word in human wisdom. For him, God is the perfectly adequate explanation of everything; he leaves fate to do things unassisted, in its own way—that is to say, from the human point of view, the worst way.

It is difficult for us to realize nowadays that our fathers once thought much as the Arabs do now. As late as the seventeenth century, the chemist Boyle found it necessary to protest against what I may call this Arabian view of things.

'For to explicate a phenomenon,' he wrote, 'it is not enough to ascribe it to one general efficient, but we must intelligibly show the particular manner, how that general cause produces the proposed effect. He must be a very dull inquirer who, demanding an account of the phenomena of a watch, shall rest satisfied with being told that it is an engine made by a watchmaker; though nothing be declared thereby of the structure and coaptation of the spring, wheels, balance, etc., and the manner how they act on one another so as to make the needle point out the true time of the day.'

The Arabs were once the continuators of the Greek tradition; they produced men of science. They have relapsed—all except those who are educated according to Western methods—into pre-scientific fatalism, with its attendant incuriosity and apathy. They are the 'dull inquirers who, demanding an account of the phenomena of a watch, rest satisfied with being told that it is an engine made by a watchmaker.' The result of their satisfaction with this extremely unsatisfactory answer is that their villages look like the ruins of villages, that the blow-flies sit undisturbedly feeding on the eyelids of those whom Allah has predestined to blindness, that half their babies die, and that, politically, they are not their own masters.

The end