

MOUNTAIN LIFE IN ALGERIA

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649493203

Mountain Life in Algeria by Edgar Barclay

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EDGAR BARCLAY

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LIFE IN ALGERIA**

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ALGERIA

BY
EDGAR BARCLAY

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR



LONDON
KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, & CO., 1 PATERNOSTER SQUARE
1882

268 . 2.7

INTRODUCTION.

FROM the city of Algiers, looking eastwards across the bay, is seen a snow-covered mass towering above lower ranges of mountains. It is to the country lying immediately beneath those snow-clad peaks, inhabited by a people of entirely different race and speech to the Arabs, and known as Kabyles, that the following pages relate. Though Algiers has many English visitors, this district remains little known; the reason perhaps being the want of those accommodations that tourists look for.

A day spent at Fort National, which is at the threshold of the region I refer to, is usually considered ample, and exhausts their interest. But any one making a more prolonged stay in a country, is apt to look upon it in a different light to the passing traveller; and I may be pardoned for having taken up the pen, if I should succeed in inspiring the reader with some of the interest that I feel for this district and its native inhabitants.

In former days, when the Kabyles were self-governing, immemorial custom, religion, and tribal laws, rigidly enforced hospitality. Special funds were put aside by the Jemâa, or village Com-

mune, for the entertainment of travellers ; it held itself responsible for the safety of the stranger and for that of his luggage, and each householder was in his turn called upon to play the part of host.

At present, under French rule, it is obligatory for the Amine, or headman, to entertain a stranger for one night. If it were not for this law, it is clear that, as there are no inns, a European journeying through the country might, by the caprice of the natives, be forced to pass the night without shelter on the mountain side.

The Amine refuses the money offered him in requital, but some one can always be found to accept a suitable payment.

The house where the traveller may be entertained, will probably be constructed in somewhat the following fashion.

A series of rooms is built round an open courtyard, which has a single entrance, and within which cattle, sheep, and goats are driven for protection at night. The building is of blocks of stone roughly plastered together, and whitewashed over. The beams and rafters of the roof are apparent, and upon them is spread a thick layer of canes, the crannies between being filled up with earth ; above is a covering of tiles, and on these again heavy stones help by their weight to keep the whole in its place. The eaves are broad, and sometimes project so far over the courtyard that they are supported by wooden columns, and thus form a rude corridor, which affords shelter for the beasts from the weather.

Is not such a courtyard the model of the rude ancestor of such refined examples as are to be seen at Pompeii, where the open

enclosure for the protection of animals has grown into a fountain-refreshed garden, and the rustic corridor into one decorated with elegant encaustic paintings ?

In some parts of the country, large flattened slabs of cork are substituted for tiles, and are laid overlapping in the manner of slates ; a layer of earth is beaten down on the top, which soon becomes overgrown with moss and weeds. These roofs are much flatter than the tiled ones, being just sufficiently inclined to throw off water when it rains heavily ; they thus form terraces useful for various purposes, such as drying fruit. The rooms are lighted chiefly from their doorways, which lead from the courtyard, but in the outer walls are a few windows just large enough to permit a person's head being protruded. Rooms are set apart for the women and children of the household, and on one side of the courtyard is the guest chamber. On entering this, the stranger is struck by finding it resemble a barn, rather than an ordinary room at an inn. The roof is supported by columns and beams, made from the roughly trimmed trunks of trees, and the floor is of beaten plaster. At one end of the room is a wall about five feet in height, supporting a broad platform or stage, on which are placed gigantic earthenware jars, square in plan, and five or six feet in height. These contain a provision of dried figs and grain, which is thus secured from damp and the attacks of rats. The platform is the roof of a stable for the accommodation of mules and cows. The room has only one

door, which serves also as a passage to this stable. The beasts entering, turn, and are driven down an inclined plane, which opens between the outer wall of the building and the wall supporting the platform, and find themselves in their stalls. The floor of the stable is three or four feet lower than where the guest reclines, who is startled at seeing the heads of the beasts appear at large square openings, on a level with, and facing him.

This singular arrangement has at any rate the merit of allowing the traveller to observe whether his animals are properly cared for, since literally they sup at the sideboard.

Thoughts also are likely to arise concerning the Nativity, and how the infant Saviour was laid in his swaddling-clothes in a manger; for here is an example, that the most natural course to adopt, supposing that there should be an extra number of guests, would be to enter the stable under the same roof.

In one corner is a small hole made in the floor, where live embers are placed if the weather be cold, the smoke finding its exit as best it can through a hole above. Rugs are spread on the floor, and in due time the evening meal is brought, which will include a Kouskous, the characteristic dish of the country, answering to the macaroni of Southern Italy.

The Amine and some of his friends, sit by while the guest eats; but they do not partake themselves, their *rôle* is, to enliven the stranger with their conversation, to serve him, and to encourage him to eat as much as he can. When he has finished they retire.

leaving a guardian who sleeps just within the threshold. The traveller rolls himself up in his wraps, and disposes himself to sleep upon the floor. Even if tired, he is fortunate if he wake refreshed in the morning, for sometimes there may be other animals besides cows and mules—rats in the roof or about the bins, not to mention fleas, the dogs of the house bark, and jackals howl outside.

Such being a picture of the native accommodation, it is evident that a European proposing to remain in the country, away from French settlements, must travel with a tent. The opportunity to do so, was offered me by Colonel Playfair, Her Majesty's Consul-General at Algiers, who most kindly placed his fine tent at my disposal; and I take this occasion to again thank him for the shelter under which I spent so many pleasant days and peaceful nights.

I have been asked, 'What do you find attractive in this semi-barbarous Kabylia?' Before relating my story, it will not be out of place to mention a few facts relating to the country, which in my estimation render it interesting for an artist.

Firstly, the landscape combines great beauty with an imposing grandeur. There is a luxuriance of vegetation which more than rivals that of Southern Italy; and the glorious mountain masses, with their scarpred precipices, cannot be easily matched for their form and colour.

The land is highly cultivated, and of a happy and cheerful aspect.

It is thickly populated, and the out-of-door life of the people, both as regards their agricultural and pastoral occupations, is picturesque. Not that these are strange in their character, on the contrary, they have the charm of being simple world-wide performances, common to all time.

The women, although Mohammedans, expose their faces with the same freedom as Europeans.

The dress of the men consists of a tunic and burnous.

The artistic merit of this loose and extremely simple dress, is not in the actual clothes, but in the manner of wearing them, which is varied. From the arrangements of folds into which these garments fall being ever changing, the artistic sense of the observer is always kept alive. A man thus simply dressed, may by some chance movement fling his cloak about his person, so that its masses and folds assume a dignity and interest worthy of permanence in sculpture. Such harmonies unfold themselves suddenly, and are fleeting, but they are an incentive to endeavour to record them.

I believe this is the only corner of the world, where the dress of the women is still the same as the Greek dress of antiquity. Though the Romans dominated North Africa, there is no reason to suppose that it was introduced by them; because, in a certain condition of society, it is the dress which common sense dictates.

Gestures can be studied when the people are excited, but only then. I should describe the ordinary manners of the Kabyles as