

Some Places

Pages from a Notebook

Marrakesh

DAZZLE of stars and orange-trees. Throbbing of nightingales, twinkling of starlight. The perfume of the orange smothers everything. The grape-fruit in flower has a lingering sweetness that the orange lacks.

The twittering of birds before dawn, a great rushing of birds. After daybreak a cadence of the nightingale echoes still, a fragment of the night. At first light the swallow utters her piercing cry. Then the liquid throaty gurgling of the common oriole and the blackbird. The last songs rise from a damp shingle whose every pebble is the sound of a sparrow and the kisses, kisses, kisses of myriad tom-tits. . . .

At noon all fall silent except the dove, always invisible, who murmurs tirelessly through the heat.

THE BARE WALL, flat garden, low firm divan. Surfaces where the eye can wander, the body twist and turn. The irritation of a crease, disgust with a climbing lane. Close by, near the sleeping fountain, an unpleasantly

COLETTE (who died in Paris in 1954 at the age of 81) published over fifty books, but many of her personal notebooks and travel diaries have never been translated. These pages—so redolent of a dead Empire—are taken from "Places," a selection translated by David Le Vay which will shortly be published by Peter Owen.

raucous American laugh ruffles the black-birds' plumage. What's more, this American woman is wearing a chiffon dress printed with a map of Paris. Fact.

ILLUSION of having reached a goal because one is resting in the middle of an enclosed garden, with only mute signs of human penetration, traces that leave no sound on the air. How long can the illusion last? "I've come to the very end. . . ." The end of what? Life? Desire? Movement? Love? How long can one browse in the contemplation of a secret garden, a filigree of fine metalwork against a leafy background? How much time can one spend in waiting for the wind at last to stir the rigid, immense torch of a cypress that seems to buttress an angle of the house and create the illusion that the palace itself is swaying?

For today, and the two previous days, the illusion has lasted. It is simply that luxury beguiles one's sense of everyday life; and here, as elsewhere, luxury is stillness and silence.

Who can say what a palace is like before going inside? It is a wall like every other wall, the colour of pale twilight, the colour of earth, the colour of the sky. The men who sit under the portals resemble all the men of these parts beneath every Moroccan portal.

At the end of the unpaved passage the small rectangular cloister is so plain and cool and deserted. A chanting of prayers betrays a tiny little mosque, built by the Pasha and

reserved for him and his immediate neighbours. No guards or servants to be seen, only the outline of a man dreaming against a door. . . . It puts out an arm to the door, which opens. Again a narrow passage with the beginning of a mosaic surface. At the end of the passage a tall man, all in white, El Hadj Thami Glaou.

The large sunken almost fearful eyes of a dreamer. The small capricious chin of unrestrained violence. We can learn nothing of such a man, save for his studied gentleness, his perfect—almost wordless—politeness; for he knows nothing of the French language and stands on ceremony because of this lack, like a cat who will not drink while watched. He understand everything, or nearly everything. He says little; Samuel ben Rimoj translates.

He leads us through the long cool rooms, furnished with divans and scented by burning cedar and coumarin wood.

His own room is a long narrow rectangle, perfume-filled and flanked by divans with white silk cushions and seats. A bed, all veiled in white gauze and embroidered in soft pink—the bed of Clara d'Ellébeuse—is where the ruler of thousands sleeps. His hand, dark against the white curtain, indicates the couch. . . .

Dinner in the oriental style, under garish electric light, Dufayel chandeliers, beside a telephone fixed to the mosaic.

THE REAL LUXURY—all there is to be seen, perhaps—is the slaves. Seven or eight women busy themselves round our dining-table of five places. Beautiful tall negresses, glossier than any fruit, and dressed in immaculate fabrics, they manoeuvre in their great skirts like ships on a calm sea. But the fascinating Chleuhs, the colour of barely tinted ivory, have fine compressed mouths, narrow noses and small aristocratic hands and feet. Nothing of Africa in them. Is there any creature more European than a young Chleuh dancer, with her Spanish nose and delicate lip?

After the meal she dances while plucking

at a small stringed instrument and another Chleuh sings, stroking a similar instrument with a bow. A third Chleuh sings also; this one is darker, as attractive as a beautiful Italian girl. Their song is a "mountain entertainment," not unlike one from the Tyrol. . . .

THREE FLIGHTS of mosaic stairs. I am supported, carried along, by two pairs of female arms.

But the two gay recluses are not used to climbing or hurrying; afterwards they rest a hand on a heaving, plump breast. One is already done for, enormous with pendulous cheeks; the other is still charming, with small teeth, a frank childlike gaze, expressive little hands with carefully-tended bright red nails. One can only guess at the body beneath the abundant heavy fabrics, fashioned like the dresses of the Second Empire. Cut blue velvet reveals a second robe of heavy rose, floral and magnificent. Over the shoulders straps of violet silk interwoven with long lozenges of gold, support sleeves of silk brocade. Moroccan head-dress, with silken fringes displaying the ears, a golden plaque above the forehead. This forehead plaque is embossed with fine diamonds; the pear-shaped brilliants dangling from the ears are very European.

The long salon is hung with deeply reflecting silky Lyons velvet. Standing around us or bent over their mint tea, splendid—almost gigantic—negresses laugh silently.

A Moroccan Luncheon

"AZIL!"

A Si-Kassem never had to call twice. She stood beside the door, leaning her shoulder on its cedar frame. She ran on bare feet with heels and nails of a dusky pink. She ran with her skirt in great folds, sprigged with white muslin embroidered with small flowers. Each time she brought a new offering: a straw pagoda, tented with velvet and braided with gold, sheltering round loaves of pure wheat flavoured with aniseed; cov-

ered dishes of red clay with a conical lid pierced by a smoking chimney, or perhaps some ewers. The ewer for washing and its copper basin, made in Fez, chiselled in rich yellow metal; the English ewer lined with silvered glass, from whose insulating walls poured bluish water from a spring that welled up from the ground a few yards away. There were six of us, seated in Turkish style round the low table. None of us drank from the contents of the water carafe during the meal; we knew that merely rinsing the mouth would preserve our appetite for a good Moroccan meal that we had learned to appreciate. . . .

“Azil!”

A silken scarf, modelled like a Parisian hat, revealed nothing of her hair. Azil was young and zealous and did not allow herself to smile. Her soft cheeks and bare round arms captured the blue from without whenever she passed the bay-window opening on to the sea. Azil mirrored the blue of the sky, the green of foliage; from each ear a glass pendant swung to its own bluish reflection on her strong neck. Azil was beautiful like a polished jar, beautiful like a young seal, beautiful like any well-treated, well-fed, sixteen-year-old slave.

She had already placed before us pale girdle-cakes soaked in sugared butter and sprinkled with almonds; pigeons bathed in succulent juice with green olives, chick-peas melting in flour, sweet onions; chickens buried under fresh beans with wrinkled skins and lemon cooked and re-cooked and reduced to a savoury puree. We had also had mutton, and mutton again, and once more; mutton stuffed with fennel, mutton with cumin and courgettes, mutton with twenty spices; and an exquisite diversion—girdle-cakes flaky to the limit of flakiness, rendered transparent, concealing a soft nugget of minced fowl, sugared and flavoured with nutmeg.

So WHAT ABOUT all this sugar in dishes we customarily salt? Allow me to insert a laudatory parenthesis. Good Moroccan cooking—and I have perfect native hospitality in mind

—has its secretly tried principles. It relies extensively on various dishes cooked on damped-down fires, in which—thanks to olive-oil—no one notices the lack of butter. As for the use of sugar in the main dishes, let me for a moment leave my Moroccan meal and slyly select a recipe from one of the best manuals of French cuisine, a little volume published in 1839. I choose from a hundred others, a recipe for “shoulders of mutton *en musette*”:

“Remove all the bones from two shoulders of mutton and halve them; put the shoulders together, season inside with salt, pepper and fine spices; truss; lard the outer parts, coat with a layer of cooked forcemeat, *sugar the whole as desired*. Garnish with gherkins and truffles, lightly embedded in the forcemeat. Leave to cook in a braising-pan with a little ham, cover with slices of fat bacon and grease-proof paper, leave to cook on a slow fire. . . .”

I omit the details of glazing and dressing, which end with this ambiguous recommendation: “It is advisable to cover with a full-bodied Spaniard or a reduced Italian,” and return to the surroundings of Tangiers. But not without repeating that “sugar as desired” recurs in many an ancient recipe for braised and stewed meats; and that sugar is indispensable for any dish that takes more than an hour to cook. There is no question of sugaring your purple steak or blue cutlet, of which I partake only rarely.

CEASELESSLY Azil fetched and carried the red bowls. The spring vegetables took pride of place—broad beans, asparagus, new peas in a pot decorated with orange-trees, artichokes round as roses; small turnips, marrows and carrots appeared under swelling yellow enamel, with whole eggs broken over the dish a quarter of an hour before serving. Finally came *couscous*, at once soft and granular—*couscous*, discreet harbinger of dessert and fruit—*couscous* with a surrounding rampart, a small fortress, of sweet onions and muscat grapes swollen to the sweating-point, *couscous* and bowls of barely soured buttermilk. We lifted our heads, we began

to look at the sea, beyond an abyss of greenery tumbling to the shore.

They have vagabond, noble, disinterested souls who commit themselves to a motionless siesta on divans stuffed with fine wool and contemplate the Mediterranean through half-closed eyes. Already we can hear the water simmering in the bowls of the samovar. Faithful to tradition, our host rises to prepare the green mint tea. And if, simultaneously, we all turn to watch Azil of the black and pink feet, it is not because she seems more beautiful as she runs unburdened, it is because she is bringing to our host—oh, that odour that touches the throat with an iced finger, which plumbs the depths of the lungs, tells of snow and subtle pepper, wakens the spirits and deludes thirst!—a green bunch of crinkled mint.

The Pasha's Audience

IT IS THUS that God the Father dispenses justice—if He exists. Also, He is handsome, vast, good, robust, ancient, ageless and majestic. Also, He judges the poor. At the Last Judgment He, too, will say to the trembling bundle of rags, collapsed to kiss the ground:

“I pardon you for having stolen that small handful of beans from a garden, for you might well have been hungry.”

But the Pasha detains—by the hand of the Avenging Angel, armed with a rod, huge, sombre, carrying the culprits suspended by the hair from his indifferent wrist—he detains the other thief:

“You have stolen beans and been caught selling them. So you did not steal from necessity. You will meditate on your crime in prison for two days.”

At intervals the Pasha sniffs delicately, as if his subtle nostril could detect the odours of innocence accused and crime concealed. Four arms-smugglers, prostrated at his feet (clad in soft wool), deny having sold the Rif a quantity of rifles. Three of the traffickers stay silent, leaving the fourth as spokesman, a grinning bewildered Arab unmoved by the white majesty of the Pasha or the clair-

voyance of the French assessor (Captain T.), who acts as a public servant. The Arab, the colour of Fez clay, talks raspingly, using the whole linguistic gamut of adroit, eloquent Arab hands. The consignment of arms had been spotted in Marrakesh and in Fez and had then melted away to the North like a dream.

“No proof,” said the Pasha, “but it was no business of any of you to peddle rifles. Get back to your own tribes down in the Souss. And don’t enter the city gates again.”

He listens unmoved to the rising protests from the prostrate *djellabahs*. Squatting in oriental fashion, his back against an ordinary plank, he is radiant, silver-bearded, draped in light-coloured wool, with luminous great blue eyes showing where some blood alliance has disturbed the Arab night.

“You were drunk,” he says to a young man. “Twenty-five francs for the crime of drunkenness.”

“I wasn’t drinking,” shrills the accused Moroccan, dressed like a Frenchman in a dirty overcoat.

The Pasha extends a delicate hand towards the Angel:

“Smell him.”

The Angel seizes the red-capped head and throws it back, then bends his scimitar of a nose over the anxiously open mouth.

“He stinks of it!” declares the Angel.

He smells. He must pay.

Now IT’S THE TURN of the mad mystic.

The madman stands with his tall dry body silhouetted against the light, reminiscent in his rags of the first Crusade. He is burdened with thirty wooden rosaries, from his neck down to his mud-encrusted feet, each bead larger than a plover’s egg. Under his red hat his hair and beard are pale with ancient dust and he brandishes “the spear of St. John.” At Marrakesh he has been stealing, provoking scandal and pricking Jewish backsides. Marrakesh expelled him and he’s been seen on every track between Marrakesh and Fez among the marigolds, the wild arums, the poppies and bluets; charged, according to him, with a divine mission, the madman—

perhaps I should say the Holy Man—continued to pierce the backsides of Jews. Fez has received him on condition that he attends the Pasha's audience twice a month to answer for his conduct.

"What have you been up to?" asks the snow-white Pasha.

"Nothing."

"You have pricked the backsides of Jews."

"That is my mission."

A few days in prison suffice.

But the wild figure stirs excitedly, the thirty wooden necklaces clattering in a halo of reddish dust. The Holy Man wishes to speak, if only to anathematise us all.

"I... I should like to see my wife," moans the missionary hollowly.

"Your wife is in Marrakesh," answers the Pasha, "and, besides, you are a Holy Man and have no need of a wife."

"It's true that I am holy. But it's precisely the want of a woman that threatens to annul my holiness."

He turns his head and his dusty mop of hair from side to side and his great blank eyes search for Jewish backsides.

HERE, KISSING THE GROUND side by side, are a sorcerer and a disgruntled husband. The pale, tormented husband alleges that the sorcerer promised to tell his wife's fortune. But first the wife had to hand over her jewels to him—the trouble is that the sorcerer kept them. The tale drags on with fluttering manual commentary. Gradually the sorcerer, at first silent and disdainful, begins to laugh in a manner showing him to be a true sorcerer, a laugh that reveals square white teeth, a conquering, impudent, irresistible laugh. What a delightful sorcerer! Even the presence of his own wife, whining, snuffling, veiled, does not make him at all downcast.

Then Zeineb, too, accuses her sorcerer husband:

"Yes, he's a sorcerer all right! Yes, he stole the jewels! And he slept with the plaintiff's wife, and so-and-so's wife, and another's, and this Hanoum and that Hanoum..."

What do I hear? French names! The sorcerer laughs more than ever. And when he laughs his eyes—almost closed—show caressing and ironic between curved eyelashes; two shiny curling locks of hair shadow his cheeks; under his *djellabah* there is a gleam of white linen—it's obvious that he's a sorcerer, a sorcerer, a sorcerer!

The Pasha motions Zeineb to silence.

"If I am to adjudicate wisely in all this I must concern myself only with the matter of the jewel theft. For the rest is nothing but women's gossip and to take account of that would make one dizzy. Remove this Zeineb and bring me the black slave who took the jewels to the sorcerer."

During the ensuing pause the just Pasha rests his gaze momentarily on the roses in the courtyard. A cool breeze stirs the long pendants of datura flowers. Flowers, clouds, untamed birds, these are the friends of this wise and powerful man who passed his youth far from the city, shared the wild tribal life and regrets the peace of boundless horizons. He seems to sail like a summer cloud on his bank of folded carpets. But it was a horse which felt the weight of this body filled with a noble spirit, when the Pasha left, at the age of sixty-nine, to bring back to Fez, to us, to France, the disturbed tribesmen who spread like an uncertain wave. He brought them back, after combat, pardoned and punished; and, as his horse galloped joyfully, two baskets of severed rebel heads swung from his saddle.

Sentiments From Sumer

My wife is thanking God for all he has given her;
My mother is prostrate beside the sacred river;
There is not, I think, much hope of dinner.

*

She had a baby without being laid,
He had a belly without eating bread. . . .
I am telling you what they said.

*

One hand rising upon the other
Built this man's house;
One belly piled on another
Brought it to dust.

*

Naked, cross-legged,
The sweating tailor stitches,
That other men may strut
In robes and britches.

Those who labour to create beauty,
Make others fair, themselves stay dirty.

*

A king? What's that to me?
A lord? Oh, stop your chatter!
A tax-collector? Ah, my friend!
That is a serious matter.

*

So soon we die,
Best spend every penny!
So long we live,
Best save many!

*

Getting married is a joy, of course,
Unequalled till the moment of divorce.

*

A prisoner-of-war! Oh,
Tethered by the nose
He stumbles by; just so go I,
In bond to wife and child.

*

It is desert fare that makes a man,
It is a shoe that points his way,
It is a wife that writes his fate,
A daughter that consoles his age;
It is a son that shields his head,
A son's wife that breaks his heart.

Nigel Dennis