

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-20

c/o Ambassade de Belgique
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GLIMPSES OF MOROCCO - PART II.

Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

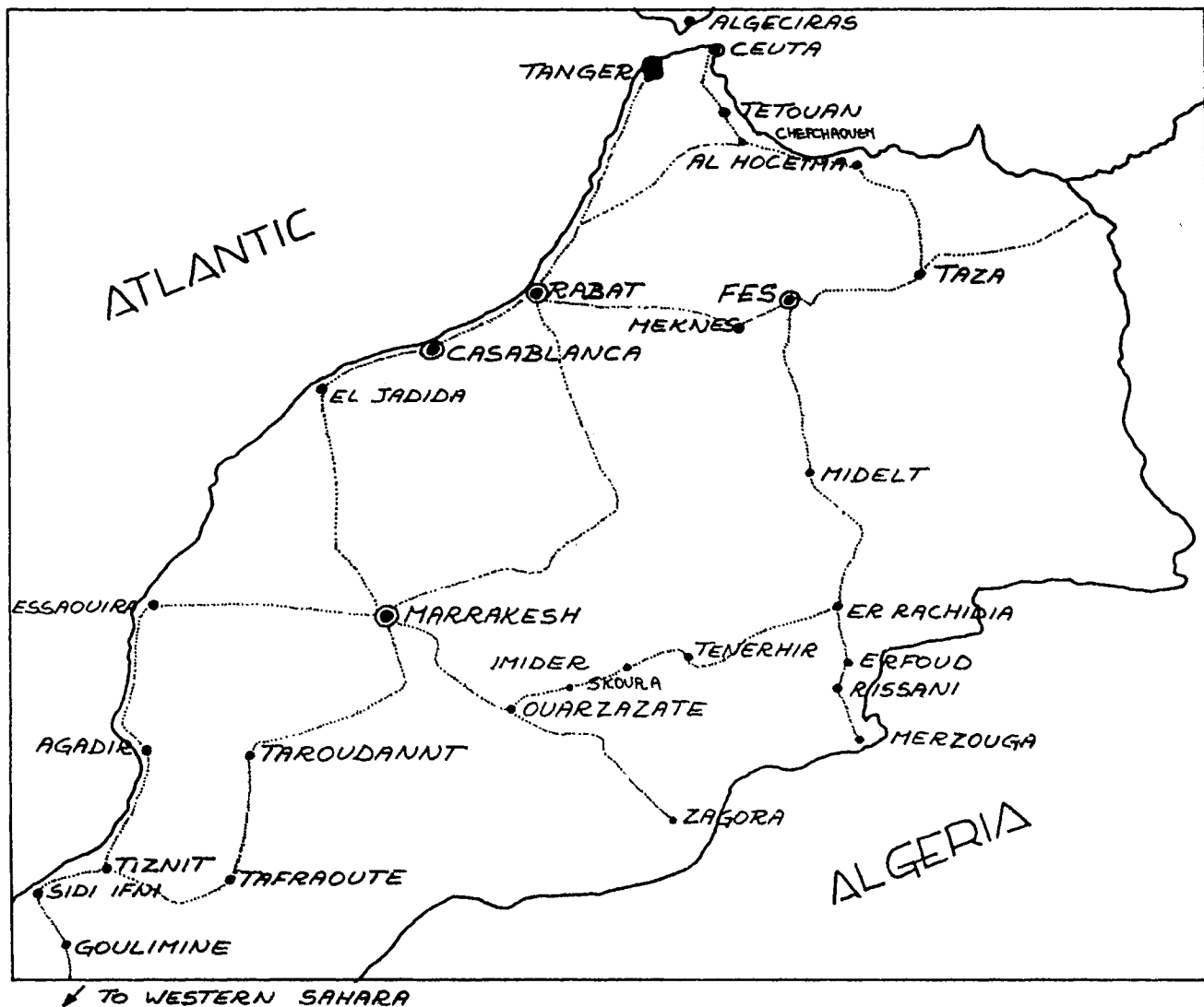
From Rachidiya southward the villages are strung out along the thin, potholed tarmac that leads to Erfoud and Rissani. Every few miles an ornamental gate lurches over the road, indicating the edge of another settlement. Then there is another mile or so before the village actually appears - as if to give the traveler time to prepare himself for what he will find. The village slowly develops from the surrounding rock and sand. There is a splash of color from vegetable stalls around the kasbah gates, a whirl of movement near the local market. The road delicately skirts the mud walls at the village edge, meanders through a few gardens near the riverbed, and throws itself into another stretch of monotonously flat and monochrome desert littered with small rounded pebbles.

There was only one vehicle in front of ^{me} as I drove toward Erfoud, a van piled high with luggage. Every now and then a black hand emerged from the front window, indicating with a graceful gesture that I could pass. The van, however, took up the entire road and swayed dangerously in the early morning wind. An hour later, at Erfoud's town square, the driver pulled over and waved me down. Several children ran out from the van. The driver was darkskinned, with a full beard and skullcap. Despite his large frame he moved quickly, with some kind of nervous energy. His wife's face was completely veiled in a black gauzy material that left a hint of high cheekbones.

"Sorry to have slowed you down." He pointed at the tarp on the van: "I was afraid to get off the road with that load on top; I just returned from France." I had already guessed that much. He was back for his yearly vacation, four weeks in the little desert town of Erfoud. For twenty-two years he has made the same annual trip. He considers himself a lucky man: "I was able to get a permit for my wife and children in France. Many of my friends live for years without their families."

Retirement is only a few more summers away. Some of his savings have already been invested in a motorcycle shop. Beneath the tarp were spare parts for later use. The Tangiers custom official had wanted a large

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bribe; there had been a heated argument in the shade of the custom shed. The thought of that wasted money, however, could not still his exuberance as he looked out over his native village.

It is only 9 a.m. and already unbearably hot. The local bank is opening up. A few men are waiting, lined up under a row of tamarisks. While listening to a local boy who wants me to hire him as a guide for a trip to the Merzouga dunes, I accidentally lean my knee against the bumper of the Land Rover; within seconds I receive a nasty little burn. A certain simplicity and predictability prevails in these little desert towns: one always finds a post office, the agricultural extension bureau, the police station, the bank, an inevitable Rue Mohammed V and Avenue Hassan II.

There is also a feeling of a desert town's genteel desolation in Erfoud. Only the Banque Populaire smells of money: it has air conditioners that manage to chip an edge off the heat. The managing officer's glasswalled cubicle has its own machine. With his carefully starched shirt and silk tie, the young man behind the desk could be in Paris or New York. There are brochures for loans, backed by government programs, encouraging young people to stay in the area. Posters on the wall advocate local savings accounts; "The money you earn overseas will be safe and at your disposal in your own country!"

At the town's only intersection a young policeman is energetically directing occasional traffic in the blinding sunlight. It is a slow procession of undernourished donkeys, a few army trucks, some children on bicycles and a string of Land Rovers heading for the little market and the desert beyond. Already the wind is blowing thin lines of sand across the road.

In southern Morocco recycling is a necessity elevated to art. In Erfoud Casablanca oil drums were hammered into richly decorated doors, American food aid containers fashioned into slender-handled doorknobs, Essaouira sardine cans punched into graceful sieves. On the road to Merzouga a young boy tried to sell some local fossils. His carrying case was a Shell oil can, flattened and fitted into a shallow rectangular container.

* * *

Dust to dust. For almost eleven centuries Rissani was the endpoint of one of the great caravan routes across the desert. It was the capital of the Tafilalt, the birthplace of one of Morocco's great dynasties. Now it is a sun-drenched ruin, an abominable place of dust and hot desert winds, a miasma of poverty. Clouds of sand suddenly gusted out of the market gates as I arrived, making the place even more unpromising. People huddled against the sudden onslaught between crates of vegetables, between the legs of braying donkeys and behind the counters in the run-down stalls.

The vegetables were of poor quality. Only some occra, strung on thin metal wire, looked palatable; even so it was covered with a thin film of gray dust. There were mounds of dates too old for human consumption, congealed into sticky brown lumps, only good for fodder now. In the bakeries fresh tabouna bread hardened in an hour's time. Tomatoes looked bruised; mellons rotted away in great piles beside rusted scales. Even the

Moroccan eagerness to do business was suspended. The men sidled among the heaps or squatted over smokestained teapots. Inquiries for prices received only desultory answers: the spirit of bargaining had given way to a take-it-or-leave-it nonchalance.

The heat and the dust and the smell of the animal market made me wince. In an enclosure of stone walls several hundred donkeys milled around. Sheep stood tied by their forelegs in line after long line. Here the selling was brisk; Eid al-Kabir [a muslim feast when each family slaughters a sheep] was only a few days off. Here also the old trading instincts had not been tempered by the heat: the haggling over price and the size of the tax among sellers, tax accessors and buyers was sharp and contumelious.

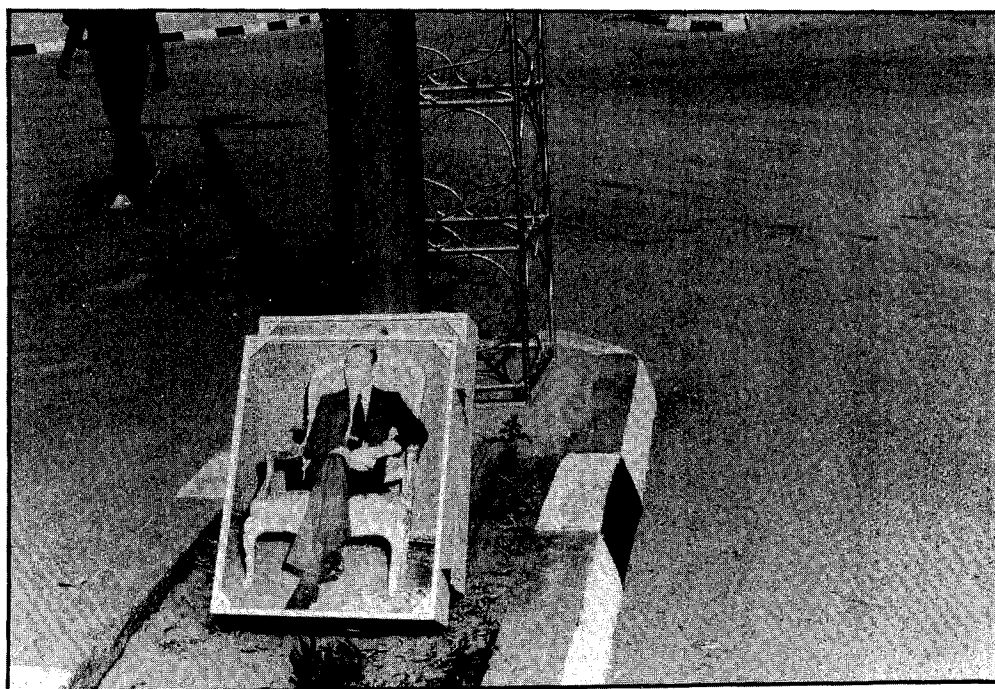
The market at Rissani, as some of the souks in Fes, was of a medieval quality. The intrusion of modernity stopped in the street outside the market gates where trucks and tractors had been parked. Inside those gates was a world unencumbered and unaltered by what went on outside. It was, as in all medieval settings, a world where wonder and awe persevered. Nothing proved the endurance of wonder better than the wonder doctor's stall with its potions for all imaginable and imagined diseases, its strings of amulets, row upon row of never heard-of spices in darkblue glass jars, animal horns and dried animal testicles, a wondrous assortment of aphrodisiacs and animal skins.

The doctor's name was Sayid al-Madani. He was outrageously dressed: it was his business to be seen. He held in his hands an emaciated iguana, its spindly legs and splayed feet dangling in the air. In the Rissani market place I stood out as a curiosity. Mr. Madani's business was curiosities - would I care to have tea with him? The shack smelled of cardamom and Eau de Cologne, depending on the corner I sat in. The wonder doctor busied himself with the tea; the iguana darted off behind some cotton bags.

* * *

The sense of having stepped back in time didn't leave me for a long time. The landscape through which I now drove heightened the feeling: a continuation of fortified kasbahs and ksour, ancient looking fortresses that loomed across rivers and guarded mountainpasses. Some were built only eighty years ago. This didn't detract from the impression of medievalism; it testified even more to its endurance.

There were clumps of oleander along the river in the Vallée du Dadès, mixed with wild mint that left a delicate fragrance. At the valley's entrance a band of striated purple rock jutted out across the landscape like the upright vertebra of some gigantic reptile. Mud colored villages hung below the jagged peaks. The ksour stood like giants between the villages and the river, dominating every turn of the road. The donkeypaths shimmered in the afternoon heat. Along them a constant procession moved back and forth from the trickle of river in the bottom of the valley: boys returning home with little buckets of charcoal, girls with bunches of thistles piled high on their backs, women laboring under wicker baskets of wet clothes. At the water fountain the men looked unkempt in scuffed shoes



ERFOUD

_____The king's pictures, huge transparencies in sandproof cases that light up at night, line the main street of virtually every Moroccan city and village. Perhaps to match the incredible cultural variety within his country, Hassan II comes in a rich assortment of poses: the king as a young man, as an older man; with sunglasses, without sunglasses; at the royal palace, in the Western Sahara; in army uniform, in army uniform with decorations; in 1950s suits with huge lapels, in Lacoste poloshirts. A sense of continuity is assured; the pictures come in standard sizes and can be replaced at a moment's notice.

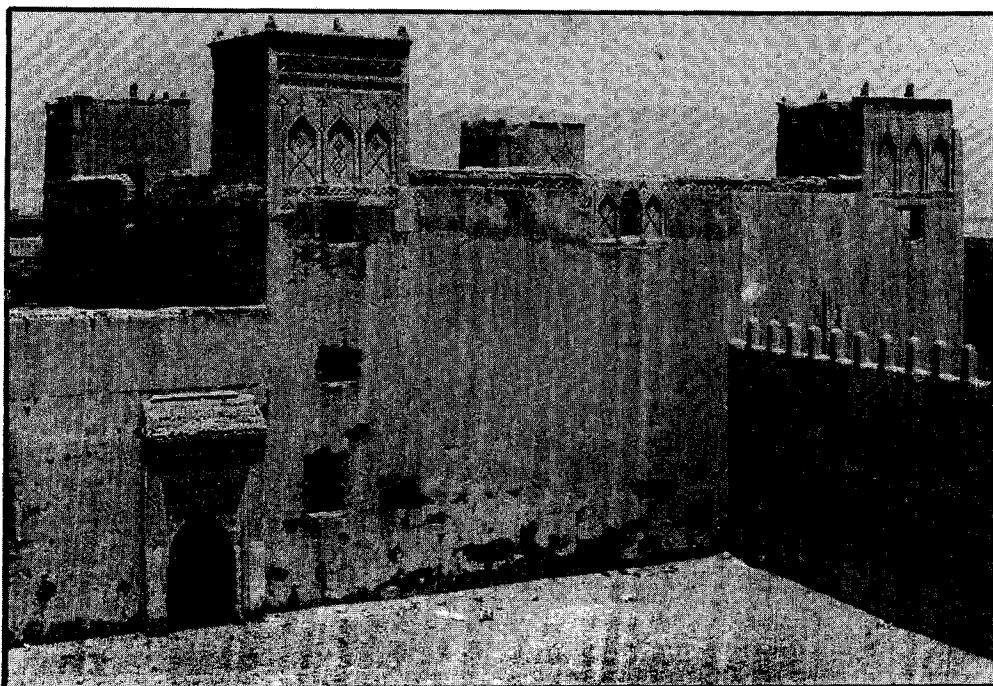
Presence, even if only hinted at with the aid of photographs, is important to the king. Only thirty years ago Thami el Glaoui, the last Pasha of Marrakesh, finally gave up his resistance to the pretensions of the Alaouite monarchy. Only since then has the country been truly unified. It is as if the king through his pictures wants to reinforce that message: "I am here; there is no more bled as-siba [area where the ruler has no control]."

Every small southern village worth its recently acquired electricity seemingly vies for the honor of inaugurating its row of royal pictures. Inevitably you find some local electrician busily hooking up another case before the sun gets too hot. In Erfoud two of them leaned momentarily against an electricity pole. Minutes later they swung in midair below the city's entry gate; immediately the first grains of sand from an oncoming sandstorm pelted the image of the king in his brocaded chair.



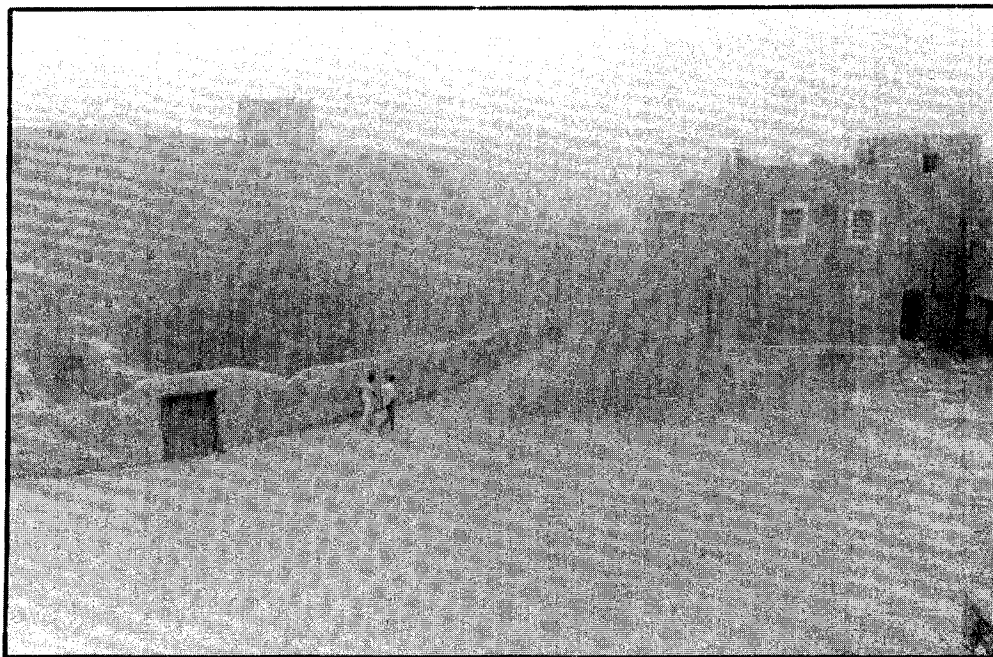
BERBER MAN NEAR MERZOUGA.

Near the Merzouga dunes one more sandstorm suddenly made traveling impossible. A number of men came in from the desert and lined up outside the mud wall of a small café-restaurant where I had found temporary shelter. They turned their faces away from the wind, rocked back and forth on their heels and smoked incessantly, waiting for the storm to pass. When visibility was near zero, Muhammad drove up on a bicycle, pedaling furiously, his jelaba aflutter. The men said it was a reckless thing to do. He only smiled, came over to where I was waiting and, in exchange for a couple of cigarettes, said I could "take all the pictures you want." I wondered where he came from, and how he made his living. But he wouldn't say any more except that he had left some donkeys behind in the dunes; then he sat back, smiled at the camera and smoked his cigarettes. He ignored the men around him. Once or twice he checked the soles and the straps of his sandals, running his fingers over the rough stitching. Whenever a strong gust of wind made smoking impossible he pulled up his veil and narrowed his eyes. As soon as he could see beyond where his bicycle stood against a stunted eucalyptus tree he walked off to look for the donkeys he had abandoned.



IMIDER KASBAH

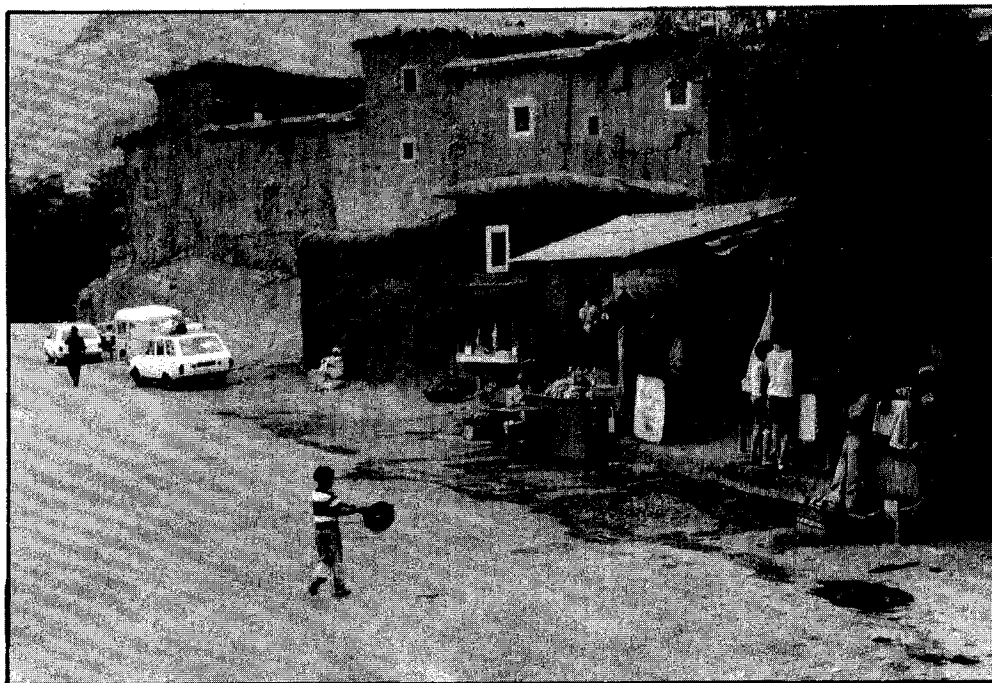
Imider is a village of two ages. The abandoned ksar dominates the hilltop; the new village lurks in its shadow in the valley below. As if the present doesn't want to be reminded of the past, all entry ways to the ksar were carefully holed up when the last descendant of the Glaoui left. Pisé buildings with their earth tones and quickly crumbling walls look instantaneously medieval. In reality the Imider kasbah was not quite a century old, a rapidly deteriorating remnant of the time when Madani el-Glaoui and his clan ruled the Tafilalet as medieval "Lords of the Atlas." El-Glaoui, a shrewd chieftain who had risen to power with the help of a (until then unknown in Morocco) Krupp 77 machinegun, realized that the French would be the powerbrokers in Morocco's future. He had French newspapers read to him at the central ksar at Telouet. He lived, as well as circumstances would allow, with French accoutrements. The ksar at Imider hinted at the duality the Glaoui clan faced as the French advanced: an outer shell of medievalism, primitive and hard, that was perhaps the world Madani el-Glaoui really belonged to. Inside, past the accumulated mountains of garbage, excrement and graffiti-filled walls, we looked at the pretensions of the now ruined French salon. There remained intimations of magnificent receiving rooms and elaborate courtyards at Imider; they testified more to the thought of grandeur the Glaoui had held than to grandeur itself.



SANDSTORM IN QUARZAZATE

The kasbah at Quarazate only hints at what it must once have been: a huge conglomeration of living quarters and storage rooms covering acre upon acre. What you are allowed to see is only a fraction of the original but tastefully restored. You climb up to the different floors of the central building; at each level you get marvelous glimpses of room upon abandoned room, with their sagging doors and rotted ceilings. At the very top is the Glaoui's room, a square and airy perch that looks out over the courtyard. The windows are covered with delicate metal grills and fronted by lightblue doors that can be closed against the wind.

Just as I entered this top room a short but violent sandstorm, mixed with rain, broke out. The room with windows on all sides was a windtunnel; within seconds I was drenched and caked with dirt. In the distance a flock of ibis birds flew away over some patches of corn near the river, bright specks of white and green caught in the ochre dust of the storm. For a few minutes sight was suspended. Then the dust thinned out momentarily; a couple of boys ran past in the alley at the kasbah's edge, the gatekeeper resumed slicing his watermelon. He offered some as we left. There were specks of yellow on the flesh near the rind.



TADDERT

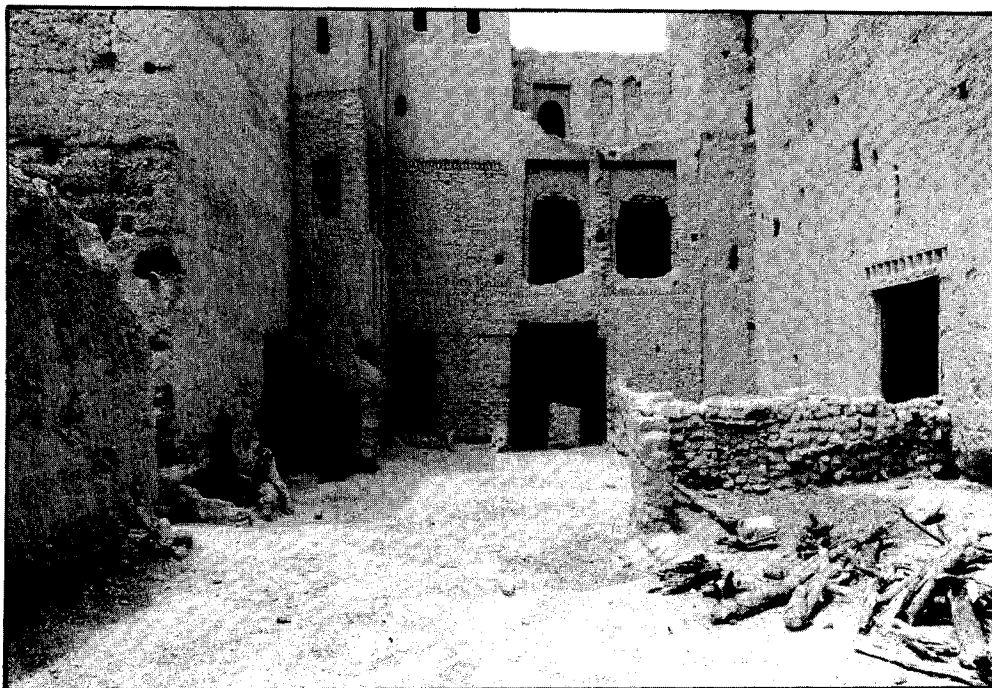
We had been looking for two weeks to buy some mutton. In vain: all had been committed for the Eid al-Kabir feast. In Rashidiya we found only some tripe, liver and a few chunks of discolored, fly-infested meat. The man behind the counter swore it was mutton but we suspected goat. The last village we drove through that evening was Taddert and it was as if we had wandered onto the set of some cowboy movie. The village was a dusty one-laner, lined with red-walled houses and shops with wide porches that ran down to the street. Hundreds of men were milling around, perusing the stalls and baskets or frequenting the cafes.

We never found out why there was mutton here and none in the villages around Taddert. There seemed to be a freewheeling spirit in the village. A dozen butchershops vied for customers. Whole carcasses were strung up in linen bags, lamb chops were broiled on big charcoal braziers. People ate near the edge of the street or at tables laid out under the verandas; the clay mugs were chipped, cats pestered customers for scraps. A group of men got up to push an old Peugeot into life, then returned for more mutton. The daily bus from Marrakesh rolled into town and rattled and rumbled while the driver went off to eat across from the "Palais des Merveilles" souvenir shop.

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and frippe vests.¹ The women wore delightful veils bordered with tiny coins, magnificent rustling skirts, silver and gold bangles; they looked resplendent. This too remained puzzling: women as very private property and, at the same time, women as showpieces to the other men in the village.

On the road to Quarzazate, near Skoura, an abandoned ksar had been converted temporarily into a family home. A couple of little girls ran out



COURTYARD OF KSAR NEAR SKOURA

and a young man beckoned at me from the entrance. Inside the multistory building he brought me to a darkened room on the third floor where the

¹ "Frippe" are recycled clothes, usually purchased in the West and brought to North Africa (and pretty much throughout the Third World) in huge quantities. It is not a recent phenomenon; as early as the 1930s Tunisia already had a lucrative market for discarded European clothing. But it has now become so common and such a large business that it supports several thousand people in most North African countries; in certain cities it employs whole sections of the population. The clothing is sorted according to quality. The poorer quality materials are shredded for pillow and mattress filling. Some is recycled into cheap rugs. The best frippe is sold as second hand clothing. My thanks to Prof. Larry Michalak of the University of California at Berkeley for sharing with me some of his insights on frippe and the weekly market system in Tunisia.

entire family lived. The man was unemployed; they were squatters in the huge crumbling ksar. The room hinted at transients: the wooden floor rotting and spattered with mud, the ceiling blackened by open fires, stained and torn carpets aligned against the shuttered windows, grimy pots stacked on a crate, a charcoal brazier still bearing the ashes of a long-ago winter fire. No chairs, no table, no attempt at organization: it was a room of people who hoped to move on but were on the verge of settling in. The man apologized, the woman smiled wanly from her place on the carpet.

The children were still unaffected and took me on a tour. Ceilings groaned and buckled under our weight. Angry pigeons swirled around us. The staircases were of an ingenuous design, each step ending in a pine branch that ran along the edge into the mud walls. Some of the lintels were of carved palmwood. The children wore cheap cotton dresses and bright scarves, had luminous black eyes, and took my hand whenever we came to a dangerous place.

* * *

The tamarisks and magnolias gave way to the silver of aspen and the dull pewter of olivegroves. The kasbahs and the ksour were taken over by french-style tiled roofs and colonial villas. Men in makeshift tents sold shiny peppers, fresh figs and prickly pear along the roads.

The world's last hippies hung around the Marrakesh post office. They gathered at night on the Djemaa el-Fna [the big open market] where they mixed with the snake charmers, the dancing transvestites, letter writers and storytellers, food sellers and con men and the nasty little boys who could yell or imply obscenities in a dozen languages and gestures.

I hired Rachid to visit the Bahia, the fin-de-siècle monstrosity built for the Grand Vizier Si Ahmed Ben Moussa. We settled for a ten dirham fee. The vast complex of palaces was empty; the grounds were poorly kept, most of the fountains no longer worked. It was a scene of splendid desolation and poor architecture. Rachid seemed perfectly at ease with it all:

"You can smoke in here and take all the pictures you want, monsieur." I did neither; he struck a match against one of the doors of the palace and, after lighting his cigarette, dropped it into a stagnant reflecting pool. With his gruff voice, energetic walk and slightly bulging eyes there was something of the bull terrier in Rachid. He sniffed around the harem for my pleasure, as if expecting to find some remaining concubine. He told me in a voice now lecherously rich, of bewitching favorite ladies that had belonged to the Vizier and of eunuchs wild with unspent passion.

It was a palace catering to all the orientalist fantasies of the Westerner. Not surprising, it became a favorite place for moviemaking. Rachid had memorized, imperfectly it turned out, the names of all the famous moviestars that once ran across the Bahia's patios: "Natasha Kanski, Jean-Paul Bemondo and Charles Weston." The latter's name came up again a couple of minutes later when, standing in the vast courtyard, my guide pointed at the double doors through which "Mr. Weston ran off with Gina Lolobrigida."

"Come along!" The trail was not now; we hurried through a few more corridors. Rachid drew up in a little courtyard. He pulled me into the

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shade of a small banana tree. His voice swelled up for peroration. He smelled blood, his eyes anticipated triumph:

"There," he said, pointing a slightly shaking finger at a tower near the palace's periphery, "there Jacqueline Kennedy and Mr. Onassis spent two weeks of their honeymoon!"

The revelation of that great secret seemed to deflate him. We walked toward the gate and there was the expected hassle over money. Rachid indignantly refused the ten dinars. "Ten is too little" he said and walked away as if indifferent and uninterested. He was a shrewd judge of character. I offered twenty and he quickly retraced his steps.

All the best,

franshure

Received in Hanover 10/8/87