

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-21

c/o Ambassade de Belgique  
15 Avenue de Marrakech  
Rabat

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### GLIMPSES OF MOROCCO - PART III.

Mr. Peter Martin  
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Dear Peter,

This is the last of my three travel reports from Morocco. I realize, now that they are finished, how much I left out. There is nothing here culled from my notes on the Western Sahara, Morocco's deep south, Rabat or Tangiers. As I warned in DJV-19, they contain few historical references or more current background information. "Disjointed Glimpses of Morocco" would perhaps have been a better working title. Still, I hope they provided some insights for my readers about the country and its people.

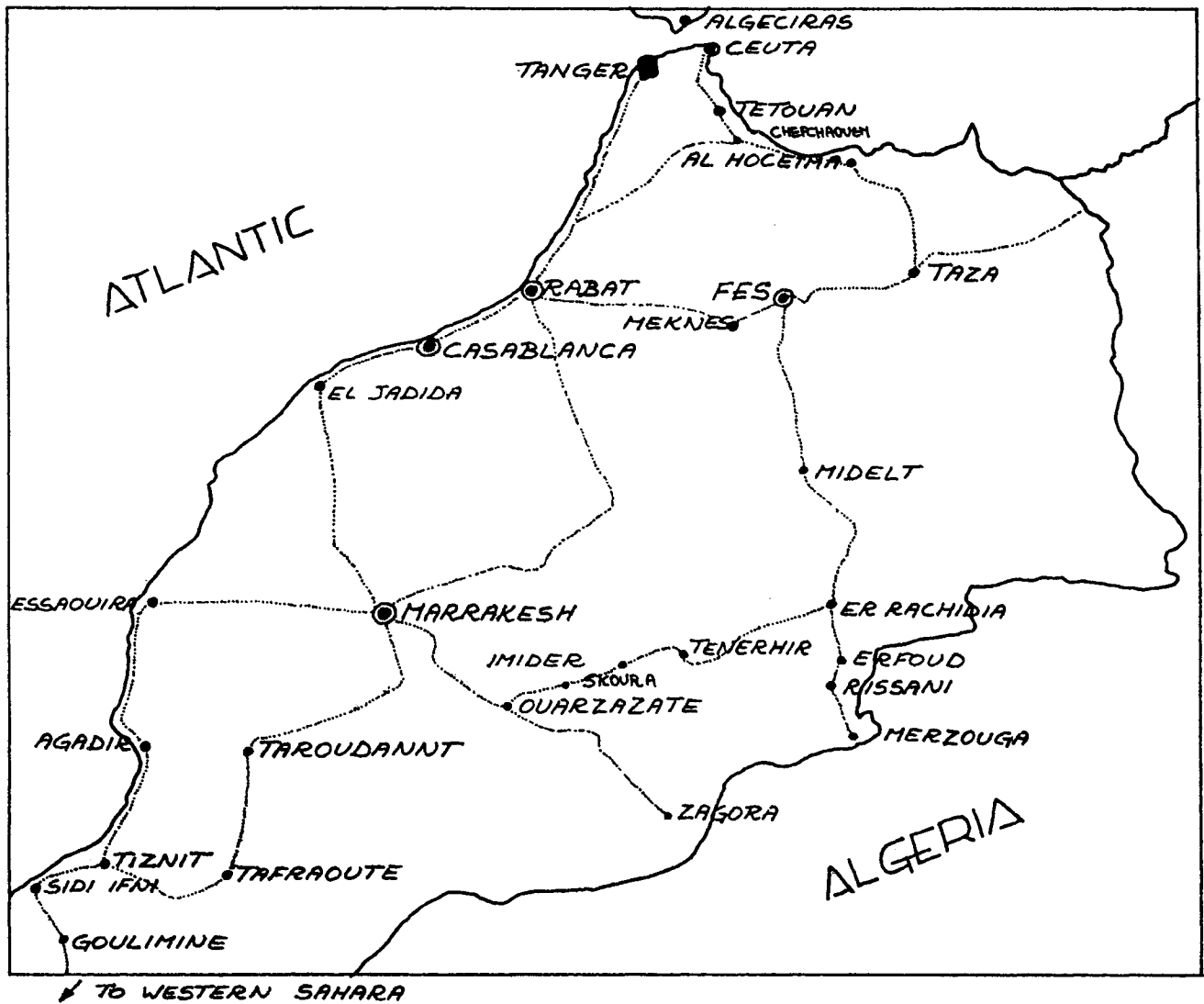
I'm leaving Morocco and am heading for Algeria. I expect to return to my more normal style of reporting, taking a closer look at Algeria's socialist experiment since its independence from France in 1962. It is exactly a quarter of a century ago since the country's bloody War of Independence ended. The revolutionary rhetoric of 1962 still persists to some extent but Algeria has made some fascinating accommodations to the realities of development in the decades since its independence. DJV-22 will provide some general background information highlighting those accommodations.

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The wiry, ragged boy near the Marrakesh postoffice handed out chewing gum to tourists, then disappeared for a few minutes - one saw him peek occasionally from behind a car or around the palm trees in the ruined park - and came back to reclaim his wares, hoping some would already be opened and would be paid for. The packet lay unopened behind me; after two or three desultory attempts, trying to ignore me while walking in and out of the building, he gave up and snatched it from the marble while screaming some obscenities, already accosting another tourist.

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It was hard to get away from the hustlers in Marrakesh. A sign of respectability for any institution in this city is their absence on its premises. Such is the Banque du Maroc on the Djemaa el-Fna. With its intricately carved ceiling and double cedarwood entry doors, the Banque exudes the rarefied air of high commerce. Crossing these doors means stepping back a few decades when banking was a matter of privilege and the clientele rich. There is a very tasteful picture of Mohamed V against the front wall, and a little less becoming one of Hassan II - it seems hard to catch the present king in any sophisticated pose.

The man at the front desk, a corpulent and somber looking man in tweed suit and matching silk tie, answered my query about changing American Express checks:

"It will take a while, monsieur. Maybe you would care to go to the Banque Commerciale across the square?"

I had plenty of time. Outside it was 110 degrees; the bank was cooled by fans lined up against the back wall.

"I will wait until you're ready."

He was rather put out:

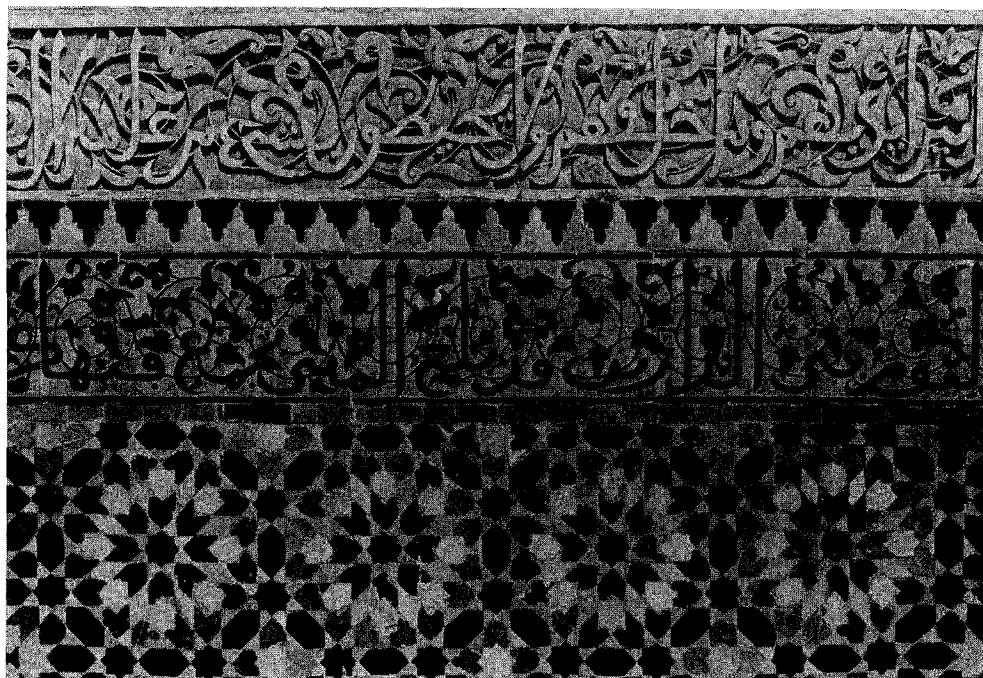
"Very well, monsieur; monsieur Abdelrahman will take care of your business."

A hippie from Australia or the businessman from France; they all met with the same "monsieur", spoken in the soft clipped french of the man in tweed. Mr. Abdelrahman was busy plugging some figures into a computer on his desk. From the arrangement of the desks I could tell he was a low-ranked clerk. In the middle of the floor, clustered around a group of communal desks, he sat with a number of other young men, all bent over their work. In a half circle around them, in a group of small glasswalled cubicles with marvelous brass locks and shiny brass bellbuttons, were those higher up the corporate ladder, paying out whatever those in the communal area had calculated - and, with serious eyes, recalculating what their subordinates had done. These little cubicles of honeycolored cedarwood and brass looked like cabins on an oceanliner; every time one of the men entered he carefully locked it behind himself. Despite the glass that gave immediate eye contact, clerks always pushed the bell before gaining admittance. Such is the ritual at the Banque du Maroc.

When I stepped back outside, the Djemaa was filling up. From the safety of the Banque's entrance I could see the snake charmers and musicians getting ready for a day's work. The dentist with his collection of molars walked by, the teeth glued to his collapsible table like barnacles to a ship's hull.

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At night there was keen competition among the horsecab drivers on the Djemaa el-Fna. The horses clustered along the edge of the avenue. Their nosebags were empty, they looked thin. They wore blinders cut from plastic bottles. The cabs' upholstery was tattered and grime-stained; the drivers sat on torn pillows in unwashed jellabas and scuffed babouches [local slippers]. Every few minutes they lashed their animals into action: the horses galloped at first, then the coaches wheeled more slowly. Finally



DETAIL OF STUCCO AND TILES IN MEDRESA BEN YOUSSEF, MARRAKESH

I visited the Ben Youssef Medresa a few days before Eid al-Kabir. The back alleys were filled with sheep that would be slaughtered in a few days. The area around the medresa (Quranic school) was once a trading center but had fallen on hard times. The remnants of that more prosperous past endure nevertheless. Little fondouks (caravanserais) line the streets, their courtyards now strewn with garbage and fodder. Many still had the original mashrabiya screens around the upper windows. From the smaller rooms downstairs merchants were selling fried sardines, couscous and a variety of beans - the staple of poor urban Moroccans.

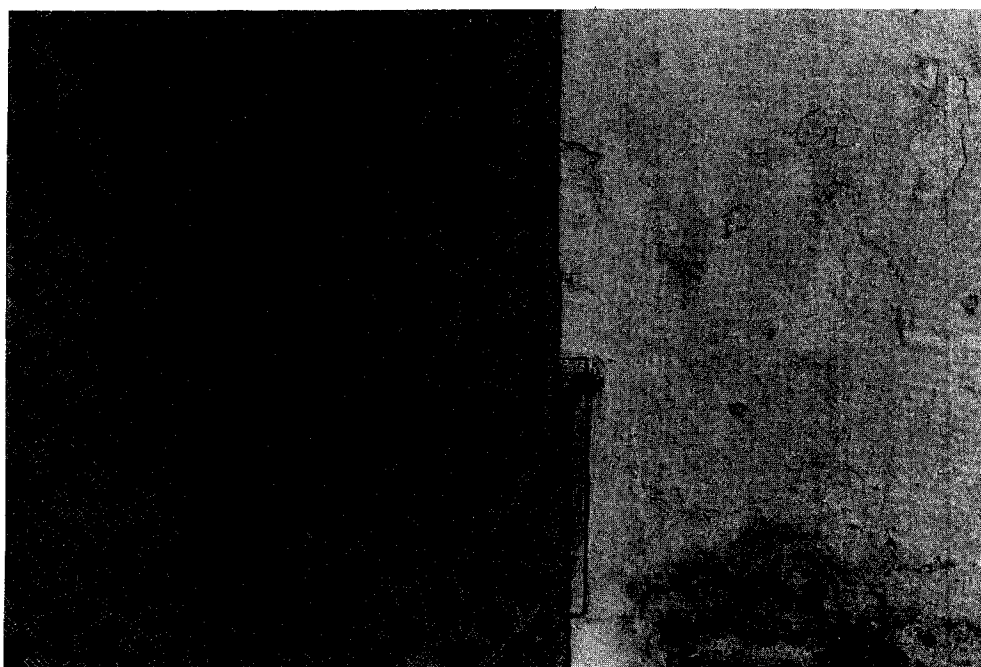
The medresa is a veritable gem. Its long entry hall is lined with ceramic tiles painted with intricate geometric designs. The central courtyard holds a bright green reflecting pool and around it, executed in brilliant craftsmanship, bands of Quranic suras are carved in cedarwood and stucco. The small cells of the students radiate in all directions from this central courtyard, grouped again around smaller lightshafts of stucco and carved wood. Around each door spandrels contained more detailed stucco. At the end of some of the cells a small window looked out over the courtyard and the reflecting pool below.



SHEEP FOR EID AL-KABIR TRANSPORTED HOME, MARRAKESH

As Eid al-Kabir approached, the streets and sidewalks filled up with sheep. They were transported on motorcycles and bicycles, thrown in with passengers on pickup trucks and donkey carts, led by ropes that had been hooked around their horns. My guide in Marrakesh was an arrogant young man who guided me through one of the souk's busiest parts. After a few hundred yards the Land Rover was completely caught in the small alleys. An ever increasing number of carts and motorcycles and angry people backed up behind us. There was a pungent smell of hay and sheep droppings in the car. The heat was insufferable. Sheep and donkeys rushed in around us, scratching the paint on the car. My guide yelled at man and beast alike but only met with rebuke from both groups: verbal abuse, guttural and full of glottal stops, from the men and the veiled women; from the sheep and donkeys a greenish smear of excrement that covered his shoes and the hem of his jelaba, and that fouled up the air in the car for the rest of the day.

A few hours later, near the Djemaa el-Fna, an older man tried to hoist a newly bought sheep on his shoulders. With a piece of cardboard across his back to protect his jelaba, he carefully knelt on the sidewalk alongside the sheep and tried to push his head under its belly. The animal, panicky each time its little airborne voyage started, kept kicking the cardboard off. In desperation the man summoned a couple of bystanders who grabbed the sheep by its legs and dropped it on the man's shoulders. Immediately the animal became still and the man walked off in the direction of the Kutubiya mosque, his head barely visible under a halo of wool.

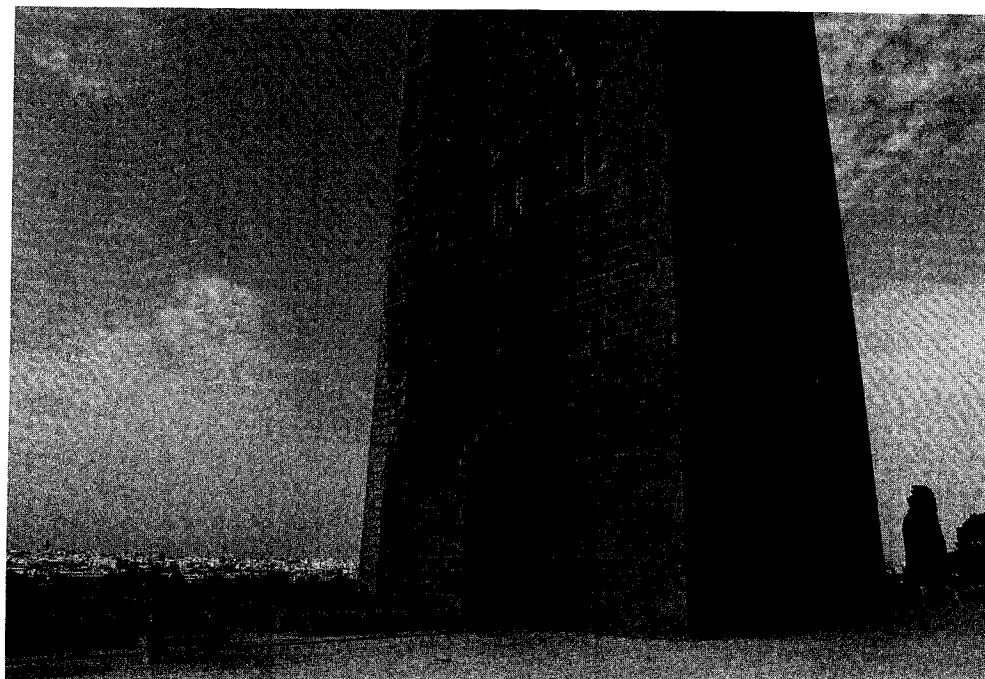
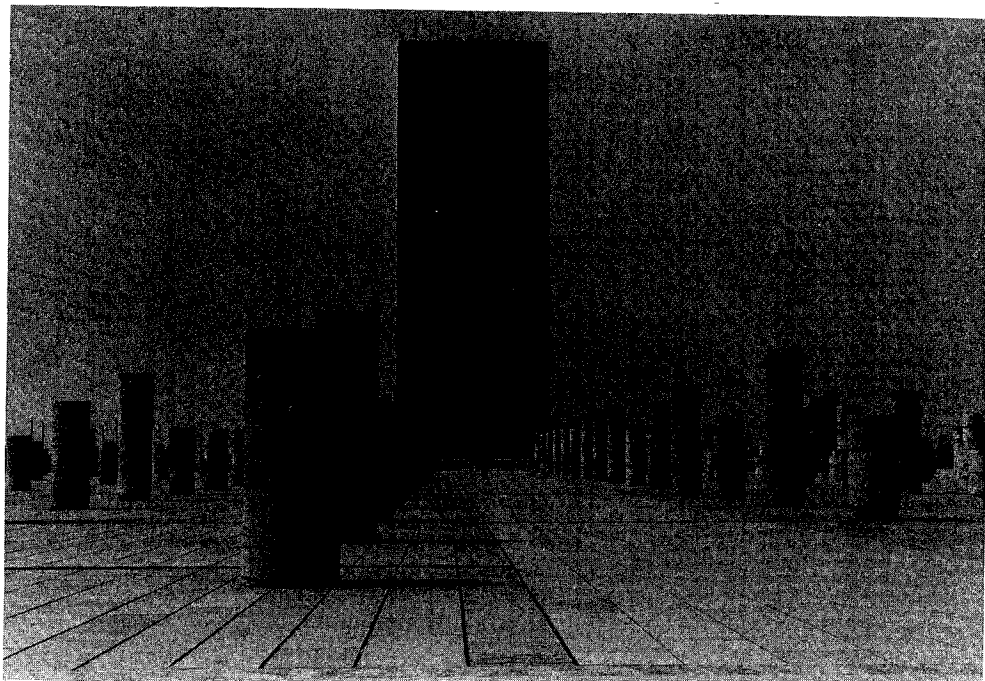


DETAIL OF BERBER RUG, MARRAKESH

In a back alley of Marrakesh, far away from the tourist shops around the central souks, I went to look for berber kilims [flatwoven rugs]. Ahmed Laraoui's shop was full of carpets and brass, a rare combination even among enterprising Moroccans. I had taught his son in New York a few years earlier and we had been friends ever since. The news of my arrival - but luckily not the exact time, for that would have resulted in special arrangements - had been relayed. The family greeted me as a long-lost son, chiding me for the unannounced appearance. From the tiny carpet-lined shop I could observe street life at my leisure: the dappled sunlight that filtered through the slats of bamboo in the alley outside; the brass burnished to a soft patina that reflected the rugs around me. The kilims came in bold heraldic colors, with camels in purple and bright green, and Stars of David bands woven across the rugs: "Jewish designs are very common in berber rugs."

Here also I saw the heavily veiled woman, her eyes relaxed in this backwater of the tourist trade; the young beggar with the thin scabby legs and roving eyes, his hands permanently deformed into a begging claw; the blind old man with flowing white beard guided along by his grandson, invoking Allah's blessings as explanation for his affliction.

I left without carpets: Mr. Laraoui wouldn't hear of money, I was determined to pay or to depart without. A package was delivered to the hotel that night. I bribed the porter into saying I had left and had him return the kilim I had seen in the shop earlier that afternoon.



HASSAN TOWER AND MOSQUE, RABAT

they lingered alongside potential customers, the drivers arguing over fares.

I joined a group of six Europeans returning to the camping at the city's edge. Our driver was a toothless old man, wrapped against the cold in a woolen cap and a huge overcoat that fell to his ankles. There was a spirited debate over the price. He was allowed to transport only six people and the police kept a close watch. We volunteered to split up but he wouldn't hear of it, afraid of losing a double fare.

He darted over to a young man leaning with his bicycle against the curb. A few seconds of agitated conversation followed. The next moment we were off. Behind us the merchants on the Djemaa el-Fna had lit their gaslights. The minaret of the Kutubiya stood out in crimson and grenadine, dominated the vast square for a last few minutes and then dissolved into darkness: the madness of another night was about to start. We could already hear the beating of the drums and the thin reedy straining of violins as the horse pulled out of the square.

The cab's hood had been pulled up to avoid easy detection by the police. The driver mumbled in a conspiratorial tone of voice that one of us would have to duck each time we passed a police patrol. And there was another precaution: ahead of us the young man pedalled at a fast clip, hired at the spur of the moment to act as a roving watchman. Curiosity often overwhelmed the young man: he slowed down until the cab caught up with him, then hooked his arm over the railing and coasted along, chatting away with us. Then, spurred on by a command from the sharp-eyed driver, he sprinted ahead. Sometimes he returned whistling. When he came back out of breath the cab would suddenly twist and turn; we lurched without warning into a dark side alley.

At some intersections the police could not be avoided. The driver turned around: "Please gentleman, there is police ahead." A momentary hesitation in the cab; then one of us would find cover on the floor, caught in a circle of knees. The ride lasted forty minutes instead of the normal twenty; in patches and whiffs we saw more of Marrakesh than on any previous evening. For all our discomfort and indulgence the driver charged us double. We protested strongly and paid only half. He whined:

"I took a terrible risk. They could have taken my license." By now I had been long enough in Marrakesh: I walked away.

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Perhaps I had already stayed too long in the city. I had grown to like the solitude of the countryside, the isolation of the villages, the cold mornings in some odd field beside the narrow tarmac road where few cars traveled; the complete absence of advertisement signs, where even the few tourist places were made to blend in with the landscape. Just the mountains and the valleys and well-hidden houses barely visible against the landscape. A place where people still walked for hours to the market, only to return against a setting sun. I marveled at the sense of authenticity: the villagers polite but distant; the knowledge that your presence would leave only a momentary impression. Places where you accommodated yourself; where no one accommodated for your sake.



On the eve of Eid al-Kabir I drove south again, toward Goulimine and the Western Sahara. The High Atlas shimmered in the distance. I wanted to see the waterfalls in the Ourika valley, hidden away in the foothills of the mountains. The approach to the village of Setti Fatma was long and spectacular. A hundred feet below the muddy road the river was a pale blue scratch in the landscape, bordered by vegetable plots and meadows. Women stood milking their cows; children were selling apples from brightly colored buckets near the road. I passed between hedges that clung to the road. Above, sloping high above the river and looking like English countryside but for the red ground, orchards stretched as far as I could see.

Tiny rivulets of the Ourika river ran alongside the road, crossing it occasionally and making passing almost impossible. They tumbled along the rock with a soft rumble; gurgling and guttering they disappeared at the side of the road. Near Oukameden an enterprising young man had stacked his softdrinks against the face of such a rock under a simple straw roof: the water had loosened the labels, the lemonade was icecold and tart.

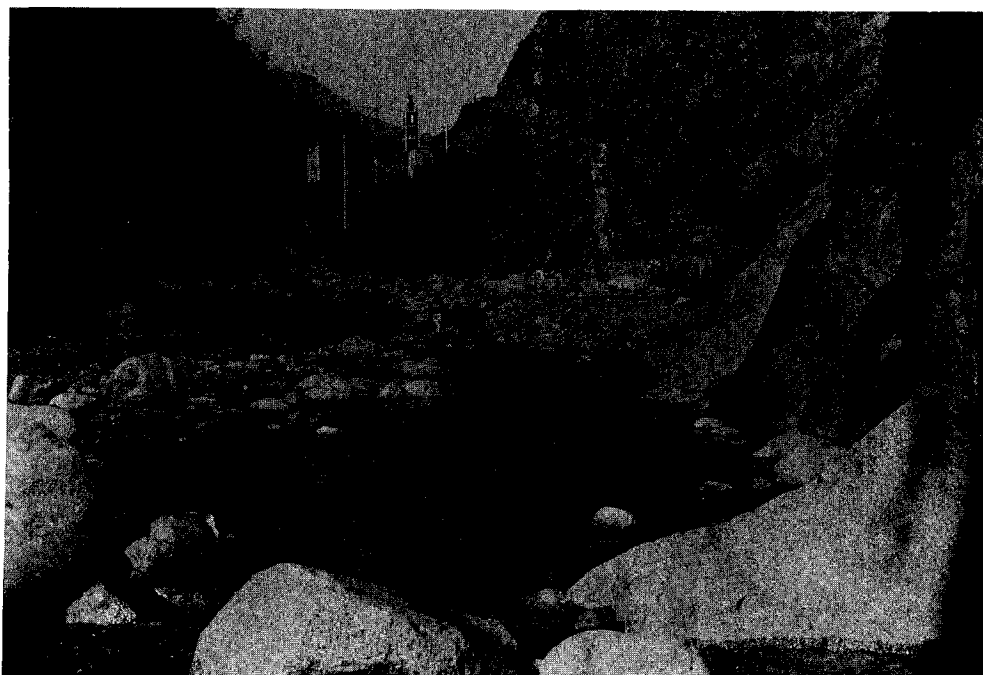
Near the vegetable stalls along the muddy road local men were purchasing the last necessities for the feast: tomatoes, aubergines, carrots still covered with soil, several kinds of mellons, dark purple grapes with dusty skins, lemons and stringbeans. Their donkeys were tied up outside the little store where I stopped, crates lashed to their sides, their saddles embroidered in tiny stitches. Sugarloaves in purple waxpaper stuck out among the vegetables. The men were friendly but preoccupied: the sheep still needed to be slaughtered. The owner of the little store was illiterate; he asked me to add up the bill and then conferred with his young son. In a dark roadside cafe the Mona Lisa and King Hassan smiled enigmatically, side by side, above a dusty counter and a collection of olives in greasy plastic jars.

Setti Fatma lay almost hidden in a sharp crease of the valley. I parked beside the riverbed, astride the only entry into the tiny village. All night people walked by, heading home: women who hitched at their skirts before skipping across, young girls guiding ribby cows between boulders. A young man inquired about guiding me to the falls.

When I awoke women were cutting grass in the meadows along the riverbed. A few girls hurried across the river to the shops near the valley entrance for some last minute shopping, dressed already in their new clothes. A few men came by to chat, in new jelabas and an odd western jacket and tie.

The young man of the previous evening, Ahmed, inquired again about the falls. He was an opinionated fellow, with a quick nervous temper and a small, muscular body. We had breakfast and he told me of Morocco's past, of its right to the Western Sahara, of the greatness of Hassan II. There were some blatant inaccuracies in his narrative. I refrained from correcting: I was interested in his perception of his own history. His views had been shaped at the local Quranic school, his world ended at Morocco's borders. In a most revealing moment he called all tourists Christians. Europe's greatness, he repeated with conviction, was due to its adaptation of Arab ingenuity and inventions.

I was intrigued by his innocence. We agreed on a fee to see the cascades. Near the edge of the village, in a small sun-dappled meadow swept clean of all debris, two men stood ready to slaughter a sheep. It had already been aligned with Mecca; its head was caught between the knees of the man with the knife. Setti Fatma was quiet. As we walked along its main muddy street we could only hear the voice of the muezzin on the minaret. All the families had retired to the balconies of their houses overlooking the river, waiting for the prayers to end and the feast to officially start. From some kitchens the first smell of roasted mutton wafted toward us.



SETTI FATMA

The path to the falls ran diagonally across the craggy face of the rock, always rising, along the wadi. Here and there small pools of water had gathered at its edge, already tepid in the morning sun and full of small frogs that leaped to the safety of lichen-stained rocks whenever we approached. The falls were icecold, the rock around them polished and black. Ahmed continued his eulogy of Morocco. He brooked no oppositional views. He was at the same time rude and charming, he defended his views with clenched fists. He called me ignorant, he treated me with the deference reserved only for fools, drunkards and obnoxious tourists. My curiosity turned to moroseness.

When we returned the sheep in the meadow had been slaughtered and quartered. In the river some boys were cleaning its intestines, ingredients for later meals. For an instant the little turn in the river was bright green with the contents of the stomach, then silvery again with a hint of blue from the reflected sky. The village was in an uproar of festivities.

We wandered back to where the "Aziz Restaurant" stood as a sentry near the entry to the valley. A sign announced "Spécialités Marocaines." Aziz was a rather unsavory-looking villager with a stained apron and shifty eyes. He had spent several years in Paris, working as a busboy in a fast food place. His unwashed hands held little culinary promise. He insisted on serving us several tajines, shish kebabs, french fries and mellow with cinnamon for an outrageous price. What we ended up with was a good deal less: a few skewers of tiny chunks of broiled mutton, a greasy tajine full of potatoes.

We inquired about the mellow. "I can't get mellons today," said Aziz, "no shops are open on Eid al-Kabir."

"We saw plenty of mellons for sale this morning across the river," I ventured.

Aziz shrugged his shoulders. I didn't feel like arguing; already Ahmed was remorselessly trying to antagonize me again with some new and supporting historical evidence of the King's fortitude and magnanimity. I caught myself short and exploded; perhaps it had been Aziz's lies, or the heat, anger at what I considered crude propaganda, or perhaps Ahmed's stubbornness. I told him I needed no history lessons on Morocco. He looked hurt and blinked without comprehension.

Of many Third World countries only outsiders, or local historians living outside, can give reasonable historical accounts. There are certain realities: the tools of analysis are Western, many of the sources repose in Western universities, scholarship is prohibitively expensive. But also this: history is a carefully cultivated identity; to preserve it, a certain unchangeable view of that history is maintained within every society.

I had experienced this urge at self-perpetuation when as a young man I grew up in a small country with a lustrous past, a country still radiant with the memories of that golden age. There remained at the popular level, and even in some intellectual discourse, the parochial conviction that the world had stood still for that one brief moment of glory; and that everything afterwards was a pallid reflection of that greatness. Outside our history the new civilization across the ocean was considered of a thinly veiled crudeness, money replacing taste and long-cultivated lifestyles.

Arrogance and ignorance were our bedfellows: we thought any new society would take as long to develop as it had taken ours. The shock when we discovered that the process could be telescoped was profound: history had betrayed us, the acquired identity had proven fragile; the solid and smug carapace of cultural uniqueness could be scratched, even pierced. It was at that time that I found out how deeply we had deceived ourselves: some of our historical monuments were of more recent vintage, carefully reconstructed in the historical idea of that lustrous past. In architecture we had preserved and restructured the buildings of that era;

more recent treasures were left to rot and ruin. As with architecture, so it was with our sense of the world: one of our greatest historians wrote a history of Ahmed's world full of monumental errors and racist slurs.

Why then be amazed at what I heard and considered myopic in this isolated valley? How could I tell Ahmed what Morocco meant where I now lived? How to explain that for most people Morocco was Tangiers, Casablanca, berbers and beggars, marabouts and mosques, a grainy and scratched Casablanca starring Humphrey Bogart; perhaps for a few people in Washington a strategic asset? For most, beyond superficial familiarity there was an unimportant void, a white spot on the map almost as immaculate as those printed in the seventeenth century. I couldn't say all that, despite my urge to turn against him, not to forgive him for his aggressiveness. He carried a deeply felt pride in what was around him. He felt no need to degrade what he didn't understand; why should I have done so?

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The trip was slowly coming to an end. The Western Sahara had been rather disappointing, Al Ayoun a boomtown of incredible expense to Hassan II. I returned to Agadir with its freewheeling style and its commercialism. It was only fitting that here, in this bastion of free enterprise and shoddy goods, I came across, in a cavernous and gloomy Uniprix, all those marvelous mementoes and artifacts I had spent so much time bargaining over during the trip. Here, thrown helter-skelter on crude wooden racks or on the floor (as if they were of little value and, perhaps, they were) all the bric-a-brac I had managed to collect. All of it at fixed prices and far below anything I had paid anywhere else: the silver kohl bottles, the carpets of a hundred designs and qualities; the leather belts with the cheap brass buckles; the tin mirrors already discoloring at the edges; the brass plates - heavier here and of higher quality - with copper fittings; the leather billfolds and bookholders stamped with fake gold; the crude kaftans and galabiyas and baskets full of fossils. All of this under one roof, as if to mock my efforts at gathering.


In the aisles the clerks kept smiling at me, comprehending and a bit gladdened by my discomfort, understanding the silly maneuvers, the arguing, the boasting and the cajoling I had been through. Their smile said: "We know what you have been through." Near the entry a young boy summarized my thoughts: "You should start off your trip in Agadir; it would save you a lot of problems."

All of Morocco's crafts for export lay at my feet, and when I looked at them in their entirety I realized that it didn't add up to much and that, as one novelist once said, bazaar merchandise doesn't travel well; much of it would look cheaply exotic in a New York apartment. I could console myself with the thought that part of the effort had been in the process of bargaining: the indignation and the laughter, the manipulations of the calculator, the feigned indifference and the interested eye, the crude psychology of the dealers. It all came back in a few moments in this ratty place in Agadir.

DJV-21 GLIMPSES OF MOROCCO - PART III

Something else was disconcerting. A few weeks earlier these souvenirs had been part of my own gateway to Morocco, purchased for what they intimated about the country. They had been bought as symbols. Now they failed to dazzle any longer; they portended nothing. The symbolism, long looked for, had been lost in the richer weave and woof of Morocco. The souvenirs had been a shortcut, a failure of imagination. They smacked only of cheap labor and squalor, declining fortunes, the last hope of the bazaaris. Something was missing, something they could not convey: the fact that out of this abject poverty, in the struggle with itself, Morocco brought forth so many people of courage and tenacity, living by intricate codes of behavior.

All the best,



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