

## 7 Arabs and Settlers

I have considered it necessary to narrate now a series of observed facts that show how the proud Arabs live under such a painful crushing.

### 7.1 The Arab Soldier

North Africa, so favored by the gods, has natural defenders, the Arabs, who are born warriors. I was once approached in a street of Algiers by an Arab who told me in good French, "I am going to Paris, do you have any errands?" He was shabby-looking, even though royally draped in a rag. As I was looking at him with incredulity, he said: "You think one needs much money to go to Paris? I don't have any but I am going anyway... I shall walk from Marseille to the capital... On the road I'll ask for a crust of bread."

"What are you going to do in Paris?"

"I have a business with the *Conseil d'Etat*,<sup>100</sup> my lawyer lost my case, I want to plead my cause myself. France's justice is fair... I am within my rights... Read, you will see that I am bound to win the judges over to my cause. Take these papers home, you will give them back to me tomorrow."

And he put in my hand a bunch of letters and documents from which it emerged that my interlocutor, Salah ben Abdalhah, was enrolled in the First Colonial Infantry under the regimental number 8471. He belonged to the glorious phalanx of more than twenty thousand Arabs massacred on the eastern border in 1870, defending our French soil. These infantry men had aroused so much admiration in the conquerors of Wissembourg and Woerth that, when those who escaped death were taken as prisoners to Berlin, the enthusiastic ladies offered them, to the deep indignation of the male population and of the local press, a banquet of honor served by their own hands.

Once free and healed of his wounds Salah went to Tunisia, then to Tonkin, where he was proposed for the military medal; he would have received it ten times if, instead of being born an Arab, he had been born a Frenchman. For, like all the men of his race, Salah naturally did wonders on our battlefields.

The Arabs are born warriors, powder and bullets electrify them, danger makes them mad with audacity and temerity. If our rulers were wise, they would pass a law establishing the draft of Arabs. This would give us a contingent of more than a hundred thousand men who, well trained by the French troops, would fight like so many wild lions of the Atlas and would help us defeat the enemy in the next war.

Salah served France with passion until one day he was wounded following an effort in a military exercise. When an animal is wounded, it is labeled "good for quartering!" If one is not grateful for its services, at least one kills it to put an end

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100 Highest French administrative jurisdiction.

to its suffering. But the colonel of the First Infantry only said, “You’re no longer any good, leave!” to Salah whose body was slashed with scars and bullet holes, Salah who for twenty years had risked his life to save that of France.

This courageous Arab’s ideas of justice and loyalty were shaken when he heard his superior officer; after all, a covenant had been signed with him! When he entered the regiment he was told, “If you serve France like your mother, she will treat you like a son.” And now that he was a human rag, worn out by years of offering his breast to defend her, France was rejecting him!... France!... No, it was not possible! It was only the colonel who had screamed, “Leave!” He appealed the colonel’s decision to the minister of War who referred the matter to the doctor of the Dey’s Hospital. The doctor examined Salah and concluded that he was still fit for service and could wait for his retirement.

The colonel did not agree with this opinion and the next day had four men throw Salah out of the barracks. It was an appalling scene: number 8471 did not want to be ousted, he pleaded, he begged, “I am all alone in the world... My tribe cursed me when I enlisted... My companions in arms are my parents, my friends!... My home is the regiment!” Since he was not allowed to receive his rations, he refused to leave without compensation. “A pension or the ration,” he repeated, holding on, forcing the four men to drag him to bring him outside.

Indeed, either Salah is fit to be a soldier, as the doctor of Algiers’ military hospital declared, and then he can finish his term and wait for his retirement; or then he is unfit for service because of disabilities incurred during his military career, as the colonel maintains, and France must indemnify him. The minister, asked to resolve this dilemma, refused to grant him a pension. The discharged soldier then took his request to the *Conseil d’Etat* which rejected it, putting forward a whole set of contradictory reasons too long to relate here.

It is this judgment that Salah wants to fight, arguing logically that he, an Arab who was accepted to come under enemy fire, cannot be refused the indemnities allocated to the French in the same circumstances. He had succeeded in borrowing money to pay for his passage from Algiers to Marseille on the deck of a boat; but in order to embark he needed the permission to leave Algiers. This veteran, who mixed his blood with that of the French on the battlefields, did not acquire the right to benefit from their laws; he remains subject to the humiliations of the *Code de l’indigénat* that forbids any Arab to travel without the consent of the administration.

Salah is still waiting for the authorization to go to France. To earn a living he is trying his hand at commerce, unsuccessfully of course. One can see him, in tatters, half naked, but always dignified, pacing up and down Rue de la Lyre, a basket in his hands, trying to imitate his co-religionists’ accent, and shouting, “Eggs! Eggs!” His eggs, cooking in the sun, bring him more setbacks than profit. Happily, his hope compensates for the bread he does not eat. “This too shall pass,” he heroically says, “as soon as the *Conseil d’Etat* has my documents in its hands, it will agree to give me my due.”

Naïve infantry man! Will the *Conseil d'Etat* say yes after the minister of War said no? While they will waste money on the Rue Saint-Dominique, there won't be any money to indemnify the Arabs who waged war for us for twenty years. When, spurred on by need, France's ex-soldier Salah ben Abdalhah, who knows no other way to earn a living than a military career, shame-facedly goes to his co-religionists and asks for "God's share" or solicits help from his tribe, he is slapped with these words: "Are those whom you have served so ungrateful that they cannot satisfy your hunger after using you for their glory?"

Even though they are treated so odiously and cannot attain in our army a rank higher than that of lieutenant despite their fighting qualities, the Arabs remain ready to share our perils when hardship strikes us. In 1870, they offered us their devotion, their blood, and their money; but later the *Bureaux arabes* insolently answered them that France did not need them to oust the enemy. Algerian natives voluntarily followed us to the Crimea, Mexico, Italy, to the Vosges, and to Tonkin, accomplishing everywhere prodigious deeds of valor. More than six thousand of them went to Madagascar,<sup>101</sup> attempting to bring victory to our flag which they carried together with the green banner of the Prophet. For the pleasure of waging war these naïve losers helped us to deprive the Hova of their land as we had deprived them of theirs.

Although our commitments have not been kept, whenever France will fight a war, her Arab sons, whom she treats as a wicked step-mother, will rush to her aid, will die for her.

## 7.2 The Beni-Gharaba

Before the food shortage that is starving Algeria's Arabs, the tribe of the Beni-Gharaba, renowned for its warm hospitality and its spirit of independence, held what we might call open tent; it spent a fortune in *difas* while getting from the soil, with little or no cultivation, wheat, barley, maize, tobacco, beans, and olives. But two successive harvests failed, the silos (underground storage) are empty and – by pure coincidence, of course – fines are raining in now that the tribe can no longer roast whole sheep and prepare chicken couscous for the authorities.

In turn, its camels, horses, cattle, herds of sheep and goats have been brought to market. Unhappily, prices are at their lowest because of the abundance of arrivals; everything is sold for a pittance, and then it just so happened – on the day when bulls and cows were taken to the market – that the administrator of the area that includes the tribe of the Beni-Gharaba needed two milk cows; he chose the two best ones in the herd and, while bargaining over them, recited, out of habit, the fines he had in reserve for the tribe.

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**101** Formerly an independent kingdom, Madagascar became a French colony in 1896; it gained its independence in 1960.

How can you sell your cows to an individual who holds the lives of the *douar*'s seventy tents in his hands? You are only too happy to make a sacrifice to appease him.

"Here, Monsieur l'administrateur, take these cows! Have them taken away! For anyone else they cost 180 francs each, for you nothing."

Indignant, the administrator raised his voice.

"You wretch, do I want your cows for nothing? Look at these people, they are starving to death and yet they talk of making gifts!"

With an air of authority, he slipped a coin of one hundred sous in the salesman's hand and went to his club to tell his colleagues that the Beni-Gharaba had the temerity to want to give him the two cows he had bought.

The sale of the herds provided enough to feed the tribe; however, financial difficulty soon arose again. The poultry was brought to market: chickens, turkeys, guinea-fowls that lived freely in the *douar* and enlivened it with their songs and their cackling; fate decided that, on that very day, two or three officials were replenishing their farmyard. They had come to buy especially from this tribe, they said, making sure to show them the sword of Damocles hanging above their heads.

In the delicate situation of the tribe it would have been unwise to make them pay. The interpreter, a Jewish moneylender – it is true that the interest was one hundred and thirty percent per month – had to be dealt with carefully. And it would have been a mistake not to offer something to Mr. bailiff who could seize everything at any moment. As for the rural policeman, who was also the jailer, he often booked those who were not his friends; and furthermore, there were always some Beni-Gharaba in prison. It is so easy to impose it, this prison, thanks to the *Code de l'indigénat* or simply on a whim, that the Arabs subjected to it are not too perturbed. However, it is best to stay in the good graces of the jailer, for he could be distracted and sometimes forget to distribute the bread and water.

The Beni-Gharaba in charge of the sale of the *douar*'s fowls, Yaya ben Yaya, Abdelkader, Larbi, and Ali ben Belkaseem, looked at and understood each other. Even though they depended on the sale of the poultry to buy barley and wheat, they divided nearly all the chickens, turkeys, and guinea-fowls among the officials who had come to buy, separately and unbeknownst to each other. Their servants' arms and hands were loaded and, furthermore, a huge wreath of hens hung down to their hips and knees. Like their masters, these vigorous boys, bent under the loads, seemed to find it very natural to despoil the Beni-Gharaba for their own profit. It has to be said, however, that the clerk-notary, a thick squat little man who earns piles of money, licked his chops when he saw the very plump turkeys and had a generous impulse, "All right, ben Yaya, all right, to please you I accept, but tell them at home that when you invite us for a *diffa*, Madame will bring sticks of barley sugar for the *douar*'s babies!"

In order to survive, the Beni-Gharaba sold everything and soon had nothing left but their tents. They sold their old and new carpets, they sold their wooden and metal bowls, their silver trays. They sold their wolfhounds, vigilant sentries that smell

animals and men two kilometers away and tear to pieces with their fangs the prowler or the fool who dares to approach. Finally, having exhausted all resources, they sold to a horse dealer for very little hard cash their superb horses, friends that always waited for them, saddled, at the entrance of the tent. This supreme sacrifice kept them from starvation, but only for a very short time, because, however great their sobriety, the Beni-Gharaba had more than fifteen hundred mouths to feed!

And now there is nothing left in the tent, no money, no supplies, and nothing to be found in the immense, arid plain where the *douar* is planted.<sup>102</sup> For a long time, the wild asparagus, which the Algerian French find so delectable in the winter, has been picked to the roots; for a long time, even young thistle plants, eaten instead of artichokes and of a more refined taste, have been pulled out. People in groups abandon the silent, moribund *douar* to go to the city; people pour out into the paths leading to neighboring villages. Those who stay with the dying children drink water to quench their hunger, but this false satiety does not prevent their stomach from twisting and screaming.

The least feeble of the remaining people dig in the sand everywhere with their truncheons. When they suspect the existence of some roots, they throw themselves full length on the bare and golden ground. Their fleshless fingers seem unable to bring what they find quickly enough to their mouths. Then, like the animal forbidden by Mohammed, they feverishly stick their face in the ground, their famished teeth rummaging through the earth and avidly devouring the roots.

Suddenly one of these human rodents, Yaya – two of his sons have died of hunger that morning – straightens up, his eyes wild, his mouth wide open, then falls backward with horrible convulsions; he is dead! His body will feed the jackals; but what about his wives, what about his children who are still alive? His third and very young wife, Kheira, nurses her beautiful seven-month-old baby called Ali. I said “nurses!” Alas! Hungry mothers have no milk! Since the day before, Kheira, with the contempt for suffering that distinguishes her race, Kheira has been piercing her nipples with a needle so her child can suck the drops of blood! Despite this horrible torture, however, this child will go to sleep like his brothers and his father; this fear triggers in her a bright idea... No, Ali ben Yaya, you won’t die! In order to save him, she will sell him, if necessary! At the town market she will find the men who bought the *douar*’s lambs and kids; they will buy her pretty little one and will feed him.

With wild energy, her silent child on her back, she leaves. At each step, the excessive water she absorbed to sustain herself during the trip flows from her as from a squeezed sponge... She has overestimated her strength... Her heart is breaking! Happily, two co-religionists on mule back soon pick her up.

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**102** Algeria suffered terrible famines in the 1870s and 1880s: severe droughts, failed crops for several years, and invasions of locusts caused starvation.

Located in a fold of the land, on a slope, the market is alive with the bleating of sheep and goats, the hailing of sellers and buyers, the individual announcements of those who have lost a purse or an animal. On arriving, all plant a stake in the ground and attach their horse or mule. These animals are touched and pushed, but still stay calm and harmless.

Kheira, squatting, the skins of her breasts in her baby's mouth, leans against the tent of a fancy goods store. But she no longer sees the tulle dresses with their multicolored sheer layers, the brocade belts, the finely embroidered slippers. Everything is spinning around her, as when she tried to dance a French waltz one day. Will she be able to stand up? The ground is swaying under her feet. But... little Ali... he no longer even closes his lips on the soft breast that is in his mouth... She walks, she staggers... A civil servant, whom she touches, pushes her back brutally with his cane and seeing her fall, shouts, "Dirty *moukère*! She is drunk on absinth!..." Kheira does not hear, the skin that is her breast has come out of her son's mouth! Is she going to let him die?...

Still staggering, she comes to the town, a road where a few houses line both sides; she drags herself there, offering dying Ali to all, moaning, "Pretty little one... buy... hungry... buy pretty little one... eat... pretty little Ali... buy..." A crowd gathers around her. The administrator, the same man who bought for one hundred sous the two prettiest cows of Kheira's *douar*, appears, shouting, threatening, "What! Is it this wretch who is causing this disturbance? Take her away!" he orders the rural policeman who is also the jailer.

Kheira, exhausted by her last maternal effort, collapses; her child escapes from her arms and falls onto the road. A woman with opulent breasts picks him up, saying, "What a handsome little *bicot!*" She shoves his head under her blouse, he is saved! Unconscious, Kheira is taken to the jail; boys and passersby follow, howling, "Eh! Drunkard! Drunkard!" Human cruelty knows no country. The young mother is locked up in a shed, laid on a plank used as a bed, and ... abandoned! The next day, she still does not move. But she should have digested her absinth by now... The jailer finally worries. A doctor is sent for, he is told that the prisoner was arrested for being drunk; he examines her carefully; then, his voice trembling with indignation, he exclaims, "Ignorant animals! This woman died of hunger!..."

### 7.3 The Fantasia<sup>103</sup>

In a *commune mixte* of the province of Algiers, our colorful flag flew in several windows, the streets were decked with branches of palms and a triumphal arch was built of oleanders. Europeans and Arabs competed to give to the center of the county

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<sup>103</sup> Equestrian entertainment.

seat an enchanting appearance, because the person who was expected can at will ruin the country or make it prosper; the administrators of the region make very sure they are attentive toward the person who bestows favors and promotions.

The administrators came escorted by their staff and their family if they could requisition the horses to bring them. But the Arabs adore shining in the *fantasia*; so instead of lending their horses to bring the administrator's wife and brood to the feast, many of them preferred mounting them to attend themselves. Result: five days in prison and a fine of fifteen francs. But it is well worth taking the risk for the joy of joining the *goum*,<sup>104</sup> wearing red boots and riding under the unfurled green banner with horsemen spread out in the plain, and seeing the great marabouts, the great notables.

In all countries, men in high places have a special way of distinguishing themselves from ordinary mortals. The Arab notables who came to the *fantasia* were decorated in a way as incongruous as it was original: they were decorated... with droppings!... Yes... falcon droppings! They wore on their burnouses traces of this hunting bird's excrements; in the desert that is the mark of a gentleman. Isn't it every bit as good as the piece of ribbon or the hardware worn by Europeans who want to be noticed?

The governor-general of Algeria, in whose honor all these preparations were made, was coming back from the south. He was bringing back cars full of rare things; he had received loads of presents from the *mouaddine*<sup>105</sup> as a sign of submission. But he was not coming back on the superb black horse, nor on the handsome white dromedary given to him by the natives of the south; he was coming back from Biskra by the express train; and like a god preceded by a sun or a king by an army, he was preceded by a crazy machine that ran as a scout before the governmental train. Telegram after telegram signaled the governor's approach. There he was!

As soon as he appeared the bugles sounded and the drums beat the general salute. The horses that had impatiently reared up hurled themselves forward, then rapidly ran back as if swept up by the wind. The horsemen who mounted them stood up straight on their saddles, shrieking at the top of their lungs and firing their guns in the air. Intoxicated by the gun powder they fired into the air, they rushed again, animated by a devilish furor. The men, one with their horses, communicated to them their feverish enthusiasm and soon the spectators, electrified, applauded them and shared their delirium.

All the horses that participated in the *fantasia* were handsome; their fine heads and their elegant shapes aroused the crowd's admiration. But among them there was one with an ebony coat and a proud neck that attracted all eyes. It was the mare belonging to Lagdar-ben-Djali of the Oulad-Mokran tribe, called Rihana, Fast as the Wind.

Over there, the horses are treated like humans and have names; the Arabs certainly take better care to educate a horse than Europeans do to educate a man; so

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**104** Algerian military contingent from a village into the French army.

**105** Man calling to prayer.

they succeed in developing in the horse more than instinct, namely, intelligence. That is how they can teach a horse that has thrown its rider to stop instantly. Like a faithful dog, this noble animal stays near the injured or dead horseman.

Rihana was not only the joy of her owner, but also the glory of the tribe. She won prizes in races, she was applauded in the *fantasia*, she could kneel and straighten up without alarming her master.

The administrator of M... had his eye on that handsome horse. The sight of the horse brought back by the governor excited his desire to possess Rihana. Finally, unable to contain himself, he approached her owner.

“Ladgar,” he said, “how much do you want for this horse worthy of a sultan?”

“It is not for sale,” answered Ladgar.

“I know you are financially comfortable, but well, to please me, put a big price on it and let me have it.”

“My pleasure is worth as much as yours, it pleases me to keep it.”

The administrator bit his lips. When the party was over and the governor gone, he was still thinking about the horse. He told his story to old Chaya whom he employed as an intermediary when he lent money at one hundred and twenty percent. Chaya filled his heart with hope.

“This comes at an ideal moment,” he said. “Bouziane, Ladgar’s neighbor, owes me, I shall have him seized.”

“But... what is the connection?” asked the official.

“I know what I am doing; I’ll speak to the bailiff, he will find a way to get the mare.”

The bailiff did not find much in Bouziane’s miserable *gourbi*.

“There isn’t enough here, let us look over there,” he said, climbing over the neighbor’s fence.

Seeing Rihana near Ladgar’s home, he went straight to her and seized her. When Ladgar indignantly protested, affirming that he did not owe anything to anyone, the bailiff only replied, “Put in a claim!”

Ladgar, of course, sought the help of the court to recover his property. Despite the many witnesses who swore that Rihana was born at Ladgar’s, despite tax receipts establishing his ownership of the horse, the court, leaning on some judicial subtleties, dismissed his suit, condemned him to pay the expenses, and validated the seizure.

Put up for sale, Rihana was bought on behalf of the administrator, who mounted her as soon as she was his, and from then on looked scornfully and insolently at Ladgar, who was distraught at having been despoiled of his animal. When Ladgar was within earshot, the administrator would shout, “Villain, you refused to sell me your mare, and two weeks later, you had it sold by the authority of the law! I’ll get even with you for that!”

Rihana’s abduction particularly upset Nedjma, Ladgar’s favorite wife. She had never eaten a honey cake, a handful of dates, or a fried morsel of roasted lamb without sharing it with Rihana, who seemed to echo this attention and neighed with

pleasure when seeing her handsome mistress. One day, when the administrator, on an inspection tour in the *douar* of the Oulad-Mokran, left the horse with his *chaouch*, it instinctively came to Ladgar's door. Nedjma innocently thought that Rihana was given back to them. Happy, laughing and crying, jumping and dancing, she ran to her, caressed her chest, took her head in her little hands and, lifting her haick, kissed her over and over again. Then, hearing steps, she quickly lowered her veil and ran away in distress. But the administrator, who had hastily come back, saw Nedjma; less perhaps than her beauty, her lively and passionate exuberance awakened in him one of those mad feelings that can neither be reasoned with nor conquered.

He could not stop thinking about her. During the day he tried to see her; at night he dreamed of her. His passion grew to the point that, unable to hide it, he confided his torment to the Jew Chaya.

"The devil take me," said Chaya, "it is less easy to take a woman than a mare!"

But he was a scoundrel, unfazed by crime, and one day he said to the bashful lover, "Eureka!" He had implicated Ladgar, a friend of France, in a trumped-up plot of rebellion against it. With money and means of intimidation witnesses can always be found. Some of them affirmed that Nedjma's husband, bought by the English, was stirring up the south and plotting a trap for our troops. Despite the implausibility of the accusation and the lack of evidence, Ladgar was found guilty, condemned, despoiled of his property, and sent to Nouméa. Nedjma, terrified by this judgment, submitted to what was demanded of her.

And while the husband of the woman and owner of the horse is in a penal colony, the administrator calmly enjoys the wife and the mare.

## 7.4 Divorce Seekers

After the sirocco that unleashed a fifteen-hour sand storm came the torrential rain, a downpour that dug ravines in Africa's warm earth and made a swamp out of the scorched plain divided by a white ribbon which is the road where Le Rocailleux, a small town in the department of Oran, is located. Numerous groups of people in burnouses and haicks have left the village despite the terrible weather.

Women and men, without the portable tent we call an umbrella, appear much less troubled by the weather than by the storm raging inside them; their tense mouths utter piercing exclamations, their eyes throw flashes of lightning! This crowd is going to the top of the hill; a town is perched there, so as to dominate the Arab quarter and signal that this is a French town. It has four vast buildings: the luxurious and comfortable hotel of the administration; the *gendarmerie*<sup>106</sup> that looks like a barracks, whereas the soldiers' barracks look more like villas behind their screens

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<sup>106</sup> French military police.

of oleanders; then a low house that is visibly trying to hide as if it were ashamed to be there: this is the prison; and finally there is a parallelogram made of red bricks, the temple of Themis<sup>107</sup>. From fifty meters away you would believe it is surrounded by a herd of sheep; but as you approach, you see that what appeared to be sheep are in fact men wrapped in their burnouses, squatting close to one another. There they are, three or four hundred of them, in the torrential rain, waiting for the Muslim tribunal.

Grouped apart from the men, their small hands and nails reddened with henna, the women hide their faces with their haiks, which are blown off at times by the indiscreet wind, giving fugitive apparitions of houris. These women, nearly all of them young and pretty, are there to obtain a divorce.

The court's large double door finally opens and while the Arabs, soaked to the skin, squat in the immense room, the *chaouch* in his sparkling white costume solemnly announces, "The Court is now in session!" As soon as the judges are seated, the litigants come to the bar one by one. Even when they have good reasons, if they have neglected to pay the interpreter – judges and Arab litigants do not speak the same language and therefore do not understand each other – he will translate the contrary of what they are saying and they are often condemned.

Besides the frequent accusations of robberies, blows, and wounds, strange claims are heard in the court. Here, for instance, is the case of Yamina bent Aïsem against Larbi ben Ali. A woman of elegant appearance approaches the bar; she slightly opens her haik, which excites some curiosity, and with precise details she tells the judges that her husband has not kissed her in six weeks! For this wrong, this offence, she is demanding one hundred francs of damages. The laughing judges seem to think that the husband has punished himself enough.

But here is an opposing view. A husband named El-Abib whose wife just ran away demands three francs of damages for each day she has spent outside his home. His suit being dismissed, he leaves, uttering against the judge this malediction so frequent in Arab country:

May God curse all yours!

May He make yours blind!

May He destroy your harvests!

May He make you ill, cripple!

Meryem bent Djabis, whose husband agreed to accept only a *khul* divorce whereby he would receive a large sum of money, has succeeded in obtaining a doctor's certificate testifying that she was ... a maiden; she obtained her freedom without having to pay any ransom to her husband.

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<sup>107</sup> Personification of law and order in Greek mythology.

The main cause of most divorces is polygamy, even though polygamy is not grounds for divorce. Many women who come and expose their grievances for the first time vehemently protest against the plurality of wives. The judge puts them and their husbands in *adala* for a week with an observer who will decide which spouse is in the wrong.

But look at this young girl at the bar, her haik immodestly raised, her face in tears; she speaks rapidly; the words “betrayal” and “divorce” come over and over again from her mouth. It is Kanza, a pretty fourteen-year-old adolescent; her husband, returning from his wedding, introduced to her a Negress as her co-wife. Furious, indignant, Kanza tried to run away to avoid this promiscuity; her husband barricaded the door; terrified, the poor child, risking her life, jumped through the window into a ravine. The court reprimanded the husband, Amed ben Assem, a puny eighteen-year old, ashen and sickly, who protested his love for his first wife and declared that if he took a second one, it was simply to have her work for his mother... Furthermore, Muslim law gives him the right to marry four wives!

Unable to obtain a divorce, Kanza cried out, “Give me a lizard, a dog as a spouse, but not a man who has another wife!” Then she dashed outside, hurried off and ran so fast that neither her parents nor her husband could follow her. She rushed down the hill and came to a colossal tree, the only one of a burned-down forest still standing; newly skinned sheep were swinging from its branches. This tree is the town’s abattoir, where at any hour lambs and oxen are killed under its shade. Two men throw the victim to the ground, hold it there while a third one seizes the animal at the throat and slits its carotid with a knife.

There was a pool of blood where a white goat with a long silky coat and a slender head had just been killed, screaming like a pretty woman under the executioner’s knife. In despair, little Kanza lay down in the steaming blood; her *melhfa* and her haik took on a purple hue; she put her head on the block, her heart broken, her voice full of sobs, she said to the butcher: “I am too unhappy... too... unhappy..., bleed me!”

## 7.5 Sadia

Everyone is struck by the Arabs’ noble air and the regal majesty with which the poorest among them drape themselves in their ragged burnouses. This is not the exclusive privilege of men; many women – if they could be seen – would be hailed as queens in the most aristocratic circles of our civilized cities. Sadia is among the most triumphant of these queens.

The Arab woman is generally short. Sadia is tall, graceful, elegant! Her voice is harmonious, her charm disturbs and fascinates. But her reputation for coquetry is as widely spread as that of her beauty.

Is Sadia a courtesan? Not at all! When you enter her spacious house, the most beautiful in the country with its ornaments and crescents in varnished earthenware,

you see in the immense rooms stacks of carpets that serve as hangings, furniture, and seats. You see oak trunks overflowing with jewelry, lace, silk and gold embroidery, beautiful fabrics, fans, and a thousand artistic nothings; but no man.

It is among women that you drink, burning your lips, the obligatory boiling hot coffee served in solid gold cups on silver trays of a one-meter diameter. And it is to women that Sadia shows her riches, wanting to give them when her guests marvel at them. But her European airs, her audacity in refusing the seclusion imposed on Muslim women, and finally her three successive divorces before the age of twenty-five, have given her a reputation of flirtatiousness; her beauty is scrutinized as her jewels are appraised.

Sadia goes out, but after sundown as prescribed by Mohammed. She wraps herself in a white silk haik with pink stripes that reveals only one of her eyes. She only goes to those houses of notables where she is welcomed. She arrives around eight o'clock, preceded by servants, accompanied by her mother, a common matron, and by her young sister, an eight-year-old child already married. Those honored by her visit serve her a light supper; and with what supreme elegance does Sadia bring the goblet to her lips or eat a piece of cake!

She must be really seductive, she must be really incomparable, this Sadia, because her divorced husbands cannot forget her! Then why all these divorces? Here is her odyssey with her last husband, the *caïd*<sup>108</sup> Muhamed, son of a *bachaga*,<sup>109</sup> if you please.

The *caïd* Muhamed, from around Tialet where are born the most handsome men, had seen Sadia walk by and had fallen head over heels in love. Passions are not patient in Algeria, so to satisfy his, Muhamed bought Sadia for thirty thousand francs. The nuptials were celebrated with pomp despite the sour faces of the husband's family, who claimed he was marrying beneath his station (questions of genealogy, of birth, are extremely important in Arab society; according to his parents, the *caïd* Muhamed was supposed to marry a girl of noble tent, not the handsome Sadia). Entire flocks of whole sheep were roasted, a thousand chickens killed, two hundred kilos of honey cakes baked, and all the mouths of the region, rich and poor, feasted on the couscous. For one does not need to be invited to go to a wedding in Arab country: however poor one is, everyone is always welcome at a marriage banquet. A rich groom offers copious meals; a poor one offers neither food, nor drink, but still attracts a large attendance because, for this congenial race, every special feast becomes a general celebration and provides the opportunity to get together, to "make the powder speak," to laugh, to listen to music, and to dance.

Several *fantasia* were organized for the *caïd's* nuptials; when the last kilo of powder was burned, the enchanting Sadia, hoisted on a mule superbly harnessed,

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**108** Muslim official, at once judge, administrator, and chief of police.

**109** Title of a high Muslim notable.

saddled with a fringed red carpet, and led by two Negroes, was triumphantly brought to her husband; she was going to be a woman of noble tent! Over there, this title means as much as lady of the manor is in our country. The whole town escorted Sadia; a delegation of Muhamed's tribe came to meet her; excited by the gunfire, everybody walked in a cloud of smoke to the infernal sound of drums and music, songs, and gunshots. Women, two by two in palanquins draped with multicolored fabrics, waved their white haiks and encouraged the *fantasia's* horsemen to show off, shouting: "Yu! Yu! Yu!"

When a panel of Muhamed's tent opened before the radiant face of the new bride, it was like seeing a goddess! But her delighted smile soon disappeared, she knitted her brows. In the tent she had seen ... women!

"Muhamed!" she said, pointing to them, "are they yours?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Then," she said, "adieu! I am leaving... I refuse to share my husband." She left, majestically, then mounted the mule and went back home, to the great disappointment of the entourage that had come to the wedding feast. When the *caïd* got over his amazement, he jumped on his best horse and raced after his wife; he went through every declaration of love, in vain... "I love you," repeated Sadia, "that is why I don't want you to belong to anyone else but me. Send your wives away and only then may you come to get me."

Divorce is not difficult to obtain in Arab society. However, there were for Muhamed some issues impossible to resolve; he could not repudiate his other wives without losing his standing. So it was Sadia who asked for a divorce and obtained it.

Do you think the *caïd* gave her up? No! He is still wooing her as assiduously as the most passionate lover and asks to see her while, urged by his family, he sues to be reimbursed the price he paid for the pretty woman he does not have. Each time he obtains an amorous encounter, he signs a note of five hundred francs.

Sadia adores the *caïd*; the torments her coquetry inflicts on him are a proof of it. But this proud and beautiful *Mauresque* prefers to be Muhamed's lover, his unique favorite, than the wife of a polygamist.