

# Seeking Chimera



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in collaboration with Clare Carolan

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Front cover:

Photograph by Bougaul from *Les Merveilles de l'Autre France*,  
Edited by Prosper Richard, published by Hachette, 1924.

For the Ouled Nail dancers; the women who inspired dreams

*Finally, at the extreme limit of the flattened plain, we were surrounded by an indecisive mirage. Here the earth no longer has either solidity or colour. It is a place where the dazzled eye reads the solid mountains as wisps of mist. A vague sequence of images replaces the seven heads of the Seba Rous, the Guest-Esthel and the mountainous entrance to the land of the Ouled Nail.*

Eugene Fromentin, October 1953

We would like to acknowledge the following people who supported us during the making this work:

Clare Carolan, who with characteristic insight and delight, engaged the editorial process with remarkable insight. Clare, no cursory contributor, connects with the text like a gardener tending her garden; she knows that pruning and nourishment are necessary if she is to bring out the colour. We are indebted to her for ensuring narrative continuity.

Kheira Fasse encouraged us and contributed to the stories and images contained in this book. Kheira kept traditions alive and invited us to enjoy her delicious meals.

Dennis Mariner fine tuned the layout; he cared for the image production and he supervised the layout of book; these things he did with patience and dedication.

Werner Herzog supported us by making the film *Fata Morgana*. For us the inspirational attitude he brings to film making is a source of profound engagement.

# Seeking Chimera

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## Opening Comments by the Authors

The layers of this book are complex. In its entirety it is fiction, but it includes real work that has been translated. In this fiction we are practising the deceit that some invented documents contained within the book are real and some real documents have been fictionalised. Having mixed the real and the invented together we trust that the reader will find their own truth once familiar with the territory.

We begin this narrative by claiming that a series of documents and papers were either collected or created by a young woman, Nancy Etheridge, when she was in Algeria. Nancy, the protagonist of the story, was an Edwardian Englishwoman and the material she left behind has been prepared for publication by her fictional great granddaughter, Bérénice Sanson. Bérénice received Nancy's documents from her mother, who in turn inherited them from her own mother. The book Bérénice has produced is called *An Algerian Adventure – The Awakening of Nancy Etheridge*.

Part of Bérénice's inherited collection is a novel by Nancy Etheridge, entitled *Mirage*. Nancy writes in the third person, but the family believe it is an autobiographical account of her time in Algeria. Nancy's unusual practice of using her own name for the leading character is the extent of their evidence. Some regard the novel as a finished work and others claim that it is incomplete.

The plot relates to a journey that Léon Lehuraux organises for Nancy. Léon was in fact an Indigenous Affairs Officer in

the French Army, stationed in Algeria. In this narrative we have re-invented him as a fictional character, but Léon's account of a marriage ceremony in Biskra was one of many books he actually produced and had published: *Musulmans 1938 – Un Mariage Arabe Dans Le Sud Algérien*. We have translated parts of this book and present it in our fiction as a first draft manuscript of a marriage ceremony that occurred in Djelfa.

We have also translated passages of *Bou-Saâda, Cité Du Bonheur*, also by Léon Lehuroux. His beautiful description of the town and of the Ouled Nail women is important to this work. In the introduction to her book, Bérénice states that *Bou-Saâda, Cité Du Bonheur* was sent to Nancy many years after her visit.

Léon, as portrayed in Nancy's novel, *Mirage*, is a product of our assumptions about his qualities and his spirit as we perceive it from his writing. The events he engages in and the feelings he expresses have been invented by the authors.

The two sections in this book called, *Memoirs of a Journey* and *News from Bou-Saâda*, also pose as reality yet they sit squarely in the realm of fiction. The interplay between invention and reality in this tale has one final twist – the account of Nancy's visit to the Zaouia and the apartment in the Casbah were inspired by real events; these occurred to Kheira Fasse when she visited Algiers in the summer of 2010.





# An Algerian Adventure

The Awakening of Nancy Etheridge



Edited by Bérénice Sanson

Published in 1996 by Marabout Press  
4 Place des Heros, 89 100 Sens, France

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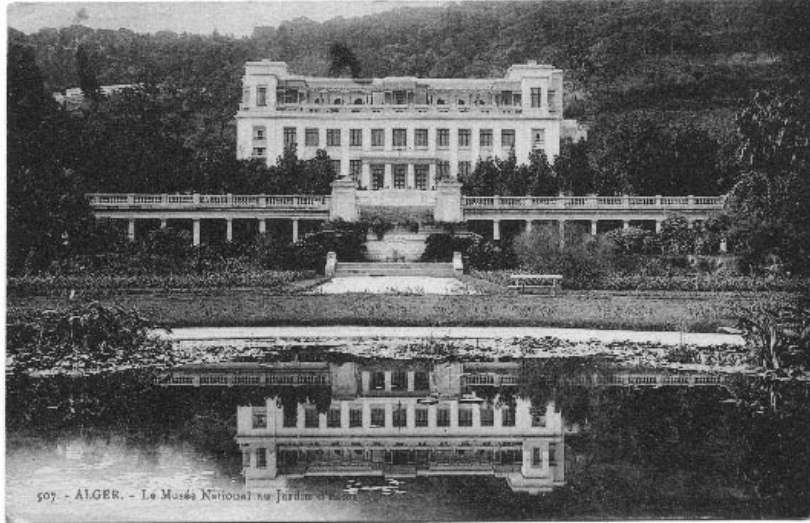
Front cover: a postcard from the collection of Nancy Etheridge.

For Léon Lehuraux

*A country where the centre is in every  
place and the circumference is nowhere.*

General O. Meynier, 1954

# Acknowledgements



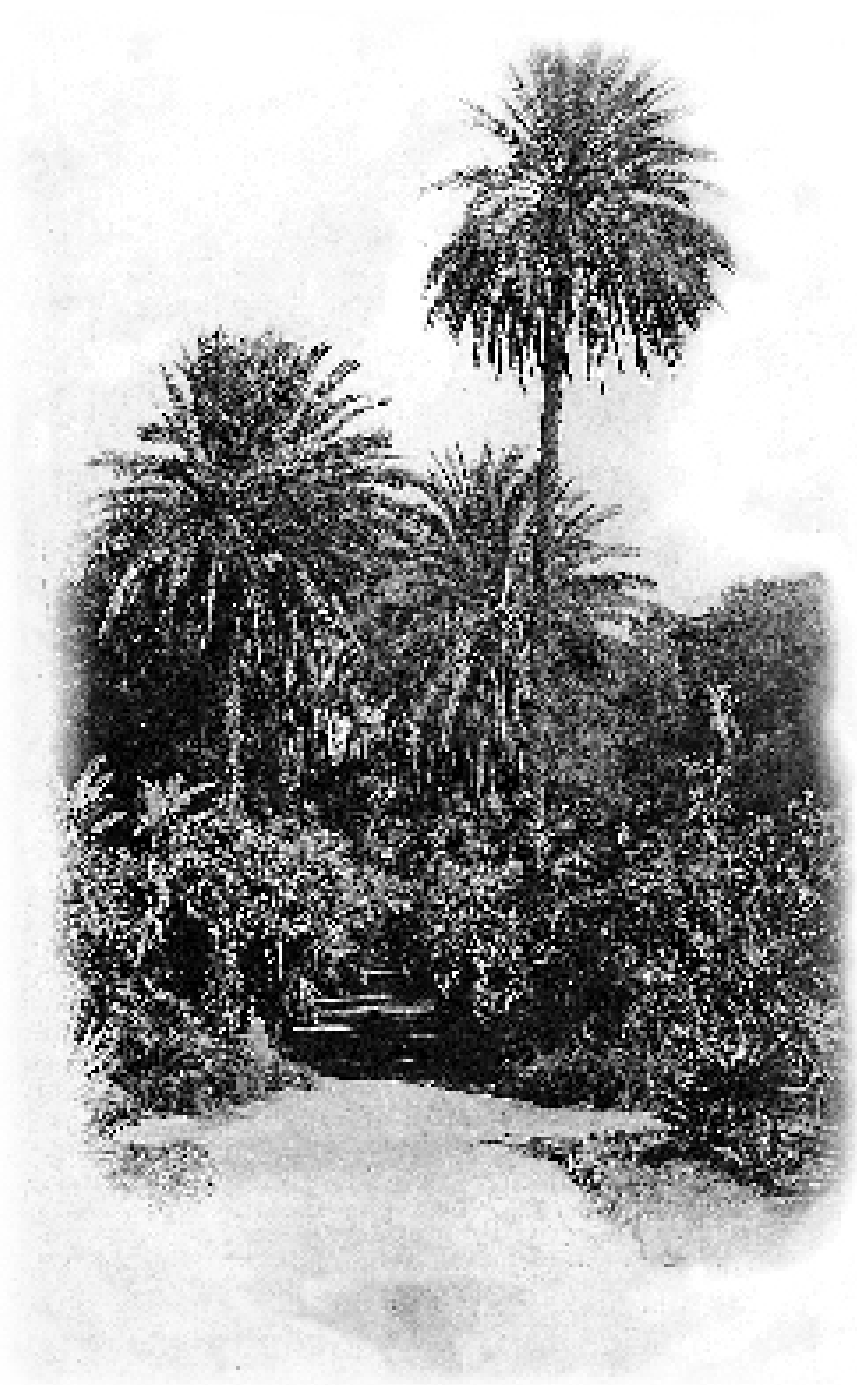
I would like to acknowledge the following people who supported me during the process of making this work:

Amina Fasse, Clare Carolan, Houria Tabaïchount, Aïcha Bakoura, Cordelia Blair-Stickland, Marguerite Pilon, Belkacem Tamani, Emmanuel Charton and Dennis Mariner.

# Contents

As a young woman, my great-grandmother Nancy Etheridge, visited Algeria. I have in my possession, four sets of documents owned or created by her when she was there – a novel, a draft manuscript, a collection of postcards, maps, memorabilia and correspondence between my great-grandmother and her mother. There is also a book written by Léon Lehuraux, *Bou-Saâda, Cité Du Bonheur*, that was sent to Nancy many years later, extracts of which I have included. I present them as follows:

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# Mirage

A novel by Nancy Etheridge





# Mirage

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Part One  
Algiers the White



# Aunt Jessica

Nancy stared at the telegram. She had no idea then that the half a dozen words it contained would change her life. Feeling lost and slightly uncertain, she placed the buff-coloured piece of paper on the table, hurried to the shoe cupboard, retrieved her walking boots and left the house. Her intention was to walk across the fields, her ambition to come to terms with her feelings, but neither were realised. She stopped abruptly at the first stile and made a robust declaration that was entirely uncharacteristic; Aunt Jessica would not die until she had seen her. She simply would not allow it.

Knowing that she must honour this resolution, Nancy turned for home, swiftly packed a bag and headed purposefully into town to catch the train for London. From there she would travel to Paris, where Aunt Jessica lived.

When Nancy was young, it was her Aunt Jessica who had recognised her inherent vulnerability. It was Jessica who had constantly instructed her niece in ways that she might befriend her wild dreams and become more courageous. On one occasion, Nancy recalled that she had shown her how to stand, encouraging her to broaden her chest and look people in the eye. Remembering Jessica's lessons, Nancy believed she was no longer frightened by her dreams or given to a lack of confidence, but with Jessica gone, she feared she might return to her vulnerable ways.

Nancy arrived in Paris doubting that Jessica's ability to inspire could continue beyond the grave, yet she left the city certain that her final lesson at Jessica's bedside would stay with her forever. The frail, courageous woman described the ambitions that had directed her own life, lectured Nancy further on the need to shed her self-consciousness and advised her on the evils of false confidence born of privilege and education. It had always been her aunt's abiding opinion that formal education restricted the human spirit and Jessica returned again to this theme.

"Schools induce fear in the body and arrogance in the mind," she had declared, "and you continue to show signs of both of these. Those dreams that haunt you, your passion for a solitary life only increase your need for attention. All this speaks of imprisonment. You need more independence

and more determination if you are to take part fully in life. You must travel, Nancy; see how others live, broaden your understanding.”

Nancy, familiar enough with the views of her Aunt and not wanting to upset her, took everything in her stride, but the formidable Jessica did not stop there.

“You must find a man who loves you passionately,” she insisted, “do not shrink from making partnerships or wait for a man to find you. I’m certain there’s a more robust character in you somewhere and remember, it’s always better to have a number of lovers to choose from.”

At this last remark, Jessica’s dark eyes flashed and she pulled herself up, communicating that she was still fiercely independent at heart. Nancy, by comparison, shrank and felt like a child once more. Jessica pursued her vigorous instruction.

“Look at a man straight and he will respect you; play the coy maid and you are lost for ever.” Aunt Jessica’s gaze unsettled Nancy, but she knew how to hide it. “You must also learn to dance,” the untamed Jessica continued. “Dance exquisitely and you will enchant men. They always marvel at the beauty of a confident body, even if the woman is not beautiful. You are far more beautiful than I ever was, but I had more spirit, and I never loved a man who couldn’t dance.” Nancy, studied her Aunt, bemused that the topic of dance should feature yet again.

Until this moment Aunt Jessica had shown no indication that her grip on life was anything but robust, but with these words, she slumped back onto her pillows. Nancy cried out to her. Jessica opened her eyes briefly. She spoke in a thin, cracked voice. Nancy squeezed her hand in fear and sadness.

“I will be strong again in a moment,” Jessica promised. She lay still, her eyes closed. “I must soon look death in the eye. That’s the final lesson isn’t it? Thankfully I’m ready for it.”

Nancy was never to see the return of her beloved Aunt’s strength, but she had heard something of great importance. She had asked Jessica to reveal her fondest memory, a request that she had hoped would revive her.

“The Ouled Nail dancers,” Jessica had whispered smiling secretly and then, no more. Nancy knew that Jessica was speaking about the dancers of the Sahara.

After the funeral she asked her mother, Alicia, for more information, but Alicia had little to tell. The gist of it was that her sister had visited the

Sahara Desert specifically to be with the Ouled Nail tribe. Upon her return, Jessica had danced like a wild angel.

“At the time, everyone found it quite amusing,” Alicia remembered, “and certainly more entertaining than many of her other eccentricities.”

Nancy recalled that when she was little her Aunt’s dancing had frightened her, but in the weeks that followed her death, she longed to relive those dances. Later, when the temptation to sink into melancholy was upon her, Nancy attempted an imitation of Jessica’s dances and was surprised that they engendered such a fierce energy.

Jessica’s connection with these dancers inspired Nancy to make another resolute and somewhat uncharacteristic decision. Nancy vowed that she would seek out the dancers of the Sahara Desert. She told herself that it would be a fitting way to take her departure from Jessica, certain that it would give her own spirit some of the buoyancy it now needed.

Nancy’s father, George, was greatly displeased by his daughter’s notion of visiting Algeria. He tried everything to dissuade her, but Nancy was in no mood for dissension. As luck would have it, George knew something of North Africa, being a surgeon in the Royal Army Medical Corps, so he contacted some colleagues who had served there and eventually managed to make contact with a certain Captain Léon Lehuraux. Lehuraux, a French indigenous affairs officer stationed in Algiers, offered to accompany Nancy during her stay there. He was an expert in tribal customs and had considerable knowledge of the social life of the Nomadic tribes. Nancy was delighted when a telegram arrived from him.

*algiers the white city awaits stop  
will welcome you 0900 hrs 14 april stop  
salutations captain lehuraux*

## Spice and Sea

The sea journey from Marseilles to Algiers was enchanting. The weather was fine and Nancy spent the hours on deck reading about the city she was about to visit.

*Algiers the White, or El-Bahdja in Arabic, started life as a Phoenician outpost, developed into a small town during Roman times and has known many incarnations since. When the Ottomans took control, they constructed a citadel at the highest point. The upper city, al-Gabal, or the mountain, was inhabited by Andalusian, Jewish, Moorish and Kabyle communities and the lower city, al-Wata, or the plains, was inhabited by the Turkish community.*

Not wishing to appear naive before the indigenous affairs officer, Nancy read everything she could lay her hands on. The names of all things Algerian intrigued her. She wanted to stay in places like Djelfa, Laghouat or Ksar-el-Boukhari, to visit Ain Oussera, Hassi-Bahbah or Sidi Makhlouf. She wanted to see the salt lakes, Zahrez Gharbi and Zahrez Chergui, the rivers, Oued Messaad and Oued Djedi and the mountains, Djebel Bou-Khaïl and Djebel Teberguine.

At dawn on the second day, Nancy was greeted by dazzling sunlight reflecting off the white buildings of El-Bahdja. It was a majestic scene, but the calm of her arriving vision was soon replaced by the chaos of the harbour and dock side. Nancy was allocated a Maltese porter to take care of her trunk and she followed him through the bustling, unfamiliar chaos. She knew Captain Léon Lehuraux the moment she saw him; a tall, thin uniformed man, with a neat moustache. He was busily looking about him. Similarly, he identified her on sight, but this was less surprising for she was the only woman on the platform and she had fair hair.

Lehuraux greeted Nancy, issued an instruction to the porter in Arabic and escorted her to a horse-drawn carriage. Lehuraux paid the porter and assisted the driver to store the luggage. As he seated himself next to her, Nancy thanked him for agreeing to be her chaperone.

“It was little more than a selfish excuse on my part,” the gallant captain declared. “With you, I hope to improve my English.”

As they moved out of the dockyard, Lehuraux assumed the role of tour guide and Nancy nodded or made appreciative sounds to indicate that she was listening. They were in a modern area of Algiers, but now and then she caught glimpses of the old part, the ancient City of the Deys, occupying a steep hill, high above sea level.

Nancy was overwhelmed. The smell of the streets, an unfamiliar collection of spice odours mixed with the smell of the sea, was rich, almost uncomfortably so, but she surrendered to the exotic luxury. She reacted to the heat as though it were holding her in a sensual embrace and to the air as though she was breathing in all of Africa. They travelled up steep streets, Nancy catching startling views of the blue sea and the city winding round the harbour on the far side of the bay.

“Quelle vue, c’est magnifique,” she whispered. Lehuraux smiled. Nancy, in a dream, imagined her Aunt experiencing Algiers with similar delight.

The carriage came to a stop in La Place des Palmiers de la Régence. L’Hotel Colonial d’Angleterre was the place she was to stay. They stood under the magnificent palm trees and Lehuraux pointed to the Opera House on the other side of the square. “Next to that is the officer’s mess,” he told her. “That’s where I live. It’s a very grand part of the city. The difference between the European sector and the labyrinthine old town, where the Arab population live, is striking.”

“Yes, without the palm trees and the bright sunlight it could be mistaken for Haussmann’s Paris,” Nancy offered.

Lehuraux agreed and it occurred to him that he might enjoy Nancy’s presence in this city. Once she had completed her arrival formalities at reception, he suggested they dine together in the officer’s mess.

“I cannot invite you there before seven,” he explained “because the bar and smoking room are for men only.”

Nancy accepted the invitation and they parted company, agreeing to meet in the lounge at six. Alone in her room, Nancy stood at the open window gazing at the Opera House. All was silent in that direction, but she could just hear the haunting, unfamiliar, rhythmic music coming from the Casbah. She delighted in the exotic sounds.

Following a bath, Nancy lay daydreaming on the bed. A servant entered, bearing a bottle of red wine. She gazed in silent amazement at her uninvited guest as he poured a glass of rich-looking liquid and offered it to her. She took a generous sip. It tasted as rich as it looked and the warm hint of spice



invigorated her. She emptied the glass, drank another and slipped into a dream of an Algiers from another age. It was the sound of the muezzin that woke her an hour or so later. The call filled her with a desire to stand close to the singer and to witness the strength of those vocal chords that could fill the city.

After tea, Nancy engaged a carriage driver to take her on a tour of the city. She was eager to visit the Casbah, but the streets there were too narrow for a carriage to pass and she was not yet confident enough to walk alone. The trams, rumbling down the broad boulevard of Rue Michelet, were filled with people, as were the pavements that lay before the enticing shops lining the Rue d'Isly. La Grande Post looked more like a palace than a post office and the Marche de la Lyre, an impressive metal structure, filled the surrounding streets with delicious spicy smells.

Returning to the hotel, Nancy changed for dinner and met Lehuraux in the lounge. While they drank herbal aperitifs, Nancy told her story of how her Aunt Jessica had inspired her to seek out the Ouled Nail dancers. Léon Lehuraux was taken aback.

"It is unusual for a European woman to see the dancers," he informed her. "They only perform in the Moorish cafés these days and here men are the sole inhabitants."

It never occurred to Nancy that she might see the dancers in Algiers rather than the desert. She asked why it was not possible to visit the cafés.

"First," Lehuraux exclaimed, and then fell silent. He had to think what did come first. "First, you must start by getting to know something of this country and then we will discuss the dancing cafés."

"My Aunt saw them many years ago" Nancy insisted, a little aggrieved. "You cannot possibly imagine that I will return before seeing them."

"I'm sure I can arrange something," Lehuraux smiled neutrally. He hardly knew how to expand upon the difficulties of arranging such a visit, but he let the matter rest.

## Ouled Nail Dancers

Over dinner in the officer's mess, Nancy bombarded Léon with questions. He had no idea about the importance of her quest, but he was willing and eager to share his knowledge. Before long, Nancy was pronouncing the name Ouled Nail correctly. She learned that it meant *Children of Nail* and that the Nail, one of the larger Nomadic tribes, originated in the Mont des Ouled Nail, just south of the High Plateau. Léon explained that the dancing women returned to their mountain villages to get married once they had been in Algiers long enough to establish a dowry.

Lehuraux's knowledge impressed Nancy and when he talked of the time he had seen the dancers in Djelfa, she begged to be taken there. He was quick to reject the notion.

"Djelfa is a long way from here and the journey is dangerous."

Nancy was beginning to wonder if Captain Lehuraux was the best choice of companion after all and he too was beginning to sense the possibility of conflict between them. What kept their animated discussion alive that evening was her need for information and his eagerness to display his knowledge. Léon seemed to know everything about the indigenous population of Algeria, but Nancy only wanted to question him about the Ouled Nail. She wanted to know why they allowed their girls to dance in public when all other tribal groups zealously guarded their daughters. Léon explained that it was simply a matter of tradition.

"The girls are instructed in the art of dance by their mothers. When they are about twelve they leave their desert homes to practice their trade in the cafés of the cities and oases towns. Their talents are in great demand and the best of them can amass a large dowry. Most return home after about fifteen years and make a good marriage, but some continue to dance and guide the younger, incoming Ouled Nail girls.

"How do they earn their money?"

"The audience pay them. The women wear the money they are given as a sign of their worth."

"Do they wear it while dancing?"

"Yes, it is part of the dance."

“They wear an entire dowry?”

“Of course, they are very proud of it. It’s not a cheap trick. These are women of influence; they are highly esteemed.”

“What happens after they marry?”

“Those who marry are held to the laws of respectability as strictly as any of their tribal sisters. They never dance publicly again.”

“So these women are used and then rejected,” Nancy declared. Suddenly Léon’s narrative lost its charm for her and Léon, realising this, became first defensive and then argumentative.

“With a sufficient dowry they can at least choose who to marry,” he claimed. “Dancing in public is an honourable profession and it does at least assure their material well-being.”

Nancy set her censorious gaze upon him and Léon again retreated into caution when Nancy asked how the dancers chose their husbands.

“Like anyone else,” he replied with a shrug. “Men have been known to fight over a woman who has earned a good dowry.”

“There you see,” said Nancy. “This tribal ritual is exploitation.”

“Please Nancy, we must not be combative about this.”

“But you’re trying to put a good face on something that is unethical.”

Léon held himself in check. He did not wish to end their first evening in discord. “Perhaps I should describe an Ouled Nail dance for you,” he suggested and he received a nod from Nancy.

“Curiously, the girls dance in pairs,” he began. “I don’t know why they do this. The women who are not dancing line up by the stage. After two or three dances one of them will rest and a waiting dancer will replace her. The dance is very intense. They keep their heads relatively still and shake their shoulders in rapid undulations.”

Léon held his arms out at shoulder level to demonstrate. Nancy smiled.

“These women have a high degree of muscle control. They move their arms like snakes and their hands in gentle waves of action. The fingers they flutter delicately.”

“Are you being truthful about this?” Nancy asked.

“Of course,” Léon replied, offended. “Now I must tell of the region beneath the waist; this is where the most important movements take place. They twist their hips and move them from side to side. The dancers either tilt forward or arch backwards, twisting their bodies at the same time. Often they have a silk scarf, which they flutter around them, pulling it

behind their heads and stroking it against their cheeks.”

“Surely this is just to arouse the men,” said Nancy sceptically.

Léon sighed, “It’s more complicated than that, Nancy.”

“Might we go to the café tomorrow?”

Léon prevaricated and gave no answer. He had no ambition to act as Nancy’s protector and lacked the confidence to be her companion.

“Where do the young girls live?” Nancy asked.

“With the older dancers. They shelter and train them.”

“I thought they were trained by their mothers.”

“They are, but they continue to learn. The women who teach rarely marry. They live together in a demimonde.”

“A demimonde?”

“A place where women live in groups. The Ouled Nail often take over an entire street. They are highly respected and financially independent, supported by wealthy protectors, but they live on the fringes of society.”

Nancy felt affronted on their behalf. This could not be right. How frequently she recalled the image of Jessica lying on her bed. How often she wanted to question her further about the things she had seen here.

“Many of the women are kept by their lovers,” Léon continued, “and by all accounts the arrangement suits both parties. It is said that the man who sleeps with an Ouled Nail woman will first lose his soul, afterwards his wealth, and finally his life, so one can hardly weigh the balance between winners and losers. These women can be fierce. You should not romanticise them. They have a hard life, but they know how to play it.”

As Nancy stood to leave, she wondered if she was an innocent flower or a fighter for women’s suffrage.

## Café Bou-Saâda

By mid morning Léon was again at Nancy's hotel. He informed her that if she wished to see the dancers, she must dress in the guise of man and Nancy, taken aback, enquired why his manner was so curt.

"If you want to go to the café, you must exchange your blouse and skirt for a gandoura and a burnous and wrap a guenour about your head. Trust me. The men would be very inquisitive about a European woman in their café, especially one with golden hair, wearing frilly cottons. The dancers will not be pleased if you distract attention away from them."

Nancy's thoughts were again with Jessica. She imagined she would not have objected to dressing as a man, but when Léon described the drab gown, cloak and head gear she must wear, she was less than enthusiastic. Léon encouraged her, insisting that she would love the market and the bargaining that would take place. Nancy could find no reason to object.

Mornings in Algiers were busy and Nancy took in the mix of sights, sounds and smells with considerable delight. The Market was more magnificent than she could have imagined and she wandered slowly through it, touching everything as she went. The stall holders were equally taken with Nancy and the clothiers expressed their appreciation when she assumed the gate of a man in her Arab costume. It surprised Léon that she displayed such confidence in this situation. He had not imagined she would enjoy being the centre of attention.

That evening, in the hotel lounge, Nancy rehearsed her disguise for real. The success of the evening's excursion relied on her remaining anonymous. Receiving no unexpected glances or comments in the hotel, Nancy ambled into the square. Before long she was enjoying her new role, beginning to sense that her presence in the café promised excitement.

"I prefer you in your own clothes," Léon told her. Nancy smiled, teasing him with a glimpse of hair she had not tucked under the guenour. They took a waiting carriage and once again she passed the trams rumbling down the Rue Michelet, the many shops on the Rue d'Isly and the palatial post office. At the Marche de la Lyre, they left the carriage and crossed the street to start the long climb up Rue Randon into the Casbah.

“We are going to the Quartier des Plaisirs. There are endless steps, so I hope your shoes fit properly.”

Nancy, half-remembering the word Algerians used for shoes, asked Léon to remind her of it.

“Ouazouazi,” he declared and Nancy laughed. “They are also called sabatte boussadi,” said Léon, joining her mirth, “but either way, if your shoes are loose you will be uncomfortable.”

Nancy lifted her robe to display delicate feet slipping around inside new shoes. Léon huffed and removed his boots. He pulled off his socks, gave them to Nancy and bid her to put them on. Although the walk was difficult, Nancy was enchanted with the scenes before her. She saw very few women, and as they glided past in the haik that covered them from head to foot, she tried unsuccessfully to catch their eye. Men were everywhere, walking together or drinking coffee and chatting excitedly outside the cafés.

“The night belongs to the men,” Nancy commented. “What do they find to talk about so enthusiastically?”

“Anything and everything,” said Léon, “but I doubt any of it is worthy of suspicion.” He wondered why he had expressed himself in this way and pointed to the café of the dancers. The name *Bou-Saâda* and the light pouring from the open doorway also announced its presence. Léon placed a helping hand at Nancy’s back and then reminded himself to treat her like a fellow male.

Self consciously, Nancy followed Léon into the café. She stopped, taken aback by the smoke-filled air, and stood transfixed by a group of Arabs in costly silk and woollen garments. Léon nudged her, indicating a table that was unoccupied. The men gazed eagerly towards a raised platform at the end of a long room. Nancy did likewise. There, gaudily-attired girls danced to the strains of strange instruments.

Nancy had expected to be part of a ritual celebration; she had imagined a place filled with light-hearted enjoyment, but here there was only self-preoccupation. She found the women’s movements - the shaking and jiggling, abrasive and confrontational.

The Ouled Nail girls glittered with gold and silver. Their heads were swathed in rainbow-hued, silk shawls with long fringes that streamed down their backs. Their hair was tied with coloured ribbons that hung down their cheeks. Their faces were whitened and rouged and their lips shined red. Their eyebrows were blackened and their cheeks were adorned with

spangles. Gold and silver earrings, great hoops many inches in diameter, hung from their ears. About their throats were a mixture of beads and bands of gold coins. Enormous bracelets and anklets, some six inches broad, some hinged, some studded with coloured stones, adorned their bare arms and ankles. Their feet were naked and their toes stained with henna. Most wore a gauze garment covered with silk vests of the palest colours. They each wore a rose-tinted, brocaded silk jacket, heavily embroidered with silver bullion and covered with transparent silver tissue. Their waists were swathed in a silk sash with gold-embroidered leather belts. Their wide silk trousers hung baggily over their slender ankles.

While they were stationery, Nancy found these women a delightful and extraordinary sight, but when they were dancing they became an assault on her senses. The two dancers waved silk handkerchiefs in the air. They danced on their toes, but they did not raise them off the platform. Indeed, their feet, hands, legs and arms hardly entered into the dance at all. Primarily the dance engaged the muscles of their necks, breasts, abdomen and hips. Nancy imagined they were taunting the onlookers with their aggressive motions, but the men smiled, self satisfied, almost complacent.

It was some time before Nancy realised that they were keeping time with the music of the pipe, flageolet and tom-tom. It was a strangely hypnotic sound, disturbed only by the watching dancers when they clapped their hands or uttered little cries of approval and support.

Nancy imagined that it was the music that caused her to fall into a trance and collapse to the floor, but Léon blamed the hashish-filled air. He rallied her enough to get her outside and heading for the Market but, with her arm about his shoulders and her stumbling steps, their progress was far from rapid. Léon's suspicions about the hashish were fully confirmed once they were in the carriage. He was certain that Nancy's excitable chatter was the outcome of hallucination.

## A Barbarous Sport

At the hotel, Léon nervously coaxed Nancy forward without arousing suspicion. He was relieved when she was safely in her bedroom, her identity undiscovered. He left Nancy to rest while he went in search of Dr. Thomas, an army man with considerable experience in matters of late-night excess. It was the doctor's opinion that Nancy's condition was due entirely to exhaustion and Léon was grateful to receive the advice. After the medic's departure, Léon offered to sit with Nancy, but her almost imperceptible nod was hardly the expression of enthusiasm he had hoped for.

While Nancy lay on the bed, her eyes closed, our gallant captain attempted to engage her in conversation, but she was not up to it. When he was certain that she was asleep, he left her to her dreams, confident that they would restore her. He could not have anticipated that she would have to contend with terrible visions. The disturbance of her mind propelled Nancy from her bed and compelled her to pace the room. After some time she sat at the table, writing furiously, attempting to wrestle her frightful dream from the realms of unconsciousness.

*Filled with hope I entered the café; then I was ignominiously carried home, stripped of my robes, encumbered with despair. Now I am disconsolate, howling at the moon, dreaming that flames consume me. My parting was an anguished sigh, my sorrow, utter disappointment. My wounded soul has nothing to sustain it now.*

*I awoke weeping, great tears filling my eyes. How can this be when anticipation promised they would sparkle? This night my dreams racked me; my conscious heart was cold and damp, when outside it was hot and dry. There is no day I would rather relive, no day when I would not have pleasure as substitute for my tears and a ceremony with some grace to accompany the dancing. Now disappointment is all I have.*

*What would Jessica think of that unforgiving place? Did I get it wrong? I entreat her, my rich fountain of inspiration, to say what is in her soul. Joy gleamed from her when she spoke of the dancers. During the final hours I held her hand and the subtle touch of her inspiration shot through my veins. It left my spirit tingling. Let me perish if I ever neglect her advice.*



*The dancers, rather than warming my heart, performed a dance of chilling proportions, akin to death entering the door. I have not one tender thought of the Ouled Nail women. Their ritual was a barbarous sport that filled me with pity. They offered wounded hearts to those men, men who knew only lustful love. Their smiles mined the women's fraud and betrayed truth.*

*It seems impossible now to think of intruding again into their presence, yet I must obey Jessica's injunctions and continue to broaden my horizons. There, where the women toil, I will again indulge the pain, mourn their hard fate and curse their bondage. I will witness their overflowing hearts, the labour of their panting nerves, though my dreams are of innumerable deaths every hour.*

Nancy, restored through action, returned to sleep. This time her troubled spirit was revived by dreams of glorious landscapes alive with waterfalls and streams, trees and exotic vegetation, sun and warmth.

When Nancy woke to the bright morning sun, the notion of visiting the Ouled Nail mountains was uppermost in her mind; she knew it was there that she wanted to see Jessica's beloved dancers, not in a city café. She opened the windows wide and breathed in the air. Beautiful gusts of perfume from the garden roses filled her nostrils and she surrendered to them. Her hope now was that a brighter experience would eradicate the miserable visions that had filled her unconscious mind.

Adamant that her dream of luxuriant mountain scenery must not leave her, Nancy went to breakfast. The dining room, a cavernous hall of classic simplicity, had a smooth floor of inlaid marble and French windows covered in beautiful silk hangings. Passing through the windows she discovered a garden fit for a palace, where abundant fountains flowed and played. The guests sat at tables in cool recesses of shade and this picture of temperate sweetness offered Nancy a soothing balm to match her present longing.

When Léon joined her in the garden, he was delighted that Nancy made no mention of the previous evening's drama. He was relieved that her symptoms did not appear to have persisted and he took her excellent humour as proof of its transitory nature. Conversation between them flourished for a while, as they walked in the garden shade, but Léon began to notice a disjointed rhythm to her speech. Nancy spoke again as they stood at the edge of the terrace.

“Look at those distant peaks,” she began, pointing to the far distance. “Those upper dells of green that crown the summits, that’s where I’m going. I want to climb the clefts and ledges of those mountains and rest in the fair expanse of pasture that flourishes there.”

Léon, reflecting on Nancy’s words, was convinced that her hallucinations had not yet abated. He saw the mountains she referred to, but they did not compare with Nancy’s sense of them. For him they were majestic, but forbidding masses of rock. This was a world where incomprehensible danger was the daily reality. Spirits and other tricky beings were the only forms of life he could imagine in the craggy ridges and deep ravines he was familiar with.

“The sun must be on the heads of the flowers there,” said Nancy, persisting with her poetic vision. “I can see them like a flood of gold flowing down the gorges. And above, can you see it, that delicate rose hue on the distant peaks? I thought at first that the scent came from the city gardens, but it comes from the hills. Will you take me there Léon? I need to be there more than anything.”

Léon fell silent and tried to take stock of this unexpected development.

“I cannot leave this city on a whim,” he announced, uncertain why he did so and yet continuing in the same vein. “First I must present an adequate reason and then I must seek the permission of my superiors.”

It was Nancy’s very passion and eagerness that caused Léon to respond in such negative fashion. As soon as he had spoken, he wanted to replace his words with a more positive statement, but he had no idea how, while still maintaining a restraining influence on Nancy’s unbounded enthusiasm. Nancy interrupted his mental prevarications and took him at his word.

“Perhaps if you don’t feel able, you could find another to accompany me,” she suggested.

The words hit Léon like a brick. It was overwhelming jealousy he felt and he could not have had forewarning of this. His only recourse at this moment was to seek solitude. He had to consider his feelings.

“If you wish,” he stammered, “we will have dinner together and discuss your intentions further while we eat.”

Nancy thanked him for the invitation and suggested they dine in the hotel. Léon departed; a storm brewing within him.

## Beneficent Tears

The moment Léon departed, Nancy, without disguising herself, hired a carriage to take her to the Marche de la Lyre. She again walked up Rue Randon into the Casbah, but before long she had lost all sense of direction. Not wishing to ask the way to the Café Bou-Saâda, she wandered through the cobbled alleys that rose up and down in waves, the many steps punctuating the flow of her movement. She studied the elaborate, timber-framed, bay windows overhanging the street and wished she could see into one of the rooms that lay behind them. Awnings hung from many facades, especially those needing protection for merchandise. Open doorways beckoned everywhere. Women, entirely covered in white cotton haiks, talked as they shopped, their children played and old men sat watching.

The café was not to be found. Nancy contemplated her alternatives, perhaps she could explore the inside of a Mosque or visit a library instead. She had heard much about the beauty of the elaborate calligraphy of the Koran and other such precious, handwritten books, but she passed no building that invited or promised such delights. As she wandered up Rampe Vallée Street, lofty palm tree fronds softly draped over a high wall, enticing her towards a majestic gateway. Beyond, beautiful gardens were laid out, wide paths offering a shaded walk through the cool, arching palms set against the clear blue sky. She walked on, her sojourn graced by layered fountains, shrines and a mausoleum, all carved in stone. Discovering the delights of Le Jardin Marengo was exactly what her spirit needed.

Nancy knew that she was high up on the hill, but at the Garden's edge she caught sight of Algiers the White rising out of the blue Mediterranean far below. This extraordinary panoramic view confirmed her elevated position. For some time she stood gazing at the magical sight, before reluctantly returning to Rampe Vallée Street. There, Nancy stopped for tea and bought some postcards. She was examining scarves on a stall when a young boy pulled at her sleeve.

"Zaouia?" he asked. Nancy did not reply. In an attempt to deter the young fellow she decided to buy one of the scarves, but still the boy did not move away. Nancy ignored him. She paid the stall-holder for the scarf

and he placed three in her bag. Nancy shook her head, holding up one, but the man shook his head and motioned her to take all three.

“Zaouia – Sidi Abderrahmane El Thaalibi?” the young boy asked. Nancy, now bewildered, gazed at him. He was barefoot, grimy and beautiful. Nancy had never seen such dark eyes. His face beamed with optimism, glowed with intelligence, and she felt the depth of his understanding.

“The boy wants to escort you to the Zaouia,” the stall holder spoke in French.

“The Zaouia?”

“It’s a school and a holy place. You must go.” Nancy turned to the boy.

“Je m’appelle Belkacem,” the boy declared.

“That’s a very nice name,” Nancy replied in her schoolgirl French. “I bet you could teach English boys a thing or two.” Belkacem smiled.

“Yes please,” she said, “take me to the Zaouia. Is it your school?”

The boy laughed and shook his head. Nancy walked along with him in silence. She trusted him explicitly and felt a certain independence in doing so. She gave no thought to how she would find the Market again.

The Zaouia, a large, white domed building, stood on open ground next to the street. Each of the four corners displayed elegant, but smaller domes. Belkacem walked up to the entrance steps and gestured to Nancy to enter. Before she started up the steps he pointed at her bag and told her that she should give presents. Nancy imagined that he wanted a scarf, but when she offered him one he waved his hand.

“You must give presents to the people here,” Belkacem told her, pointing at the door. Nancy nodded. She entered the sombre interior and spent some time contemplating the beauty of the large dome before realising that Belkacem was no longer with her. Four women squatted on the tiled floor, talking among themselves. Nancy walked away from them and sat against the wall of an alcove, taking in the peace that filled the hall. She felt nervous about giving the women presents, especially as they were four and she only had three scarves, but after a little time the women left, relieving Nancy of her dilemma. Suddenly, one of them returned, walked over to Nancy, bowed and spoke.

“Last night I had a dream. I was here, in this place and a woman with golden hair sat exactly where you are. No-one with golden hair has ever been in the Zaouia before. We did not speak to each other, but I received her wisdom in silence. As she left, she gave me three scarves and these

gifts confirmed that my prayers had been answered. May God bless you. I did not want to disturb your peace to relate this story, but my friends insisted I return.”

Nancy, astonished, stood up. The woman’s eyes were trusting, dark pools. Nancy slowly put her hand in her bag, pulled out the three scarves and offered them to the woman. The woman stepped back in silent shock. Then, still with a look of total incredulity on her face, she moved closer and hesitantly touched Nancy’s hair. In that moment, Nancy saw herself as the apparition in the woman’s dream. She was about to explain the presence of the scarves as coincidence when the woman went down on her knees and touched Nancy’s foot. Returning to her feet, she put her hands together, bowed again and offered Nancy a salutation. With that she turned away and left the Zaouia, leaving Nancy alone.

Nancy stood for some time staring at the doorway before returning to the alcove. She sat, absorbing the spirit of the place, thinking about what had just happened. Soon tears were falling down her cheeks. She wept in the presence of the unutterable goodness she found there, not tears of joy exactly, but that word came closest to describing them. They were tears of connection, of belonging. She felt herself increasingly reduced until she was sharing the world with every particle in it. It was an overwhelming sense of benevolence, an almost tangible presence so remarkable, she could never have invented it.

Nancy departed from the Zaouia feeling washed and revived by her beneficent tears. She stood on Rampe Valée Street disappointed that Belkacem was not there to guide her. Still in her own dream world, she retraced her steps until she came to Rue Randon again and headed straight for the Market. It wasn’t until she was sitting with Léon in the hotel lounge that Nancy spoke about her experience. She had been through the events many times in her head and suspected that Léon would not believe her.

“He will claim it as a manoeuvre by the stall holder to sell scarves,” she told herself. “Or, worse still, he will imagine that I have invented it to make an impression upon him.”

As it happened, Léon listened, entranced.



# Part Two

## Over the Mountains

# Affaires Indigènes

The duties of *L'Officier des Affaires Indigènes* in the French army, was to observe and comment upon cultural patterns in a land that persistently defied definition. As far as the army was concerned, the purpose of this endless round of analysis and description was to tame the bewildering complexities of the desert landscape and its people, but there was nothing about Algeria that Léon Lehuraux wished to tame. He was grateful enough for the opportunity to snatch glimpses of this strange and exotic land and trusted his empathy would adequately communicate to his readers and maybe even inspire them.

Over the years, Léon had established an existence of well-ordered calm amidst the chaos that surrounded him, but with Nancy's arrival in Algiers, he sensed that his natural ability to control events was in the decline. What was uppermost in his mind, after leaving Nancy that morning, was her request that he might find another to accompany her to the mountains.

Léon went immediately to his Colonel's office to make an appointment to talk with him. Colonel Francois Bachelard was fond of Léon and sensed his urgency. He invited his Captain to return in an hour when he would have time to discuss his concerns over lunch.

Léon spent the morning reading numerous communications from the outlying regions. He discovered that there was to be a tribal gathering in Bou-Saâda the following week and realised this was likely to be his best excuse for travelling south. He concluded that he must expand the importance of this gathering to be certain his request was accepted.

As lunchtime approached, Léon, uncharacteristically smoking a third cigar, knew that agitation could be the only cause. He repeatedly recalled his inadvertent words to Nancy and was determined that he would not now lie about needing approval to leave Algiers to work against him. There were times when permission was difficult to achieve, but he had invented this particular lie because he believed he must discourage Nancy's travel plans if he was to keep her safe. For the most part, an Affaires Indigènes Officer could travel wherever and whenever he wished, he had only to ask. This morning, however, Léon was fearful that some unknown cause



might present itself and prevent him from making the journey south. As it happened, Colonel Bachelard expressed his willingness for Léon to report on the tribal gathering in Bou-Saâda. He had no reason to suspect his officer of over-emphasising the importance of events there.

After a busy afternoon of arrangements, Léon, sitting in his apartment, began to suspect that his concern for Nancy was beginning to dictate his every move. He was keen to obscure the truth of this from himself and justified his actions as rigorous attention to duty, but this did not account for the permanent presence of Nancy in his mind. As he dressed for dinner he attempted to fight off a nagging suspicion that he was practising self deception, he tried everything to believe the lie, but he couldn't avoid the truth; the stories he was inventing were in tatters. He sighed with the pain this caused him.

As he walked across La Place des Palmiers de la Régence, he vowed to put a stop to it. He told himself that this modest infatuation with Nancy did not have the scent of love about it and his use of the word 'love' shocked him. He stood still, staring up at Nancy's room, agitated by the possibility that she might be aware of his feelings towards her. He could think of no instance when he had given her grounds for suspecting how he felt and concluded that his manner might in fact have been rather harsh. In this assumption he was correct.

Externally, Léon was a man fully practised in the art of composure, but internally he was in turmoil. In the hotel lounge, the mere sight of Nancy broke his accomplished restraint into pieces. He stood, took her hand and kissed it. Nancy, aware of the effect she was having on him, despite his apparent brusqueness, launched into a description of her visit to the Zaouia. Her manner was entirely reminiscent of a school girl describing her first serious adventure and it made Léon smile. After listening intently, he told Nancy that the Zaouia de Sidi Abderrahmane was a school dedicated to Sidi Abderrahmane El Thaalibi.

"It was he who founded the Thaalibiya, the site you visited," Léon continued, "and this Zaouia is emblematic of Algiers. Sidi means saint. Abderrahmane is considered to be a saint because he possessed miraculous healing powers. People suffering from all sorts of physical ailments will go to the Zaouia in search of a cure."

"But the women I saw had no ailments," Nancy told him, "or at least none that I could recognise."

“No, but perhaps they went there to follow the woman’s dream.”

Nancy reflected on Léon’s words. She thought about the impact of dreams in her own life. There were times when she had regarded them as being superior to reason and had been criticised for doing so. Were these women acknowledging something similar in their lives? Something that gave life a fuller, more complete picture?

“Is the saint buried in this place?” she asked.

“Yes and therefore the Zaouia is also a Marabout.”

“A Marabout?”

“In its tribal meaning, Marabout is used synonymously with Zaouia. Marabout, in Arabic, means *one who is attached or garrisoned*. They use the word to denote a scholar of the Qur’an, or a religious teacher. Marabout can also be used for a Muslim hermit or saint or the tomb where they rest.”

“Belkacem told me that it was a school.”

“Yes, a Zaouia is an Islamic religious school or monastery. Before the French arrived they were the only places where children could learn basic literacy skills. Even the children in remote mountainous areas had access to a Zaouia. The term Zaouia is also used to signify a certain caste within the tribes. There are several tribal castes. At the top is the warrior tribe, the ruling caste, they require and demand tribute from the subservient tribes. The Zaouia caste is in the middle. This group is composed of scholars, and those capable of providing religious teaching and services. The teachers don’t generally build a monastery or a school, since most tribes are more or less nomadic. Only the important sheikhs create schools and after their deaths, their graves become holy places. These Marabout have great significance for the people of this land.”

# The Far South

Nancy understood the significance of Algeria's holy places, but she wanted to talk about how Algerian women allowed their dreams to cross the threshold into reality with such ease.

"They assimilate mysteries into their conscious world with a natural grace," she exclaimed, "and this pleases me, but I am struggling with the fact that they regarded me, an ordinary Englishwoman, as a messenger of the saint."

"It is also a mystery to me," Léon replied. "Maybe these women expect a saint's messenger to come from an unexpected place. Maybe the more unusual it is the more likely it will be that the saint will work a miracle."

"But isn't that how magic works?" Nancy asked. "Aren't they just inventing stories and pulling the wool over their eyes?"

"They do not regard it as magic," Léon explained. "It is all part of their religious life. Everything that occurs in a Marabout is treated with the greatest respect, whether they understand or not. Being in these places is daily routine. The little ceremonies and exchanges that occur there are intrinsic to their lives."

"But how would the woman have reacted if I had revealed that my possession of the scarves was mere chance?"

"She would not have believed you. You could never persuade her that your view was more real than hers. When we travel into the heart of the country you will learn more of these ways. There are Marabout everywhere."

"Are we travelling then?" Nancy asked, taken aback. Léon nodded.

The delight of her smile expressed her gratitude and Léon felt it. He recounted the many things he had achieved that day and he could hardly contain the joy and pride that was in him. Nancy listened, inspired and content. She was becoming accustomed to Léon's organised efficiency. He told her of his audacity with the Colonel, that he had exaggerated the importance of the gathering in Bou-Saâda, and Nancy applauded him.

"I love it when people know how to get their way," she declared and Léon, soaking up her approval, felt his heart nourished by her words.

Léon told Nancy she must again dress in men's clothes for the trip. Momentarily her familiar ambivalence returned; she had no wish to hide herself, but she did not complain. Léon encouraged, informed her that no tap water was to be had anywhere outside of Algiers. Nancy did not regard this as troublesome. Delighted, Léon became unstoppable. His desire to charm her with tales of the mysteries she was about to experience knew no bounds. He answered Nancy's questions with ever greater eagerness and convinced her that she would soon know everything of the land and tribes of the Atlas Mountains and the Great Plateau beyond.

Léon and Nancy poured over a series of maps he had brought and she loved the sense of orientation they gave her. She gazed at them lovingly, her finger tracing the routes as a lover might trace the veins on a beloved's hand. Léon felt the reward of his labours most sweetly for he knew it was now certain that he was going to be close to Nancy for some time to come.

"There are no rail lines between Djelfa and Bou-Saâda," Nancy remarked, studying the map of the Ouled Nail mountains.

"No, after Djelfa we must travel only on horseback. Everything after Djelfa is the South. South is not a place or an area or even a direction, it's a world of its own. For many it's an expectation, for some it's an ideal, for others it's a completion, but for a few, and these may love it the most, it is simply the end, the conclusion."

Nancy shot a look of alarm at Léon and he instantly recognised it.

"I am referring to the way people regard their lives," he excused himself. "I do not speak of death. It is not easy, even for an Affaires Indigènes Officer, to talk of the depth of feeling that exists out there. To initiate a demoiselle into these mysterious things is beyond anyone's grasp."

"Please don't be over-sensitive on my behalf," Nancy declared. "I did not come here to practice the art of the shrinking violet."

"Good," the relieved captain exclaimed. "In deep Algeria, the one which only a few truly love, you will see real Ouled Nail dancing. Forget what you saw the other evening. You are going to see so much more. The Sahara is the only territory I know that has the power to consume everything and everyone; the weak together with the strong. We know it as the South in the same way the Americans refer to their territory as the West. They know everything about the Wild West, but we, the French, thank God, despite our cartographers, know hardly anything about the South."

At the evening's end, Nancy touched Léon's hand and thanked him. As she took her hand away, Léon considered his reply, but no words came to him. He was silent and delighted that destiny had selected him to be with Nancy in the desert. He felt as eager as a hawk, as proud as a peacock and as bold as an ostrich. Once in his own quarters, he asked himself again if he should accept the truth of his feelings and knew that he must. His heart continued to beat in a worrisome fashion, but he was determined to walk with confidence into the coming days and weeks, learning how to appreciate and care for that which providence had provided.

As Nancy stood alone at her bedroom window gazing out at the clear, star-filled night, visions of the Atlas Mountains, ecstatic, beautiful landscapes, wove in and around her thoughts. She imagined great pastures of velvet green and a broad lake of gold and jasper. The mountain slopes and vales were robed in forests that rose in great waves of leafage. Above them, peaks of snow flickered like silver flames in the farthest blue. That these visions might not bear any close relation to Algeria's mountain landscape was of no consequence.

Later, as Nancy lay in bed, her thoughts were of Léon. She wondered at his enthusiasm for gathering knowledge about the tribes of this strange land and she mused on his probable opinion of her. She was quick to take the view that he regarded her as a delicate and over sensitive female, but hoped it was not so. She was certain that a French Army officer needed a woman with an adventurous spirit and vowed to make herself behave like a more robust character.

Nancy, puzzled that she did not easily exhaust the subject of Léon Lehuraux, directed herself to sleep, but thoughts of him returned continually. He was unmarried. Men often found life difficult without a woman. Might she be attracted to him? He was handsome, a gentleman, full of spirit, but so far he had inspired no passion in her. She recalled it was Jessica who had added the word passion to her vocabulary.

In England, there were evenings when Nancy considered the kind of man she might live with. On the few occasions she was with an eligible bachelor she always held back. Her parents had tried to encourage and facilitate liaisons, but nothing ever came of any of them. She had engaged in a brief affair before travelling to Algeria, but she could hardly claim she was looking for love, despite Jessica's injunction that she should do so.

# Endless Dreaming

*The light increased in lustre until the pale splendour of flickering brightness dazzled in its brilliance. A cloaked figure entered her room.*

*“Prepare for the arrival of the genie of the lamp,” he declared. “The genie has heard you calling and he graciously accepts your invitation.”*

*Nancy wanted to fly to the light to extinguish it, but she was paralysed with fear. She pleaded with the dark silhouette to help her. Seeing her distress, he flung his body over hers, clasping her head, covering her eyes and clinging to her, caressingly.*

Nancy awoke sobbing. She turned off the lamp, opened the shutters and flung wide the windows in the hope that the genie might vanish. A second sleep eventually followed and as Nancy finally woke to see the sun high in the sky, she was rueful that she had missed so much of the day. This was to be her last in Algiers and she urgently wanted to take in more of the city before departing. She wanted to visit the shops that lined Rue d’Isly and in particular the travel bookshop that Léon had told her about. She washed and dressed quickly and, forgetting breakfast, she hired a carriage.

The time Nancy spent in the cool, dark interior of the bookshop, belied her ambition to explore the city and confirmed her love of maps, adventure books and picture postcards. One card in particular, showing the Marabout in Blida - a small white, domed building nestling among exotic trees - caught her eye. She was intoxicated by these sacred places that inspire connections with dreams and make ordinary things seem marvellous. Knowing that she and Léon would change trains in Blida, Nancy felt it was certain that she would visit this Marabout.

Her ambition on this day was to re-visit the Zaouia, but as she walked up Rue Randon into the Casbah, a woman came smiling from a doorway. It was at exactly that place, the previous day, where she had studied the elaborate, timber-framed bay windows overhanging the street, and wished she could see into one of the rooms.

“Salaam Aleykoum Marhaba,” the woman greeted. Nancy bowed politely. She invited Nancy to enter and Nancy, delighted, followed her into

a courtyard. The woman removed the veil of her haik and proudly gestured to the brightly painted architecture. A continuous balcony covered the three upper floors and two stairways connected them. The woman walked on, up the nearest staircase to the first floor and into her apartment. Nancy followed. She looked about the room, taking in the rug-covered mattresses on the floor, the elaborate brass lamp that dominated the low table and the brightly coloured tiles on the walls. She walked to the balcony and gazed out from the bay window. Nancy desperately wanted to ask the woman questions but they shared no common language.

After a few moments, the woman moved closer to her and touched Nancy's hair. They smiled, nodded to each other and sat to drink tea. The woman took from a chest a pile of postcards and slowly showed them to Nancy, pointing out places that were important to her. Images of Marabout were in many of the cards. Again, Nancy discovered that sense of oneness, similar to the feelings she had experienced in the Zaouia. As tears welled, she struggled to compose herself, shaking her head, and wiping her eyes. She laughed at herself and the woman laughed with her. Nancy was surprised by their unlikely intimacy. They sat quietly for some time and at her departure, Nancy hugged and kissed the woman. She smiled knowingly and stroked her hair again.

There was no time for Nancy to explore the city, but she had no regrets; the interior of the woman's *Dar* had introduced her to another world.

In the hotel lounge before dinner, Nancy presented Léon with the postcard of the Blida Marabout and requested that they visit it. He explained that it was impossible; the train south would leave Blida soon after their arrival.

"You find the Marabout very compelling," he commented.

"Yes, their capacity to create a sense of belonging is a rare and remarkable thing." Léon nodded.

During dinner, Nancy told him about her visit to the house in the Casbah. She described her alternating tears and laughter with the woman who spoke no French and she was surprised that Léon did not find the invitation to enter her apartment in any way surprising.

"As for crying and laughing," he declared, "you must know that there are cultures in this world where deep sadness and joyful laughter go hand in hand without one contradicting the other. My guess is that the women here know the value both can bring."

The two studied Nancy's travel books, followed their journey on her maps and sat talking late into the night.

Alone in her room, Nancy passed a wakeful hour waiting for her excitement to subside. After two hours of sleep a dream startled her to wakefulness. She felt compelled to describe the scenes of her unconscious wanderings.

*As I was standing in a beautiful garden admiring the fine blossoms, a veiled figure reached out to me. The hand signalled for my silence and drew me away from the garden. The figure led me through a court into a passage lit with lamps and on into a closely curtained chamber. We passed through a heavy curtain into a second chamber and from there, on into a circular passageway that descended between black hangings.*

*At the bottom of the stairway we came to a square vault draped again in black. The oils of precious woods were burning in censers and the odour of ambergris, myrrh and musk floated about us in clouds. I enquired of the veiled figure our destination.*

*"To your banquet," he said.*

*As I turned, I saw before me a table laid out with viands and wines, sparkling cups and a service of gold. It was the preparation for a feast and most likely it was my funeral feast. I blindly ran from there and found myself in an endless sequence of tunnels, where everything was blackness. Desperately I scraped along the passages. Eventually, to my great relief, I scrambled into a cave where there was some height above me. On the far side there was sunlight. I stepped out. I was in an open landscape awash with blazing heat.*

*There were no trees to cast any shade and I stumbled over broken rocks and stunted shrubs. A sense of panic enveloped me, but soon my ailing spirits were cheered by the sound of gentle running water, exuding freshness and the cool scent of flowers.*

*Before me was the most beautiful hillside. Asphodel and rose bloomed in the crevices of the crags and in the distance a robe of purple covered the slopes. Beyond that, the promise of emerald pasture returned. Dance music, like the sounds I had heard in the café, filled the hills. Maybe this was the land of the Ouled Nail.*



## Train to Médéa

*For many it's an expectation, for some it's an ideal, for others it's a completion, but for a few, and these may love it the most, the South is simply the end, the conclusion.*

Léon's words. Nancy had listened to them echoing through her mind many times as they travelled south. They came to her again as she read through her dream-writing. She felt sure they had inspired her dream and she knew enough about the kind of adventure she was undertaking to realise that a part of her must die if another was to be re-born. She opened the curtains, greeted the first of the sun's rays and longed to talk with Jessica.

With very little sleep Nancy was not at her best. Léon too found the morning difficult. On the train he introduced Nancy to two officers who were sharing their carriage. First they were amused by her disguise and then inquisitive about their journey to Bou-Saâda. Annoyed by the officer's presence, Léon said he was not at liberty to speak about it. As the sun blazoned across the huge fields of jasmine flowers he tried to open the window so that Nancy could take in the fragrance, but they insisted it was forbidden while crossing the Mitidja Plain. Frustrated in his desire to be Nancy's inspiring guide, he moved close to her and whispered.

"It would take the scent of only one jasmine flower to inspire a poet and here there are enough to exhilarate every woman in England."

Nancy hinted at a smile. Later, as they passed through a spectacular landscape of orange groves, Léon repeated the sentence with the taste of oranges as its subject and this time Nancy hid her laugh in the gandoura.

"The wonders of the agricultural plain are nothing compared to the wild Gorges de la Chiffa," Léon told her as they approached Blida.

"I still want to visit the Blida Marabout," Nancy declared.

Again Léon explained it was impossible, given that only one train travelled south each day and they couldn't miss it. Nancy studied her postcard. She so wanted to sit among the exotic trees surrounding that Marabout. She wanted to meet another woman, to repeat her experience in the Algiers Zaouia.

On the platform at Blida, Nancy expressed her dislike of the smells; the coffee aroma mixed with tobacco and wet charcoal from the train's engine was too much for her.

"Chebli is a local tobacco, renowned for its strong smell," Léon explained. "Many of the men chew it." Nancy screwed up her face in disgust.

Léon went to investigate their new platform and Nancy sat waiting for him on a pile of luggage. Big white letters formed the labels on the trunks. Hers read, *Ligne du Sud Blida-Médéa-Boghari-Djelfa*. Most displayed Médéa as the destination. She wondered what M. Le Capitaine, 1er regiment de Tirailleurs Algeriens, might do in Médéa. She was contemplating the words M. Valade, Sous-Lieutenant, Compagnie Saharienne du Touat, when Léon returned. She asked him about the different type of officer - Zouaves, Spahis, Chasseurs and Tirailleurs - and Léon explained their various roles as they made their way to their platform.

"The South awaits," said Léon, pointing to the new train.

"It's a very strange colour and exceptionally small," Nancy exclaimed. "Our luggage and this great crowd of passengers will never fit in."

"A train that takes you from one world to another should not be ordinary," Léon replied. "It looks modest, standing there on its narrow rails, but it will fulfil its job admirably. The real colour lies beneath its covering of sand. It is in fact very new, the first train to replace the horse-drawn carriage. It will probably grow more train-like as it grows older."

They sat in the covered section of the wagon. Strange leather curtains protected them from the midday sun. Apart from the French officers there were civil servants, wealthy locals, Algerian soldiers, the odd farmer and a number of immigrants, mostly Maltese or Calabrais. Léon assumed the role of travel guide again and indicated east, towards Chrea, where cedar forests covered the mountains.

"To the west is Chiffa," he said. "Here the train will turn south and travel up the Gorge. It's the only route to the Hauts Plateaux from the Mitidja plain. This is the beginning of your journey, the place where your initiation starts. A thousand-metre climb and we'll be in another land."

Nancy sat silently for a moment, contemplating Léon's use of the word, *initiation*, until Léon pointed out the palmier nain.

"The small palm leaves emerge straight from the earth," he explained. The first colonists had the almost impossible task of pulling them out of the ground, because until they did so they could not farm the land. It was

such a difficult task they nearly returned home rather than continue with the struggle. On account of the palm's stout resistance, Algerians have unofficially made it their national plant."

Léon named every tree. Nancy knew the olive and the fig, but the strawberry and pomegranate trees were new to her. The fig trees here were dressed in pieces of colourful fabric.

"They regard the fig as a magical tree," Léon told her. "Each piece of cloth is a wish, placed there by local women. Their wishes generally concern fertility. Do you honour the fig tree in England?"

"In England we say, *I don't give a fig* when we don't care about a thing," said Nancy. Léon laughed.

"In India the women instruct their daughters to become a fig flower, since the flower is invisible."

"There are many in England who would instruct their daughters to do the same. It was in defiance of such opinion that I came to the desert."

"I'll keep this in mind," said Léon. "A necklace of dried figs was worn by women in ancient Greece to signify their initiation into womanhood."

"Were Greek girls women before marriage?"

"No, initiation and marriage came together. You're fortunate. Few women in this world are independent before marriage."

"And the Ouled Nail girls?" Nancy taunted him. "They cannot be women until they are married? They have no independence, yet they must behave like women in every other respect."

"I think they are in between."

"That means nowhere."

"Oh please do not say so. It's not such a bad thing, is it, to have more time to grow before marriage?"

Nancy remained silent.

## A Golden Age

After the flat start to the journey, great rocky escarpments rose up on either side of the carriage. Nancy sensed the landscape coming alive.

“If one day this route fails to lead to mysteries,” Léon declared, “it really will mean the end of a world.”

“Why do you make everything sound miraculous?” Nancy asked. “For you, even a gorge is magical.”

“It is indeed. Look,” he exclaimed, pointing up into the mountains. “Can you see the little white building perched up there as if it were suspended in air? That’s a Marabout. There’s room in that one for only two or three people, but it’s an important place of pilgrimage. It sits like a sign in the mountains; a place of rest where a hermit sits, waiting for those who might have need of him.”

Nancy, enchanted, scanned the mountains for other Marabout. As the train climbed higher the space between the deep gorge and the high ridges increased spectacularly. She saw a bird hovering in a strip of bright blue sky between the peaks and asked Léon to name it.

“A vulture,” said Léon. Nancy shivered.

“Vultures are the farmer’s friend.”

“How is that?”

“Because they don’t kill other living creatures. Their prey either dies or something else kills it. They are not a threat to crops or livestock and they will not harm their own species. The eagle, the owl, the hawk; they all live on other birds.”

“But there’s something scary about the way the vulture looks.”

“Don’t judge them in this respect. Vultures live and work together in cooperation. When they find something to eat, they let other vultures know where the food is. There is something magical about them.”

“What, more magic!” Nancy cried.

“Indeed,” said Léon. “They remind us that hardship is temporary and necessary for a higher purpose.”

“But does this make them magical?”

“No, they are magical because they glide effortlessly on the winds, soaring high and using little energy. They are not weighed down by gravity and, by association, they teach us not be weighed down by our cares. We should learn from the vulture. It’s certainly the first lesson that a shaman must learn if he is to be useful to his tribe.”

“A shaman?”

“Yes, a shaman must learn how to fly in a trance, for they must travel to the realm of the spirits. It is there that they will do battle against malign entities, or entreat the spirits to act on their behalf.”

“Good Lord,” Nancy cried, “is this land inhabited by fairy-like folk?”

“It’s not the fairies we have in the mountains,” said Léon, “it’s the Djinn. Fairies would object to almost anything the Djinn get up to.”

Nancy remembered her dream and felt again the terror that had disturbed her sleep.

“We are now in the Ruisseau des Singes,” said Léon. “Look carefully; you might see the monkeys. They come to the ravine to drink. Great torrents of water fall down the vertical rock face here and the monkeys leap up to drink it.”

Once they were through the gorge they travelled through a landscape of green rolling hills dotted with vineyards and numerous small farms. It had a distinctly European quality. Léon read from one of the books Nancy had purchased in Algiers.

*“In this region time stands still. The high altitude makes the air light and the climate gentle. Life here is slow and the wine is excellent. A golden age once flourished in these mountains, an age when the hearts of the people were as bright as the sun and their optimism was as steadfast as the oak. Unfortunately, we have no record of their optimistic hearts, but we do have their memories that have been nourished by gentle rain and fine breezes. After the winter snow the spring seems eternal and after the spring, the summer is the glory of nature.”*

Suddenly the town of Médéa came into view.

“I wish we were travelling further,” Nancy declared.

“But first you must taste Médéa and its excellent wine,” said Léon. “Tomorrow we will travel to Boghari. It is on the edge of the steppes and the entrance to the world of the Ouled Nail. Just west of Boghari, at Boghar, is the place they call *the balcony of the desert*. The High Plateau is visible in its entirety from there.”

Once they had deposited their cases in the l'Hotel du Commerce, Nancy asked if they could go straight to the Marabout. Léon was happy to oblige. He hired a carriage and they travelled to the old town wall, to a gateway called the Sahrawi Door. Beyond the wall, among the trees, they found the Marabout. The white building with high level windows and a tiled roof was not remarkable to look at, but still it took Nancy's breath away. She circled it for some time before entering and once inside, sat quietly for a long time. Léon, resting outside, fell into a heavy sleep. It was now his turn to know a dream that had power over him.

*He stood watching as Nancy walked slowly away from him. The heat made the atmosphere shimmer and a light breeze blew her hair and dress, making it difficult to interpret her outline. A man stood a short distance off and Léon heard murmurings coming from him. These were followed by long, slow outpourings of breath, like sighs. Nancy waved to the man, he returned her wave and sat down. Her dress billowing in the breeze, Nancy walked slowly to where the man sat and stood looking down at him. They spoke in English. He entreated that she tell no one of his presence. She nodded.*

*"I dreamt of you. I am not surprised to see you here. I knew that I had only to fall asleep and you would be close to me. Now that I am with you I am fully awake."*

*"Good," the man replied, "I will visit you each day."*

*Nancy smiled, turned and walked back to where Léon stood.*

Léon awoke. He thought at first that the vision was a mirage, but he knew it to be a dream and he was relieved. If it were a mirage it would have been a deferred image of reality. He felt the sadness this would have caused him. There were times when he felt close to Nancy and times when he knew there was a great distance between them.

At dinner Léon insisted that they talk in English. After numerous unsuccessful attempts to discover if there was a man in her life for whom she had a special regard, he learned that there was none. She had lived thus far without engaging in anything that might be considered a close romantic attachment. Nancy sensed his relief, though neither said a word about it.

# The Mountain Djinn

The journey from Médéa to Benchicao was a mountain climb. The train moved so slowly that local children climbed aboard to sell fruit. After Benchicao the train descended to Berrouaghia on the edge of the High Plateau. Here the train lingered for some time. Léon and Nancy heard the porters shouting and watched as they madly waved their arms. There had been a flash flood near Brazza. Part of the mountain had collapsed and a mud slide was now covering the tracks. Their route was impassable.

Léon suspected they could be there for days. Fearful that they would not be at Bou-Saâda in time for the tribal gathering, he suggested they hire horses and take the mountain road to Boghari. Nancy loved the idea of riding over the mountains and hummed as they walked to the stables.

The stable man advised them that the journey to Berrouaghia was almost eighty miles and they could attempt to complete the journey in two days. There were no villages on this mountain pass and the first inn, at Matteg, was almost fifty miles from Boghari. Léon had not made this journey before and he looked apprehensive, but Nancy was undeterred. She galloped ahead of him, exhibiting her wild eagerness, whooping and calling as she had learnt when giving chase in the hunt.

The day passed pleasantly, Léon was amazed that the mountains inspired such pleasure in Nancy. She loved the stones on the hillsides and the plentiful, wild vegetation that had come out after the heavy rainfall. Luxuriant flowers, the like of which she had never seen before, were in abundance. They saw oleander trees in the river beds, covered in glorious pink flowers that shone in the sunlight. Later, they discovered an entire hillside covered in the esparto plant; a tree that was exported to England in great quantities to make high quality paper. Léon promised Nancy that she would see the agave before the day was out. Nancy did not know what to expect and she was still none the wiser when he remembered that it was also called the Barbary fig. As the afternoon faded they saw a white star burst at the end of an extraordinary long stem. Léon declared this to be a very fine specimen of the agave. Nancy recognised it immediately, knowing it as the prickly pear. Léon peeled back the skin and offered her

some to eat. He looked on in delight as Nancy savoured this sweet gift of nature, swallowing the tiny hard seeds with exceptional ease. After that they discovered the Genevrier Cade, known in Europe as the Spanish cedar or Prickly Juniper.

“The nomads regard this as a magical tree,” Léon informed her.

“More magic!” Nancy exclaimed, giving him a teasing glance.

“The cade oil is used to heal stomach pains,” he maintained. “It is also effective in the removal of rodents.”

Nancy shook her head in disbelief, but when Léon pulled at some leaves and offered them to her, she reeled at the revolting smell.

“That would get rid of anything,” she declared.

“The nomads call it noix de cade. They burn it in the open air to rid themselves of the Evil Eye.”

“And do they use it to ward off the Djinn?” Nancy asked.

“No, Djinn have no fear of smell. They are made from smokeless fire, not earth as we are. They are usually invisible to humans so we cannot know when a Djinn is nearby.”

“Why do Djinns have such a bad reputation?”

“Oh, they harass humans mercilessly. They can possess them, especially if one is suffering from romantic infatuation. Often they are engaged by practitioners of black magic to exact revenge on their behalf.”

“Where do they live?”

“Here, in remote areas, such as these mountains, but they have the power to travel large distances at extreme speeds. They can be found anywhere. In Arabic the word for them is JaNaA. The word you give them is genie. JaNaA is also used for spirits and it can also mean to hide or to be hidden. JaNaA can be used to refer to anything that is concealed, especially if it is the result of darkness.”

“Do the Djinn do any good?”

“In Islamic theology the Djinn are simply creatures of free will. They have been known to act as guardian spirits when assigned to someone at birth, but mostly they are domestic, nature spirits who indulge their intrusive ways onto the life of humans.”

It was a day of hard riding and they were pleased to reach the Matteg Inn. The owner and her daughter, surprised to discover a fair-haired woman in their midst, took Nancy to a stream to wash. Afterwards Nancy sat with them in a tent where they spread cheese on their faces to keep their skin



light and shiny. Léon explained that this kind of skin was synonymous with beauty for the Berber women.

At supper Léon and Nancy ate cakes made from an assortment of grains and drank a mixture of crushed goat's cheese, dates and water. Léon, prompted by Nancy, enquired about the absent husband. He looked appalled by the reply and Nancy demanded an instant translation. She learned that the unfortunate man had used his hand on his wife and she had divorced him that very night. Nancy was astounded, but also delighted. She offered the women gestures of her approval and asked Léon to thank them for their hospitality. Through Léon, they wished her a good night's rest, but again she was plagued by dreams.

*The hooded figure who had saved her from the genie appeared again. He told her that the genie would return, bearing a ring as a gift. Nancy insisted she wanted nothing to do with him, but the hooded figure declared that she was the mistress of the ring and could not refuse it. Nancy's fear increased dramatically with the appearance of the genie and she prepared herself for the worst. She waited for him to press his evil will upon her, but it was the hooded figure who compelled her to accept the ring.*

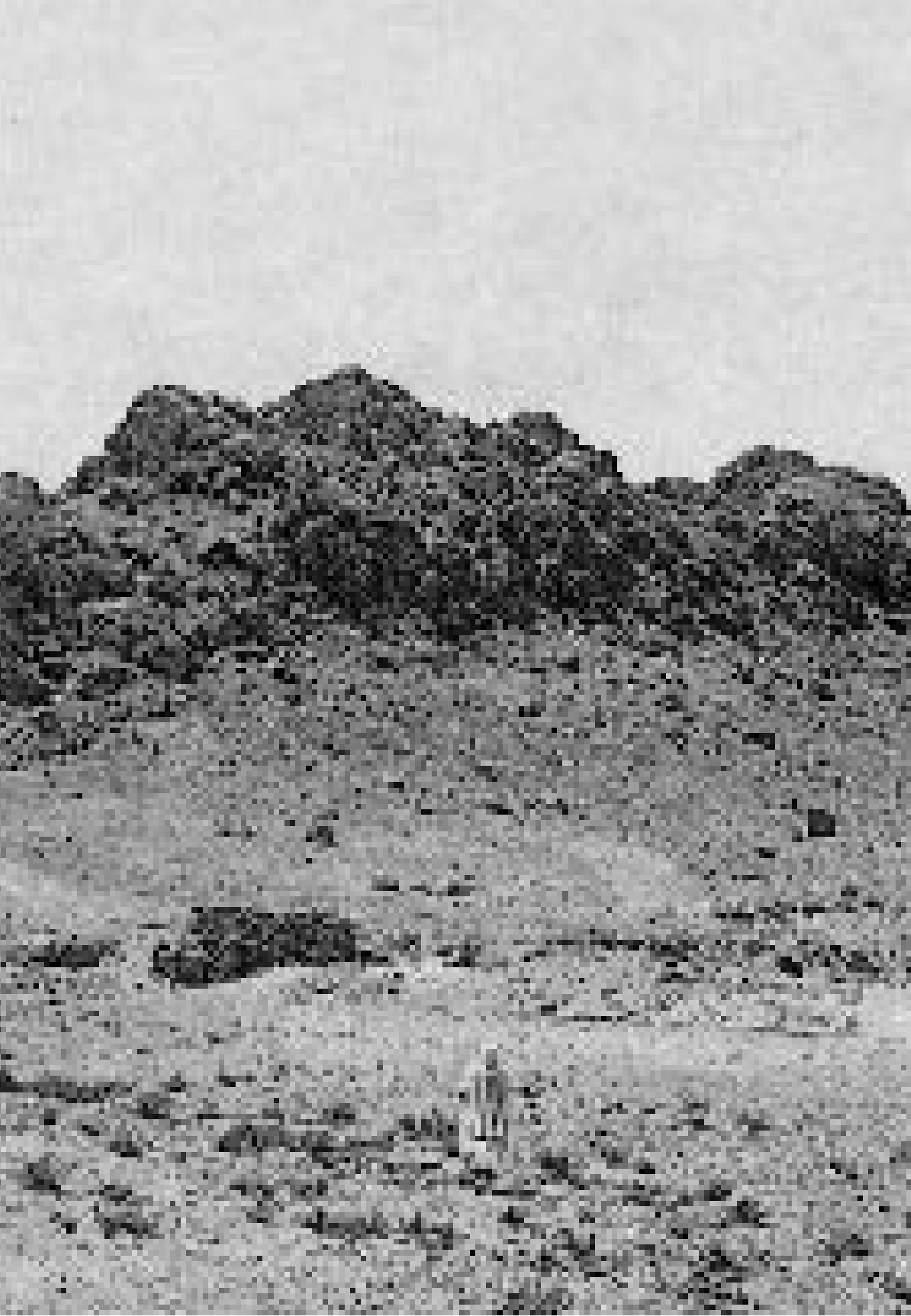
*"Sleep, sleep," the genie bid her, trying to lull her with a song, but Nancy took the ring and placed it on her finger. Suddenly, a great noise rang out. Nancy faltered and flew up into the air. She was possessed by an extraordinary power and the genie sped thunder-like behind her.*

*"Oh my betrothed," she cried, "what shrieks you chase me with."*

*It was a terrible flight. Nancy tried desperately to hold on to the ring, but it twisted and stung her as she flew.*

*Suddenly she was in a white desert town. Here she squatted in the square, lamenting and tearing out her hair. The genie appeared and then vanished. Next she saw Aunt Jessica, sprinkling petals of bright flowers as she hobbled across the square. Once beside her, Jessica entreated her niece to take the lily she was carrying.*

*"You have avoided the genie's wrath," she declared. "You have escaped the dominion of the ring by keeping your beauty hidden. It has been important for you to know humility, but now you must find wisdom. Nancy, without wisdom the genie may yet have his revenge. Become the keeper of the lily and take care not to bruise it. The beauty of the lily is the thing that will save you. If the lily declines you must rely solely on your beauty."*



# Part Three

## The High Plateau

# The Road to Boghari

The following morning, as Léon and Nancy rode down the winding road to Boghari, Léon noticed that she took no delight in the landscape or the vegetation. She offered only cursory responses to his attempts at conversation and he blamed the heavy atmosphere and extreme heat for her behaviour. He could not know that it was her dream that oppressed her so badly. Nancy felt obliged to cradle the lily her Aunt had given her in the dream and this had imposed an irritating restraint upon her actions. The Djinn she could cope with, but Jessica's uncharacteristic demand was bewildering. She struggled to understand its meaning for some time before coming upon a possible solution.

"Can Djinn change their form?" Léon nodded thoughtfully. "Can they appear as someone who is familiar to you?"

"For certain. It's a common trick for a Djinn," said Léon.

"Good," Nancy declared. She leapt from her horse, lifted a heavy rock and placed her allegorical lily beneath it.

Léon made nothing of her actions and asked no questions, but decided to keep a watchful eye on her. Soon he was relieved of this duty, for Nancy's smile had returned and she was again delighting in the scenery.

Below them a few palm trees scattered a route where a river sometimes flowed and beyond this the mountains spread out into a series of rolling hills. Léon and Nancy crossed the bridge over the Oued El Akoun and came upon a small, mud-baked settlement. Here, poor families huddled together in the shadow of the mountain. The river was dry, but the tiny fields had recently received a generous gift of water that had fallen down the mountain in floods.

"The water here disappears into the ground the minute it touches it," he explained. "This is a place of transformations. Nothing is ever planned and no opportunity goes begging. The people only survive because they honour the spirit of improvisation. The water dismantles, reconstructs and recycles everything. Every significant happening comes with the water. The ancient mysteries and stories the generations have handed down reiterate this preoccupation with the importance of water."

Men, at one with the colour of the earth, worked the hot fields. Children went barefoot. The boys moved away quickly once they discovered the strangers. They sought hiding places close to the buildings to study their uninvited guests. Léon said they were probably wondering if a fortune might be made if they happened to touch he and Nancy. Girls in faded frocks were attracted to Nancy like moths to a flame. They too were keen to touch, but they stood further back. One dispirited group of children sat on a roof, their legs dangling over the side.

Nancy took some coins from her bag and offered them to the group, but no child moved. When she threw them in their direction, they scampered for the precious objects while paying close attention for any sign of movement from the foreigners. Nancy waved as they left the village. After rising up the crest of another ridge the Great Plateau presented itself.

“It’s like waking in a new country,” Nancy declared. “It’s like waking up after being asleep for a hundred years.”

Nancy studied the wavering line of sub-tropical shrub around the base of the mountains. The only comparison she could make was the shore-line under Britain’s cliffs. She had never before seen such a dramatic change in landscape. She could almost feel the violent folding of the landmass that had occurred a million years ago.

“The building over there must be for you,” said Léon, pointing to a strange construction in the distance.

“It looks like one barn sitting on another,” Nancy commented.

“It’s the Marabout Sidi Diffala,” Léon replied.

Nancy, excited, rode swiftly towards it. She dismounted and stood in reverence before the walls. She walked slowly around the building before finally entering. Inside it was dark. The horses grazed while Léon enjoyed the cake and buttermilk given to him by the women at the Matteg Inn. Knowing that Boghari was close at hand, he was happy to give Nancy the time she wanted, but as the day began to fade, Léon entered the Marabout to inform her that they must complete their journey before nightfall.

“I’m not leaving yet,” Nancy replied. “Look, this was under the seat.”

She handed Léon a large book. He took it outside where the light was better and Nancy followed. She enquired if it was a Hermit’s book.

“Extraordinary,” Léon exclaimed. “It’s a Kabbalah.”

“From the Jewish religion?” She asked, incredulous.

“Jewish mysticism,” said Léon. “In a Marabout. It’s unimaginable.”

Nancy asked him to read it, but Léon had no Hebrew; he could only recognise the title. Nancy took the book and opened it on a page where a card had been placed. She handed it to him. On it was a hand-painted lily. Nancy asked what the lily signified.

"I don't know what it means in Judaism, we must ask the Rabbi in Boghari. We will take the book to him in the morning."

"I'm not leaving here tonight. Something important is happening."

Léon stood and waited sometime for her to explain. Eventually Nancy told him about her dream at the Matteg Inn and Léon listened patiently. He was moved by the startling imagery of Nancy's dream and impressed by her description of the Djinn. Her name for it was genie, but for him it was unmistakably a Djinn and he imagined her encounter was something more than a dream. This concerned him, but when Nancy explained her strange ritual of placing the lily under a stone, he was relieved. He could offer no words to express his thoughts.

"I'm staying here tonight," Nancy repeated. "This has been left here for me. I'm not leaving until I know why."

Léon tried to dissuade her, but once it was too dark to travel, he accepted his fate. They clung to their cloaks for warmth and talked of chance occurrences. They sat for hours weighing the balance between ancient belief and modern superstition, both hoping that they would cast some light on the mystery of the book and the lily.

"A lily in a Jewish book left in a Marabout is mystery enough," Léon offered, "but that this book should be the Kabbalah, the most esoteric of texts, is beyond belief. The coincidences are too many."

"What do you know of the Kabbalah?" Nancy asked.

"Hardly anything," he replied. "I believe it seeks to define the universe, the nature and purpose of our existence, that sort of thing, but it's an impenetrable secret to any but an experienced kabbalist. It is said that every Hebrew letter contains a secondary meaning. Only the initiated would know how to read that. It also communicates on many levels. It can be read literally, allegorically and even metaphysically. Tomorrow we will ask the Rabbi about this."

# Edge of the Wilderness

The two travellers slept fitfully, undisturbed by mythical creatures, dreams or even common visitors. Soon after sunrise they set out on horseback, cold and hungry. Within the hour they saw hundreds of farmers, goats and sheep gathering on the slopes below them. Boghari was in the distance.

“It’s the Arab Market,” Léon declared. He was more excited than Nancy had ever seen him. He galloped to a nearby ridge, dismounted and, taking pen and paper from his bag, he began sketching the scene before him. When the drawings were complete he covered them with copious notes.

The Arab farmers strolled confidently about, bartering loudly. Others stood or sat in groups, exchanging money, livestock and stories. Some played dominoes or ate couscous, their bowls steaming in the cool morning air. Once Léon was satisfied with his recording of the morning’s events, he and Nancy moved among the farmers, who welcomed them as guests, inviting them to share their food.

“Tonight the Ouled Nail will entertain us with their music and dance,” said Léon and his words brought a light to Nancy’s face. She could never have anticipated receiving so much from a community that had so little.

Arriving in the centre of Boghari, the couple stabled the horses and visited the train station, known locally as *La Porte du Desert*. Léon learned that the train from Laghouat would arrive in Boghari later that day, returning to Laghouat the following morning. There was no news of progress being made to clear the mud slide off the tracks at Brazza.

Léon took Nancy to Hotel Celestin, a modest place he had stayed at before. They washed at an outdoor pump and went to meet the Rabbi. The Synagogue, a large classical building, surprised Nancy. She had no idea that Judaism was so well established here. Léon explained that many Nomadic tribes had professed Judaism before the Arab conquest. He told her about Dihya, a celebrated female military leader and Berber Jew who led her tribe against the Arabs. Nancy imagined her Aunt Jessica in this role and smiled at the thought of it.

While Léon enquired of the Rabbi, Nancy waited outside. Within minutes he came running to welcome his unexpected guest. The Rabbi was

amazed to discover his prize possession in such perfect condition, it had been months since he had seen it. Nancy explained where she had found the book and asked him to describe something of the Kabbalah to her.

“The Kabbalah concerns many things,” he began. “Primarily, it speaks of the soul. It teaches us about the animal soul - our instincts and cravings; the human soul - that which enables us to distinguish between good and evil; and our higher soul - that which facilitates our awareness of God.”

Nancy nodded, handed him the card with the painted lily on it, and told him that she had discovered it inside the Kabbalah .

“It was a very significant thing for me to find,” she explained. “I had dreamt about a lily the previous night. It was on this page,” she said, indicating the place.

“It’s beautiful,” said the Rabbi, “but it wasn’t in the book when I had it. This section of the Kabbalah is dedicated to various methods of seeking truth. On this particular page, the verses describe qualities of imaginative comparison. There is nothing here about a lily. I’m sorry if this isn’t very helpful.”

“Does the lily have any special meaning in Judaism?” Nancy asked.

“The dew makes the lily bloom and the rain destroys it; I know that much. It’s an important flower, because its heart is directed upward, even though it grows among thorns. We interpret this as the need to trust in God amid all our afflictions.”

“May I keep the card?” Nancy asked.

“It is yours,” the Rabbi replied, “with my greatest thanks for finding my Kabbalah and my blessing for returning it.”

As Nancy and Léon were returning to the hotel they passed a church. Nancy stopped him.

“In the Christian faith the lily symbolises purity and motherhood doesn’t it? The angel of the annunciation presents Mary with lilies; do you remember? What would a Muslim hermit have to say about my lily?”

Léon thought for a moment, a far-away look in his eye.

“Come,” he instructed, “we will find out.”

They walked up a hill, west of the route they had taken when entering the town. After a short while, they came upon a cemetery where women and children appeared to be celebrating a festival. Above and beyond the cemetery lay a group of rough, stone buildings, one with an elaborate dome.



“It’s the Marabout Sidi Cheik,” Léon informed her. “If we are lucky, our hermit will be there.”

They both entered the building, but it was empty. Léon placed some coins on a stone ledge and they waited. Soon a man wearing a white djellabah and a chech around his head entered. He greeted them with a broad smile, his hands clasped together. Léon handed him Nancy’s card and asked what kind of talisman it was.

“Where are you going?” the hermit asked.

“To Bou-Saâda,” said Léon.

“This flower belongs in a garden. It comes to you at the edge of the wilderness. The garden is a place of order and contemplation. The wilderness is a place of harsh nature. You cannot take a flower like this to the wilderness. It does not belong there.”

With that he kissed Léon, bowed to Nancy and left.

“Good,” said Nancy, “it was as I suspected. The lily is the Djinn’s work and it was concocted to hold me back. Now we can see the dancing.”

She placed the card on the stone ledge next to the coins and walked out. Léon followed, listening to Nancy’s insistent declamation that she intended to wear her hair long that evening, no matter how he might try to advise her otherwise. Léon had not seen her so certain or so buoyant. As they returned past the cemetery, she gesticulated towards the graveyard and asked what kind of festival the women and children were engaged in.

“That’s no festival,” Léon informed her. “That’s just a normal day. The Kabyle regard the cemetery as a place for family celebration. For them, there is no division between living and dead members of a family; they are all part of the clan. The clan is more important than the family.”

“The Kabyle?”

“Kabylia is the region of the Atlas Mountains we are travelling through, the Arabs called it *Al Qabayel*, meaning tribes, but here they call it *Tamurt Idurar*, Land of Mountains.”

As they were returning to the Celestin, they came to a market that stretched the length of the Rue des Arcades Nord. Nancy bought postcards in great quantities and would have done the same with the kilims had Léon not dissuaded her.

# The Festival Night

Nancy stepped out, uncaring that a woman's golden hair hanging loose over a man's gandoura robe would be the cause of some attention. The festivities celebrating the market were taking place in the main square. By the time Léon and Nancy arrived the place was already crowded. A bandstand stood at the centre of the square and a temporary stage had been erected along one of the sides. The local people treated them with great courtesy, offering them wine and inviting them to sit at the front. The women touched Nancy's hair and the men clearly desired to. Luckily, they were content to fill her cup, but they stared in wonderment as she laughed and drank. Léon did not relax until they were sitting together near the stage. In reply to his question about the effects of the wine, Nancy told him that she had never felt better.

A drummer and three men playing lutes were on the stage; their sounds resonant of the landscape of this threshold place between mountain and desert. A group of women joined the musicians; one singer leading with cries and the chorus trilling in response. Then two women sang, one echoing the other. Their phrases rang out for all the heavens to hear. Nancy interpreted them as cries born of battles, drought and starvation. As the women left the stage, two flautists arrived. They were the plaintive wind and their lyrical modulations were the desert speaking through them. A singer joined the pair and stood in silence, his eyes closed. His voice, when it came, drew Nancy's heart back many generations. She was in the ancient desert, the sun searing the yellow earth, the light blinding her eyes, the wind lifting waves of intrusive sand. Léon translated the singer's words.

*Waiting, barely breathing, where are they from?  
Their voices dry, they sit in silence before departing.  
Where are they going, in this land of no horizons?  
They know the path and do not see it as wilderness.*

There were great cries from the women and shouts from the men in appreciation of this musical feast. Next, a tambourine player, a drummer,

a man with an Algerian bagpipe and another with a flute, took to the stage. Their rhythms transported Nancy to a great plateau where she could see to the very edge of the desert. The interweaving of surprises that came with the repetition of their themes transformed her thoughts into a complex overlay of images that gained in meaning the more layered they became. The trilling and clapping of the audience was ecstatic.

Without notice, the first dancer appeared, swaying as if in a dream. A drummer sprang up, dancing wildly toward her, his long cylindrical drum slung under his arm. The dancer took graceful flight and the drummer, beating his instrument with fingers and palm, pursued her. As he became still, the dancer returned to his side, enticing him with shoulder shimmies, undulations, and snaking arms. The drummer rejoined the other musicians, who played then as an ensemble. Another dancer took to the stage and the Ouled Nail duo moved their extraordinary twisting hips to the rhythm of the music.

After some time, Nancy could no longer resist her inclination to stand with the dancers. She wanted to study them at close quarters, to touch the glittering bands of coins that adorned their foreheads and throats. Their faces were startling; eyes darkened with kohl, faces patterned with tattoos. They wore their oiled black hair in braids, that looped around their ears. Their earrings appeared to support these braids. A diadem adorned many foreheads and some had tiaras made from ostrich feathers. They wore magnificent bracelets, studded or spiked, some projecting more than an inch. Nancy imagined they provided protection from ambitious hands.

With each new dance the performances became more seductive. Transfixed, Nancy was taken by surprise when a dancer came to stand next to her. The smell of her smoking cigarette made Nancy reel, but she could not resist touching her ruffled dress. She wanted to catch the woman's eye, but her face was obscured, her head swathed in a silk shawl and coloured ribbons hanging down her cheeks.

The dancer nudged Nancy's arm, offering her the hashish cigarette. Nancy declined with a shake of her head. The woman, touching Nancy's hair, spoke rapidly in Arabic. Nancy smiled and nodded, it being her only means of communication. Placing her arm round Nancy's shoulder, the woman began to sway. Nancy surrendered. She breathed in the woman's overwhelming presence and responded to her invitation to join her. Nancy did her best; she was entranced. She was connected to a powerful body; its

intelligence and self-assurance clearly expressed. It was this proud spirit, this independence and strength of character, that had so impressed her Aunt Jessica. Suddenly, the dancer burst into laughter and stopped abruptly. Seeing the look of surprise on Nancy's face, she planted a generous kiss on her lips and returned to her sisters.

Nancy felt the kiss like an explosion. As the dancer reached the stage the music and dancing stopped. At this point Nancy read all action as meaningful and connected. She could only imagine that the kiss was the cue to stop the dancing. Unsteady on her legs, she returned to Léon.

"It's time for the children to be in bed," he told her. "The entertainment will continue in the bars and in the houses of the wealthy merchants. I doubt we can join in."

"I'm not certain I can stay awake," said Nancy. "I'm exhausted. These women are so strong."

"Yes, but they didn't spend a freezing night in a hillside Marabout. They sleep all day so they can dance and smoke hashish all night. What you have seen is the public dance, after this they will perform naked for the men. No more refined gliding movements for them. The second dance is the one where they display their rotating breasts, their intricate belly rolls and their quivering thighs. The men will be queuing to spend the night with them, but these women don't accept offers easily. If desire is upon them, they will choose their man."

Léon waited for a cry of outrage from Nancy, but she did not respond as he expected.

"I guessed as much," she said. "Now that I've stood next to them I know their strength and the reason my Aunt was so attracted to them. You were right; their self assurance is profoundly alive in them. They are subservient to no-one and their love of dance is a celebration of sheer delight."

Nancy returned to Hotel Celestine in an ecstasy and a dream. She was a revived flower, its perfume nourished by sudden rain. She was the spirit of the desert and would henceforth withstand the tempest winds. She had known this about herself long ago, had seen it in pictures, heard it in songs. It seemed to her that she had been waiting patiently all her life for this moment to arrive.

# Fata Morgana

The dream remained with Nancy. She stood on the platform of *La Porte du Desert* waiting to board the train to Djelfa. She felt it madness to leave this place. It had taught her so much and filled her with so much passion.

On the train, a man and two women sat by the opposite window. One of the women was crying and the other had an arm about her shoulder. The distraught woman began arguing with the man. He went to sit in another seat further down the carriage. Léon listened to the women's conversation. Nancy could hardly wait for his translation.

"The unhappy woman has lost her husband," said Léon. "Her father has arranged another marriage, but the proposed husband is many years her senior. She is lamenting her imprisonment and her sister is attempting to encourage her with the promise that the family will not allow her to be badly treated. The sister's husband has no patience with the woman. His only concern is that he must honour his father-in-law's wishes to bring his daughter back to Laghouat.

"But aren't women free to choose their husbands?" Nancy asked.

"No. They have no rights here. Life for them is difficult. You can't compare the lives of women in Algeria with those of women in Europe. In the past, some tribes did have matriarchal structures and a few appointed women to lead them, but these days women do not leave their house without a man. They are covered and hidden. It is my belief that one day women will have more freedom. They will demand equal rights."

"But what about last night; were those women a mirage?"

"No, Nancy. Last night was special. The Ouled Nail women are an exception. In other tribes there is no independence; even educated women must fight to have a voice. Many women cannot read nor write; their husbands talk bravely of justice, but they rarely change anything. Family traditions are complex; full of contradictions and inconsistencies."

"This is surely the land of illusions," Nancy declared.

"It is exactly that," Léon agreed. "We are travelling through the High Plateau. This area produces some of the clearest mirages to be found anywhere. They are caused by the salty deposits that lie on the dry rocks."

Nancy became silent. She gazed from the window, willing a mirage to appear; she would have been content for anything to occur if it detracted attention from the anger she felt. Shimmering waves of heat rose above the High Plateau. This was all she saw from the carriage of her train.

“What causes a mirage?” she asked.

“They are tricks performed by light waves,” said Léon. A mirage is not a hallucination, it is an optical occurrence. Light rays, when they bend in a particular way, produce a displaced image of distant objects.”

“So even nature is capable of creating false images?”

“Yes, you must scan the horizon carefully to see one. They don’t come easily and when they do, we all interpret the images differently.”

“They are illusions then,” said Nancy. Léon disagreed.

“They’re real. There are inferior mirages, superior ones and complex ones. The latter are called Fata Morgana. These are very rare, but not completely illusive. Fata Morgana are formed by chance from a series of unusually elaborate images. These have to form one rapidly-changing vision for it to qualify as a Fata Morgana. Imagine seeing people moving about the landscape when they are not actually there.”

Nancy shook her head, disconsolately. Despite the good grounding she had received in scientific theory, trying to understand how moving images could be transferred across the desert was impossible.

“If everyone interprets the images differently,” she argued, “and the Fata Morgana distort the objects they are based on, then the laws of physics are hardly going to assist in the explanation of them.”

“It’s worse than that,” Léon replied. “Sometimes the Fata Morgana images are unrecognizable.”

“So, we have illusory moving images, unfolding in a place that is entirely devoid of anything but rock and salt, that are real events, even when the activities are unrecognizable.”

Léon laughed. “It’s worse yet. The Fata Morgana can also alter suddenly; they can change their status and become a straightforward static mirage.”

“Everything you say increases the number of unfathomable illusions I am left holding in my mind,” Nancy moaned.

“But this change only happens because the conditions of the atmosphere are constantly changing.”

“And this is how you leave me; ill prepared to know what I’m looking at or how to interpret it. Why are they called Fata Morgana?”

“It’s the Italian for Morgan le Fay. She was a sorceress and antagonist of King Arthur.” Nancy raised her eyebrows. “It’s the truth,” Léon exclaimed. “Le Fey in French means fairy. She was an enchantress, not unlike the Algerian female Djinn.”

“But why do they use the Italian name for her?”

“Fata Morgana figured highly in the legends associated with the waters around Sicily. She was the Queen of the Sirens and she lured unwary sailors to their death. In mediaeval France, Morgan is called *The Mistress of the Fairies of the Salt Sea*.”

“But why call the mirages after her?”

“Fata Morgana could make boats fly above the sea and golden castles float in the air. These things are optical illusions, just as Morgan is herself.”

“And Morgan le Fay, What part did she play in mediaeval romances?”

“She was King Arthur’s half-sister and his adversary. She gave Arthur’s Excalibur to her lover, Accolon, so he could use it against the King. When the plot failed she stole the scabbard of Excalibur, a thing that protected Arthur, and threw it into the lake. She also cajoled the Green Knight into frightening Guinevere, who had put an end to Morgan le Fay’s affair with Guiomar, Guinevere’s cousin. There are many stories about Morgan’s enmity towards Arthur, but she is also known for transporting him on a barge to Avalon, where he could be healed. In French romanticism, Morgan is regarded as a benevolent figure with special healing powers. She is a shape-changer, seductively gentle one second and a megalomaniac sorceress the next. Like the Fata Morgana, she is never certain.”

“The more I learn in this land, the less certain I am,” said Nancy. She was about to say that she had a strange yearning to walk into the far distance, but she remained silent and gazed at the horizon.

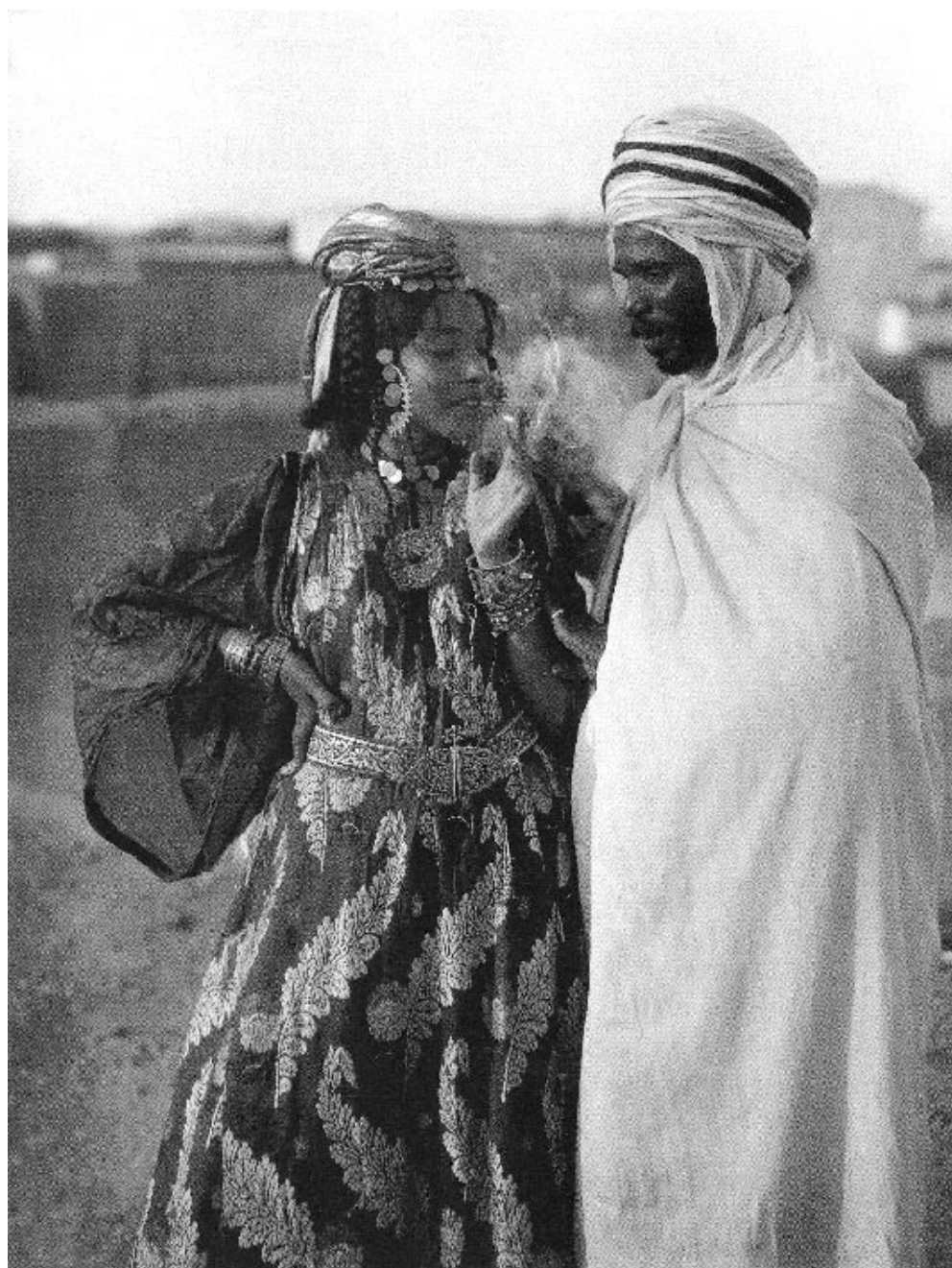
“The desert entices you to become one with it,” Léon announced.

Nancy realised he was reading her thoughts. It occurred to her that she had never become one with anything.

“No one achieves it,” he said, “but the desert makes it seem possible.”

He took from his pocket a small book of poetry by Claude-Maurice Robert and read to her:

*“It’s a completely new atmosphere. Here one can sit back, commune with nature - almost take wing - and leave behind everything that is petty and foolish. Plunged in splendour and joy, we can enjoy the miraculous harmony of time and place that has been created in this place.”*





# A Marriage in Djelfa

A Draft Manuscript by Léon Lehuraux

written in Bou-Saâda, 1904

translated by Marianne Fournier

This text concerns a marriage ceremony that occurred in April 1904. The celebration was organised by a politically important and rich Arab family. Their name was Bengana. In Algeria it is the groom's family who are responsible for the wedding arrangements. The Bengana family were on close terms with the French authorities, which explains why Captain Lehuraux was invited to attend the wedding. The traditional values and sensitivities of such families were not compromised by their relationship with their colonisers.

# The Wedding Ceremony

For the last two days this coquettish oasis has been filled with unusual excitement. In the squares and streets, a colourful crowd has been walking backwards and forwards, unoccupied, waiting for the big event.

From all Algeria, from Tunisia and Morocco, even from southern areas further away, numerous friends have come to attend the wedding ceremony of Mohammed Bel Hadj Ben Bouaziz Bengana and Doudja Bent Bensmaïa.

The town has a festive atmosphere and looks like a provincial French village on a celebration day. Some riders are parading straight and proud on their embroidered saddles. They too wait with impatience for the festivities to begin.

The crowd has gathered together in the market area, which is also the Ouled Nail area. It is here where the young women dance. Tonight these peculiar priestesses of the Saharan Venus, with their lips of joy and their dawn light complexion, will entertain the town.

The Moorish cafes are packed with customers, some crouching on mats, others sitting round tables. The air is filled with the fragrance of their favourite black beverage. A man speaks of the coffee.

“This liquor, so loved by poets, is the one Virgil longed for and the one Voltaire loved.”

A busy waiter brings the excellent mocha in minuscule, colourful china cups. The liquid is relished slowly, slurped in small gulps, with obvious delectation.

In the dull light of the small shops, some Arabs, squatting, are whispering together. They are putting up a fight, without much enthusiasm, against their half-sleepy state. A few play chess and others are busy embroidering in a feminine and meticulous manner. Others, grouped in a circle, are sewing pieces of material with the agility of those who know the price of time. Some Moorish women, leaning against the shop fronts, are chatting under their white masks, while some young Eliacins – handsome like Gods, with geranium flowers on their ears and strings of jasmine around their neck

– are hanging around, humming unfinished songs to inspire their listeners to dream.

The crowd is diverse. Those with tanned skin and wrinkled faces seared by the sun, are easily recognisable as the ‘people from the tents.’ Some are wearing white gandouras with an immaculate burnous on top. Others have a simpler outfit. Each of them moves beautifully. Their clothes fall heavily in pleats, like antique drapery, and their measured gait has something religious and noble about it.

The main Avenue is packed. The men in white burnous and the women in white haiks, look strangely luminous.

Senegalese skirmishers, with their impeccable khaki uniforms, are standing on both sides of the Avenue, paying homage to the visitors. The continuous streams of guests walk up the small avenue and gather under the immense tent. A member of the African Army, General Sarton du Jonchay, is an illustrious figure who is welcomed by everyone. He is retired now, but he chose to settle in the Saharan lands he loves so passionately. He spent many years in this region when he was an officer.

Next to the General stand the Count and Countess de Sinety, Saharan colonists and bold aviators who flew many times over the Grand Desert to Central Africa to hunt wild animals.

Everyone settles down in the vast tent, but the noise outside continues to be deafening. Gunpowder explosions send their echoing wishes to the couple and the cries of, “You, you,” from the women fly frenetically, like arrows in the ambient joy. A few stunning riders attempt to stay their horses, so excited are they by this din. They rear up, their eyes on fire, their nostrils piping hot and dilated. Their regal presence completes this extraordinary scene.

The tent is now completely full. The ceremony starts with a poem that has been specially written for the occasion. It is sung by the pupils of the Zaouia Rahmania of Tolga and has a monotonous and melancholic sound. This singing surprises the European ears, for it is strange, but the locals enjoy it immensely. They offer their trilling cries to show their approval.

This setting seems to be born of the kind of magnificence that was described in the poems of Antar. Unconsciously, the spectators are allowing themselves to be transported by the ensuing romanticism; they are opening their imaginations to scenes of ancient Arab tradition, to a time when fabulous readings of oriental tales were told late into the night.

While this ritual ceremony unfolds, the young bride and groom are in a nearby room surrounded by a swarm of beautiful young adults. The picture they make has an incomparable innocence about it.

Cheikh Abdelmadjid addresses the guests with a speech. He is a great orator and makes the audience laugh.

“Roubbamma el lissane Ilek el-insane,” he declares – which means, “Often language can trick us.”

Now comes the awaited solemn moment when the magistrate proceeds with the official celebration of the marriage according to Islamic law. The venerable Khadi of Constantine has been given the honour of pronouncing the ritual words. In glowing terms the magistrate reminds the audience of the noble origins of each family and pays homage to their ancestors. From the gathering emotion, the Khadi registers the approval of both families. The parents exchange the conventional phrases and the marriage is now official. Outside, endless applause and vibrant cries of trilling erupt from all sides. Beyond this happiness, in the azure of the desert, the magical African sun is exulting.

Gradually, the noise subsides and stops. The Muphti of Constantine, the Cheikh El Mouhoub, stands to make his speech. The Cheikh is a beautiful and assertive old man. His appearance has an amazing grandeur about it. Placed neatly about his shoulders is the ribbon of ‘the Legion d’Honneur.’ It is slightly hidden under his light wool burnous. He is dressed in white and wears a sebha round his neck. This is a coarse-grained rosary, worn to indicate his religious stature and the fact that he is an Ouali, ‘a friend of God.’ The Cheikh also wears an amama, a white headdress. It is a distinguishing feature of the erudite Ulemas. His subtle speech cannot be described accurately, for it is full of the imagery of Arabic poetry.

Next it is the turn of M. Louis Milliot, former dean of the Algiers Faculty of Law and Director of the ‘Affaires Indigènes and Territoires du Sud’. He stands on the stage knowing that he must make a magisterial speech. Being a distinguished jurist, he offers a fine presentation of the Muslim conditions of marriage and produces a beautiful eulogy on the sociology of Islam. This he peppers with quotations from the Koran and references to the Hadiths. His declaration in Arabic makes a profound impression on the audience.

The formal part of the ceremony is now finished and the guests move towards the exit. They are on their way to the banquet. The temperature

has suddenly cooled. In a sky that has become slightly stormy, a few clouds suggest the imminence of rain. The drought has endured for several months. Would Allah bless this marriage by sending the much awaited water to this dried land? The locals are examining the celestial abyss with hope, unafraid of what Theophile Gautier feared in his *Voyage en Espagne*.

“The weather,” says Gautier, “is a very capricious and teasing creature. As soon as he feels a solemn occasion is about to happen, as soon as he sees costly preparations and groups of people awaiting pleasure, he indulges his malicious and abominable enjoyment. He saves for this very day his worst rainfall, his snow and his hail, as if there were no other occasion for him to open his locks.”

The first drops of rain are welcomed by the people as a blessing from God. Allah, lord of the rain, has finally heard the prayers of his sons. It is clear that He is blessing the newly married couple at the very moment of their union. He is realising the prayers that have been repeated all these last months. He is protecting them and promising that the harvests will be saved, that the beautiful date palm trees will straighten their leaves and the pastures will live again to offer their best to the herds.



# The Diffa

At eight o'clock in the evening the guests return to the prestigious tent. It has been miraculously transformed into a fairy palace. The floating walls have disappeared and now a marvellous covering of draperies and rugs display an astonishing combination of techniques and skills. From Rabat and Berber R'taiat, there are colourful tapestries with extraordinary fringes. The Oulad Djellal tribe have made tapestries, recognizable by their garish colours. From the Atlas Mountains there is the sober rfafa, which uses a harmonious mix of wool and the weaving of tellis. Next to these, polychrome scarlet djerbi hang.

All kinds of Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian and Turkish rugs have been put together under this spacious tent. Every possible technique is on display. They look like an artist's impression of nature's marvellous rug which covers the ground after the spring rain falls. This is when the Maghrebi countryside wears her festive finery. The Arabs call it 'Plumage of Earth,' when huge iris, white and yellow daisies, red brown buttercups, blue thistles and countless daffodils are on display.

With perfect courtesy, Si Bouaziz Bengana welcomes his guests. His beautiful eyes give to his physiognomy an expression of gentleness; they seduce while reflecting a magnificent energy and an indomitable will. He is truly a *seigneur de grande tente*.

In this palace of wool, the strictness of the black suits worn by the Europeans contrasts greatly with the crimson and rich ornamental outfits of the Caids, as do the white burnous and gandouras of the Arab notables. The intimacy of this combination eloquently portrays the nature of Franco-Muslim union.

Now the prestigious diffa is about to start. In accordance with tradition, Si Bouaziz Bengana supervises the service without taking part in the meal. With discreet charm he guides the army of silent servants. After many starters the renowned couscous arrives. It has been prepared by his house with full-flavoured wheat flour. A whole regiment of women have worked the wheat for hours. With the palms of their hands they have turned it into

countless grains that are as small as the seeds of wheat. On each tray a large wooden soup tureen called metred is presented. It is full of er rgig couscous, the best and thinnest of its kind. It is served with appetising vegetables, boiled meat and cinnamon; a veritable paradise.

The European ladies look embarrassed. Like Caesar, before crossing the Rubicon, they are hesitating! They must be silently asking if everyone is going to eat from the same soup tureen. They pray that they are not expected to roll the couscous up into a ball by hand and eat it without cutlery. They know it is the traditional Arabic way of eating. Soon the ladies are relieved; the Master of the tent has made sure that everyone receives a spoon. He knows the fears of the European ladies.

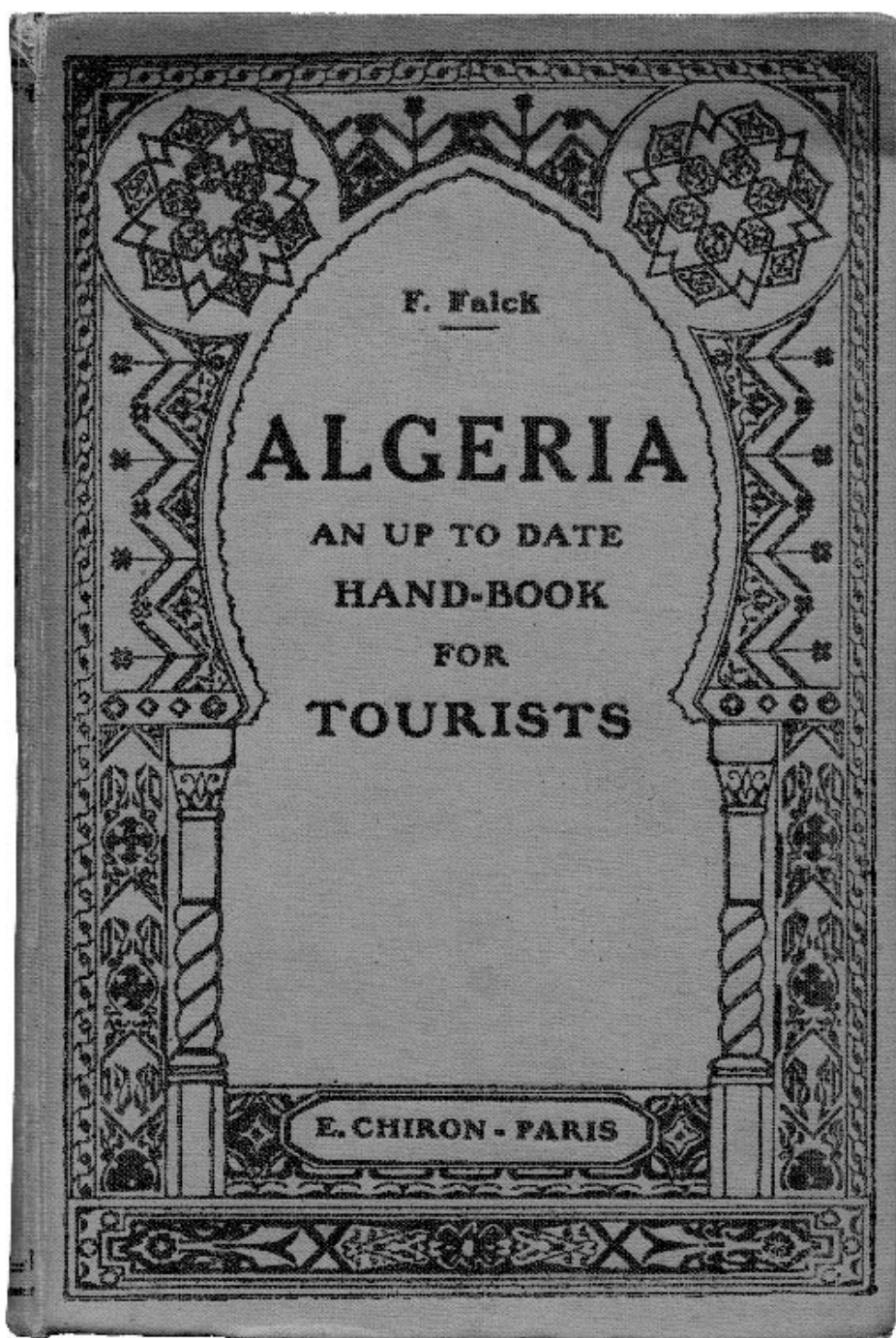


It is now time for the mechoui, the masterpiece of Arabic cuisine! As the delicious smell of roast mutton fills the air, all stand to look at the extraordinary procession. The serving men bring in the mutton on huge sticks. They are as serious as Roman banner bearers and the fifty or so mutton roasts are arranged as though they were on military revue. There is much laughter and animated conversation as everyone forms a circle around the sacrificed animals. The flesh is soft and the guests pull the meat apart with their hands; the best way to

appreciate its flavour. They enjoy another moment of paradise and before long the plump mutton roasts are nothing but skeletons.

Next, all sorts of delicious Arabic patisseries and fruits arrive. There are delightful oranges from Biskra and exquisite deglet nour dates, sweeter than honey and more transparent than amber. Then, to end this Homeric meal, the musicians, led by a proud conductor, play their finest music.

The delightful African night falls with a subtle coldness which envelopes the sleeping desert. The divine stars light up the immense vastness, glowing as flames in the sky. For the Arabs, stars have a beneficial influence. These sons of poetry call them *en nachitat*, the ones who leap.





## Memoirs of a Journey

In the box of assorted material I inherited from Nancy was the book shown here on the opposite page. On the inside cover were these words by Leon Lehuraux.

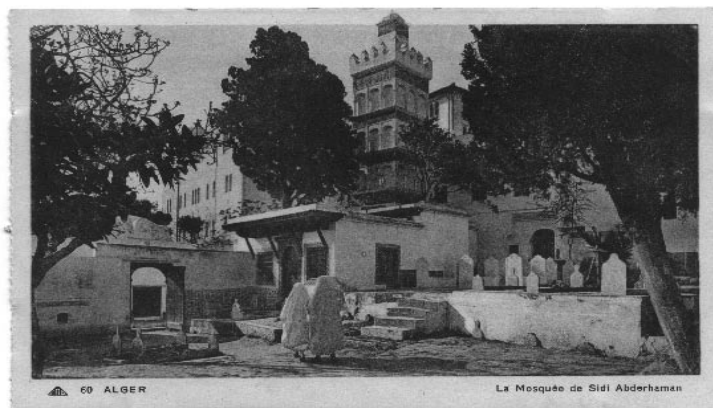
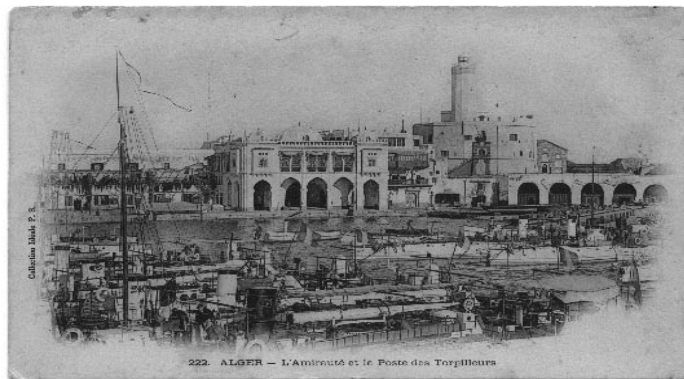
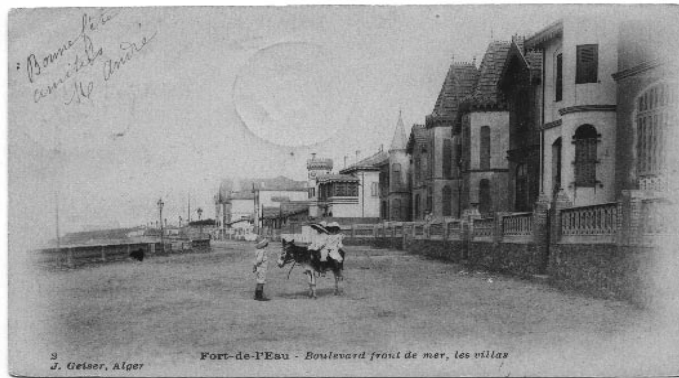
“To Nancy, may your daughter bring you much joy.  
Leon.”

Nancy had placed two markers in the book and I reproduce these pages in this section.

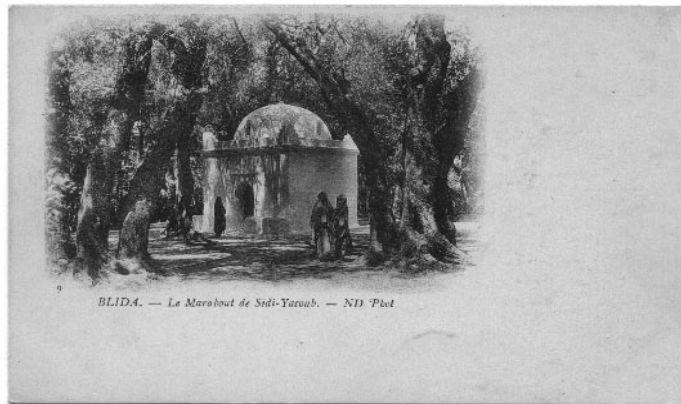
The box also contained an assortment of photographs and postcards and a series of pages that were Nancy's attempt to make an album. As far as I know, this was never completed. These pages included hand-written sentences or possibly quotes, but Nancy did not credit the authors. Her writing is difficult to decipher so I have typed out the text and present it here next to the images. I have ordered the material chronologically to give some indication of the journey undertaken by Nancy.





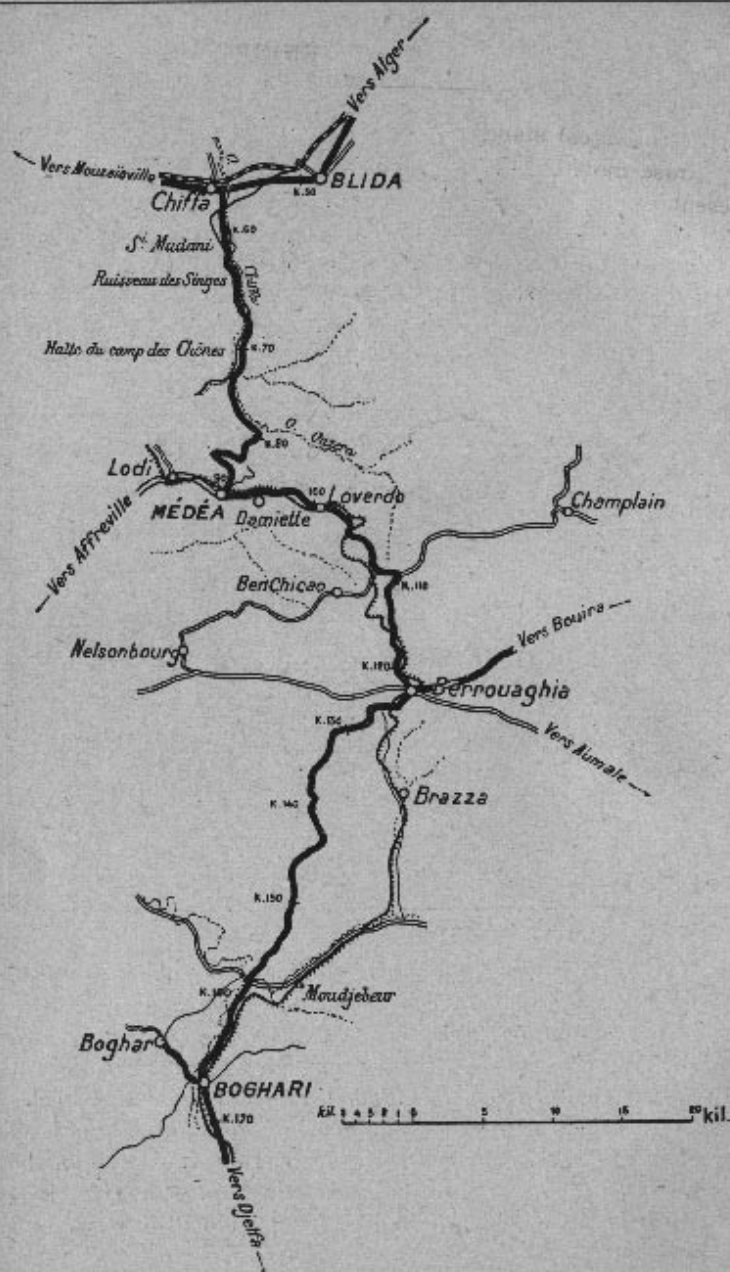


Is there a man anywhere who never transgresses your law?



Any attempt to grasp the Orient and give it a shake is folly





### FROM BLIDA TO BOGHARI

**ITINERARY :** On leaving Blida, the road to take is the Chiffa road which runs along the oued banks. After the bridge, the road divides into two branches (7 kil., about 4  $\frac{1}{2}$  miles). The left branch should be taken. It leads almost at once into the mountain and the *Gorges de la Chiffa* which are noted for their beauty, being radiant with verdure, wild and charming at the same time. At 13 kil. 8 (about 8 miles), *Sidi Madani*. The road runs along the sinuous banks of the Oued Chiffa which flows deep down between colossal cliffs. At 16 kilometers (about 10 miles), *Ruisseau des Singes* (Monkey Stream) already described. A bridge crosses the torrent, the road turns suddenly. Bridge on the oued, abrupt turn to the right. At 22 kilometers (about 14 miles) : *Camp des Chênes*. The road then leaves the gorge. Bridge on the oued Mouzaïa (26 kilometers : 16 miles). Long windings along a vale (42 kil. 5, about 26 miles).

**Medea** is 89 kilometers (about 55 miles) south of Algiers; subprefecture; 15,000 inhabitants, alt. 927 meters (about 3,040 feet). Very pleasant summer climate. Ruins of the ancient Roman town Ad Medias.

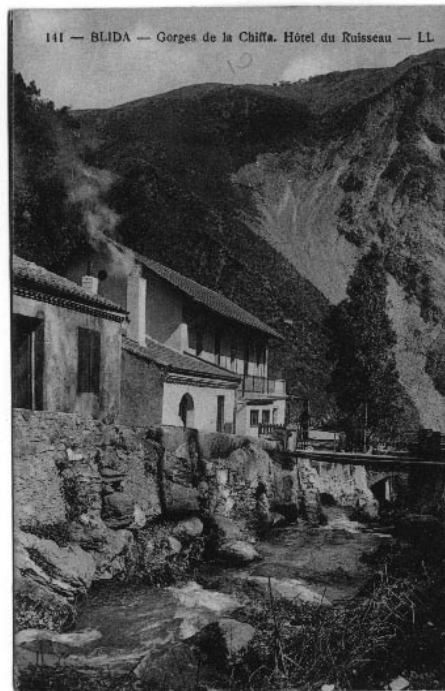
Blida to Boghari railway. High road to Algiers and to Orléansville through Affreville, also to Laghouat.

MEDEA is situated in a very healthy region. It is an essentially European town with but a few Arab houses and one mosque. Commercial center known for its wines.

**Round Medea.** 1° Excursion to the top of the *Djebel Dakla* (1,062 meters, about 3,495 feet), 6 kilometers (about 4 miles) from Medea. Medea to Lodi road. Very fine view, from the peak, of the Sahel, the sea, the Chiffa gorges, the Djurjura, the High table lands and all the southern Chains before the desert.

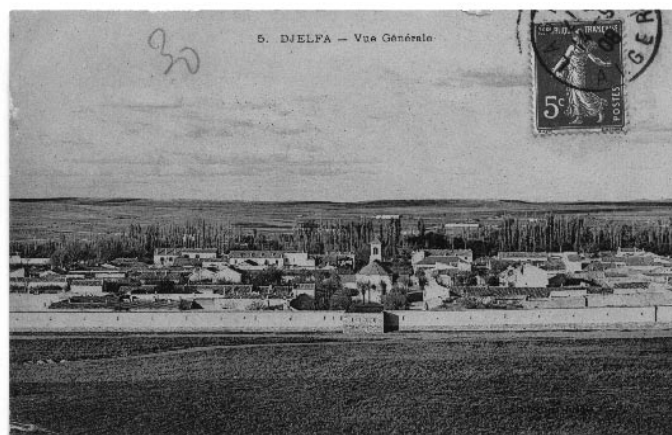
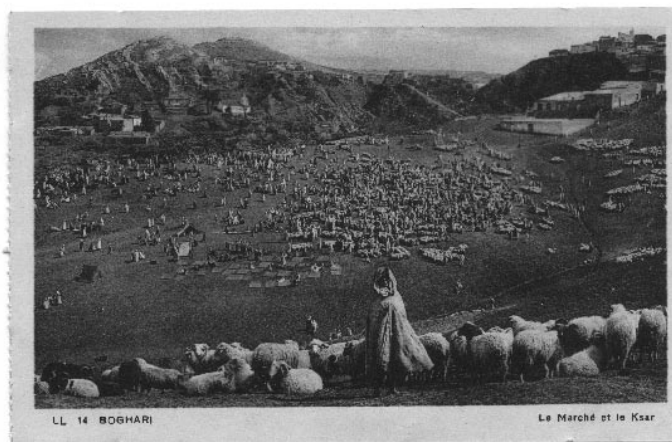
2° Excursion to Mousaïa-Peak (1,664 meters, about 5,450 feet). A whole day on mule back. Splendid view.

**ITINERARY (continued).** To reach Boghari travellers leave Medea by the Eastern side. The road goes up and down a good deal. At 3 kilometers 500 (about 2 miles) is *Damiette*. Sinuous road, then, *Loverdo* (52 kilom., about 32 miles) win-

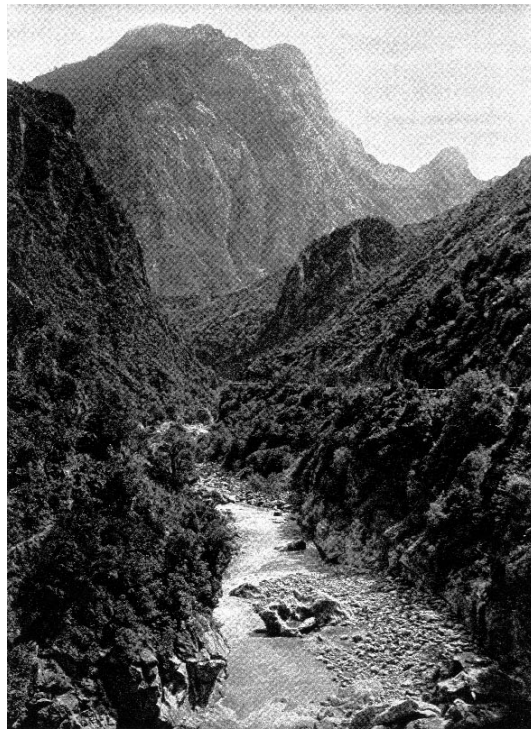
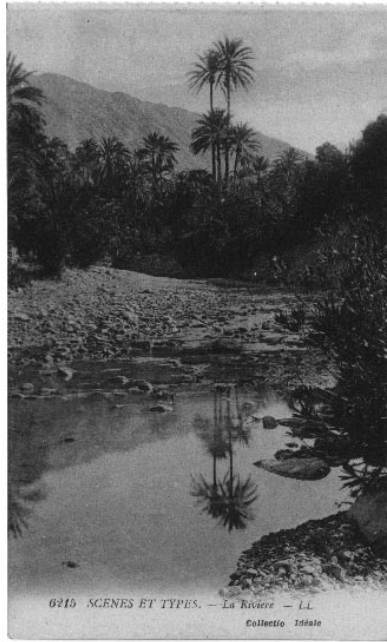


A country where the centre is in every place and the circumference is nowhere





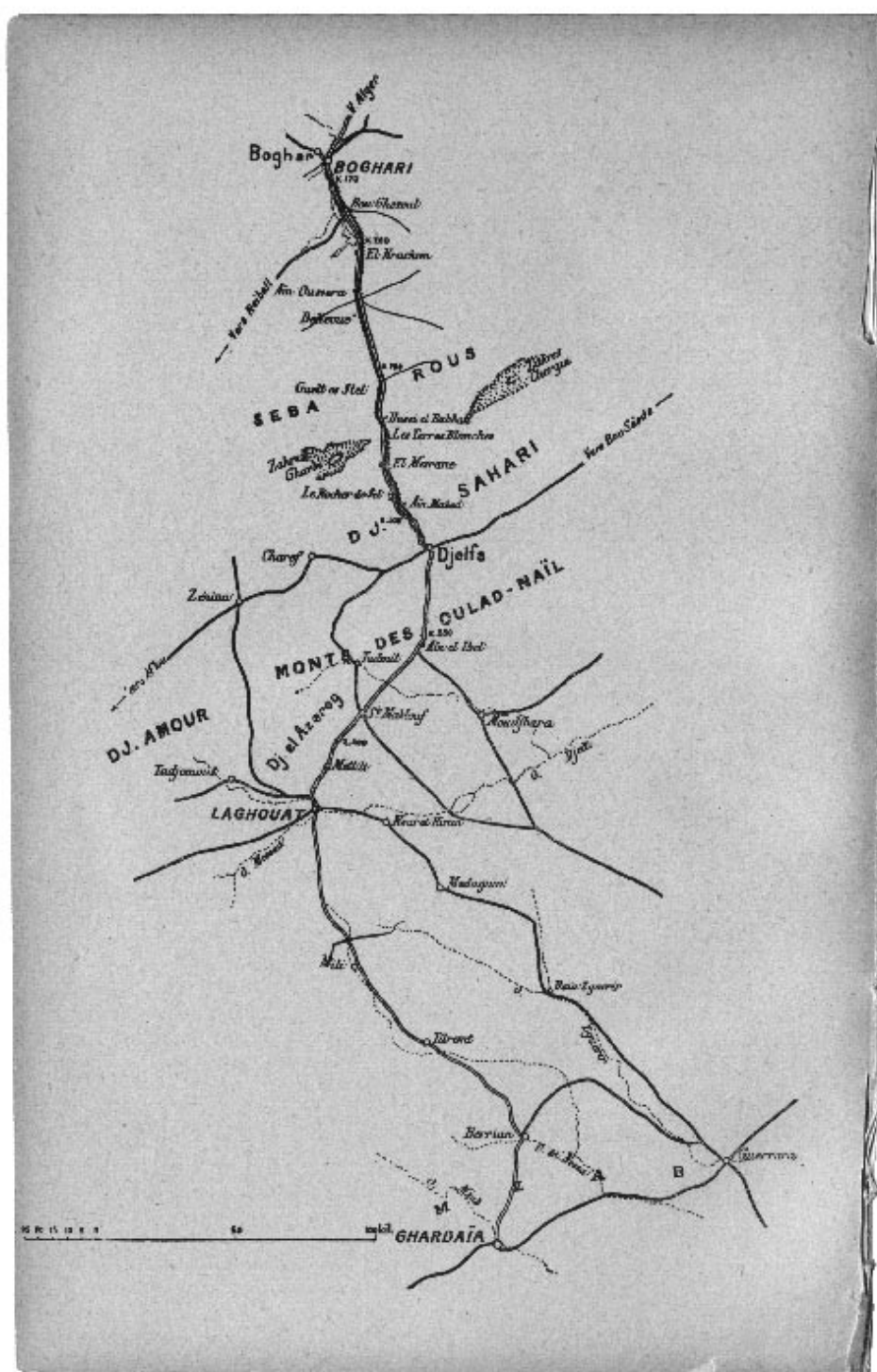
We should expect the landscape to metamorphose



All coincidence is the shadow of God



A life without sin; could you tell me how this might taste?



Thence the road winds down to the table land. Bridge on the *Oued El Akoun* (115 kil. 5, about 71 miles). The road goes up the valley of the *Oued Cheliff* (123 k. 7, about 77 miles) and reaches *Boghari* (124 k. 2, about 77 miles).

BOGHARI is a small but rather important commercial town. It presents no special interest for travellers, the only curiosity being the Ksar of Boghari which is unlike all the small towns in the region. It is built in the Saharian style and stands on abrupt rocks like a sort of fortified village. Its inhabitants, the *Ouled Naïls* give dancing displays in the evening.

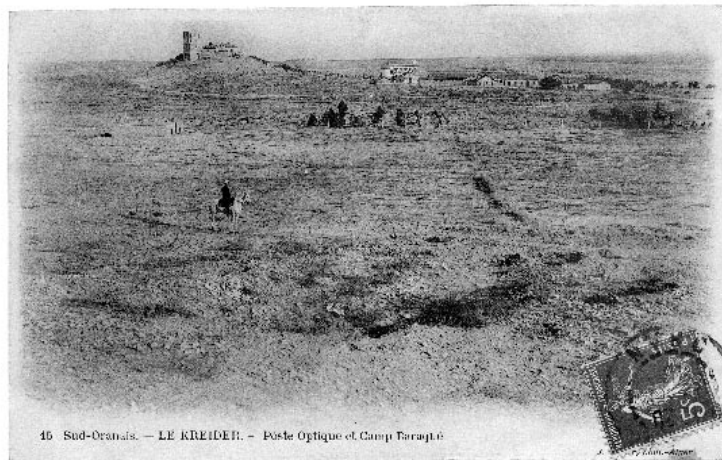
**Round Boghari.** 1° At 8 kilometers (about 5 miles), on the western side, is *Boghar* built on a formidable position at an altitude of 970 meters (about 3,185 feet), rising over all the High table lands and called the "*Balcony of the Desert.*" Boghar was one of Abd-el-Kader's haunts. Splendid view on the whole Tell zone (Very comfortable Transatlantic hotel).

2° To TENIET-EL-HAD through Boghar (6 kilometers, about 3 3/4 miles). There the road enters the timber region. It passes at the foot of the *Djebel Guessa* (1,425 meters, about 4,670 feet). *Teniet-el-Had* is known for its wonderful cedar forest which is worth seeing.

#### FROM BOGHARI TO GHARDAIA

On leaving *Boghari* the road goes straight southward. It is good and almost even. At 22 kilometers (about 14 miles) : *Bou Gjezoul*. Region of steppes and marshes. Frequent mirages. At 39 kilometers (about 24 miles) : *El Krachem*. The steppe is absolutely villageless up to *Guellet es Stel* (87 kilometers, about 54 miles). Flat country. Monotonous scenery. Then *El Mexrane* (110 kilometers, about 68 miles) where there is an inn. One kilometer further begins an ascent, 60 kilometers (about 37 miles) long, which leads to the crossing of the *Ouled Naïls* Mountains. At *Rocher de Sel* (Salt Rock) (125 kilometers : about 78 miles), there is an inn. Continual ascent to *Zmila* (135 kilometers : about 84 miles) thence to *Djelfa* (139 kilometers : about 86 miles) (steeper road).

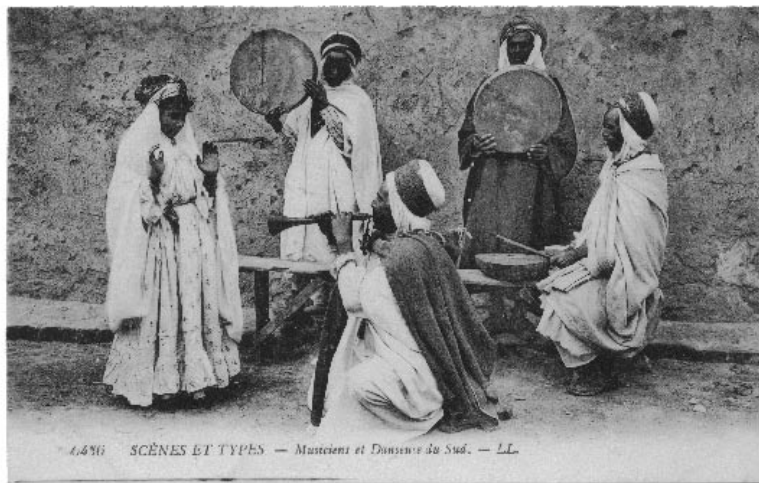
**Djelfa.** 320 kilometers (about 199 miles) from *Algiers* by



Imagine if the Algeria we knew before was nothing more than a vast stage set of startling colours, a backdrop to a play about a paradise we may yet lose.







To the scarlet dress, to the carefree youth





On their return journey Léon and Nancy visited l'Hermitage du Père de Foucauld on Le Plateau de l'Asekrem in Hoggar. Nancy's friend Louise Blair later made a watercolour painting for her, showing the landscape near this Hermitage.



# News from Bou-Saâda

## Nancy's Correspondence with her Mother

I came across this correspondence in 1967 when my Grandma, Nancy's daughter, died. Until then I had only seen a few of Nancy's postcards, my mother having transferred them to an album. She did her best to reply to my questions, but she did not know a lot about Nancy's time in Algeria. I was nine in 1967 and we were living in France, my father being French. My mother travelled to Surrey to clear Grandma's house and she returned with Nancy's box of papers. During my teenage years, I spent hours with these documents and believed I would one day write the complete story of Nancy Etheridge. When I was thirty I set about this task in earnest, but after five years I gave up; I discovered nothing that would fill the gaps in her story. One afternoon I showed my daughter the postcards and talked about Nancy's adventures. She is also called Nancy. After I had read the letters she expressed her delight at knowing everything about her great-great-grandmother. I was taken aback and realised that Nancy's portrait worked perfectly well as a collage. That's how this book was born.



Highlands  
Weald Road  
Nr. Camberley  
Surrey

14th May 1904

My dearest Nancy,

What shocking news from Captain Lehuraux, but how grateful we are that he thought to send us some communication. He gives us precious little detail of your condition and we hope that he is not holding back on anything that we should know. Your father has started asking questions of everyone, but truly we do not have enough to go on. I hope you will soon be well enough to explain your ailment and put our minds at rest. You are of course constantly in my prayers.

News at present is mostly of the saddest kind. Dr. Snow, your father's colleague and friend died suddenly. I have been supporting Margaret, his wife, and with your news it seems she must now support me. Oh Nancy, please recover soon and return to us.

Since the completion of the Royal Army Medical College your father has been more often in London than at home. I enclose a little picture card of the building so that you might think of him at work. He has suggested that I live with him there, and it is a pleasant enough spot on the river, just west of Westminster, but for some reason I feel I must be here. I cannot think about you properly if I am away from home.

I hardly know what to say. I just wish you were here in your old bed where I could look after you. Please telegram the minute you are able. I pray for the postman's knock at the door every minute. The promise of a few precious words from you is all I have to sustain me. Your father sends his deep concerns and his best love.

Your loving mother,  
Alicia Etheridge

Bou-Saâda

18th May 1904

Dear Mother and Father,

Now that our telegrams have crossed, you know that I am at last conscious, though I remain weak and confused. Daddy, please don't feel you must travel out here to rescue me. I am being looked after as well as anyone might and I really cannot travel at present.

Neither I nor Dr. Fournier, the army medic here, have any clear idea about the cause of my ailment, but he is keeping a close eye on me. We suspect that food poisoning was at the root of it, but this does not explain everything. I will live with it for a while yet before trying to explain the details of my symptoms. Don't worry, I will recover.

Léon is never far away. He has been unbelievably kind and I am grateful that he thought to keep you informed of my fortunes. Without him I would certainly have been lost somewhere on the edge of the Ouled Nail mountains. He made a stretcher from the remains of a tent he found and pulled me along behind his horse. I think we should enquire if he might receive a medal of some kind.

Léon has just entered. He informs me that he has been given permission to stay in Bou-Saâda until I am fit enough to return with him to Algiers. He must deliver this letter to the military postman now; the fellow is leaving for Djelfa at first light. I will write more frequently now that I am able and I look forward to your letters and news of England.

Please don't wait to receive my letters before writing; I like it if they cross and one every three weeks is never going to sustain our longing for news and companionship.

Your loving daughter,

Nancy

Highlands  
Weald Road  
Nr. Camberley  
Surrey

19th May 1904

My dearest Nancy,

The postman delivered your telegram today – what joy to read your words, though they are preciously small in number. Now I want a letter from you, giving some more detail about that which detains you in Bou-Saâda. The news your father has about the place does not sound encouraging, but it is difficult to see the positive aspects of a place that holds so much fear for us.

How I wish that my sister had never visited that country. I don't blame Jessica for this misfortune – how could I? – she was always that way, but I wish you had never taken up her dotty ideas and entertained the dangerous adventure of travelling to Bou-Saâda. She was always the hardy one; we're not made of the same stuff.

I hope that Captain Lehuraux isn't risking too much by staying with you in this place for so long. The army must have plenty to occupy them without supporting such indulgence, but please tell him that we are eternally grateful for his kindness. You might inform me if there is some romantic attachment between you and the Captain. I should hate to learn that you were to be married there and remain with him in Algeria. My apologies to you if I am being too presumptuous, but I am full of fear that I will not see you again and, without meaning to, I produce any little form of evidence for myself to feed my anxiety. I wish this were not true and I have voiced no such fears to your father.

He continues to be busy with his teaching and this I suspect is the best way for him to settle his nervousness. We send our deepest affection.

Your loving mother,  
Alicia Etheridge





Bou-Saâda

7th June 1904

Dear Mother and Father,

I have received both of your letters. I was sad to hear of Dr. Snow's death. Please give Mrs. Snow my condolences. How strange to think of father teaching in London. I can't wait to visit him. Please don't blame Aunt Jessica for my misfortune. The reasons for my ailment could never be laid at her door. Each day I have some reason to thank her; this is an extraordinary land, populated by people who are truly beautiful. I have so much to tell you and yet I feel that a letter is not the place for it.

I enclose a postcard of the Hotel Transatlantique. I am no longer staying here; I'm living with a group of Ouled Nail women who run their own household. It was they who knew how to nurse me; women of course know best how to bring their own kind out of shock and melancholy. I still don't know enough about my ailment to describe it to you, but the symptoms have now diminished and all that is left is for me to regain my strength.

I can now walk to the edge of town to gaze upon the mountains; this gives me considerable pleasure. I have been studying the maps and postcards that I collected on my way here. The delight I receive from retracing my steps via these memorabilia is enormous. Maybe one day I will make an album of them. For the present, I want to write. I do not know what exactly, but I have a burning need to express what is in my heart. Léon refers to it as my travelogue, but I think that it may be more like a novel. You will think this a strange decision, but I feel the need to get my mind working. I need to exercise my brain as well as my legs.

You must not imagine that Léon is putting himself out unduly by staying with me in Bou-Saâda for so long. He is writing an account of the marriage ceremony we attended in Djelfa, so he has plenty to keep him busy. I will write of it in my novel. Ours is a special relationship; not one that will lead us to marriage, but one that we will always keep in our hearts.

Please do not worry about me. I will be back as soon as I am able.

Your loving daughter,

Nancy



Bou-Saâda

14th June 1904

My dearest Mother and Father,

I hope you received my letter. I am so looking forward to having more news from you. I am much recovered and each day my lovely dancers are helping me to put strength back into my body. You cannot imagine what power they have in their muscles. It is certain that the poise and grace of their bodies is responsible for their delightful health and happiness.

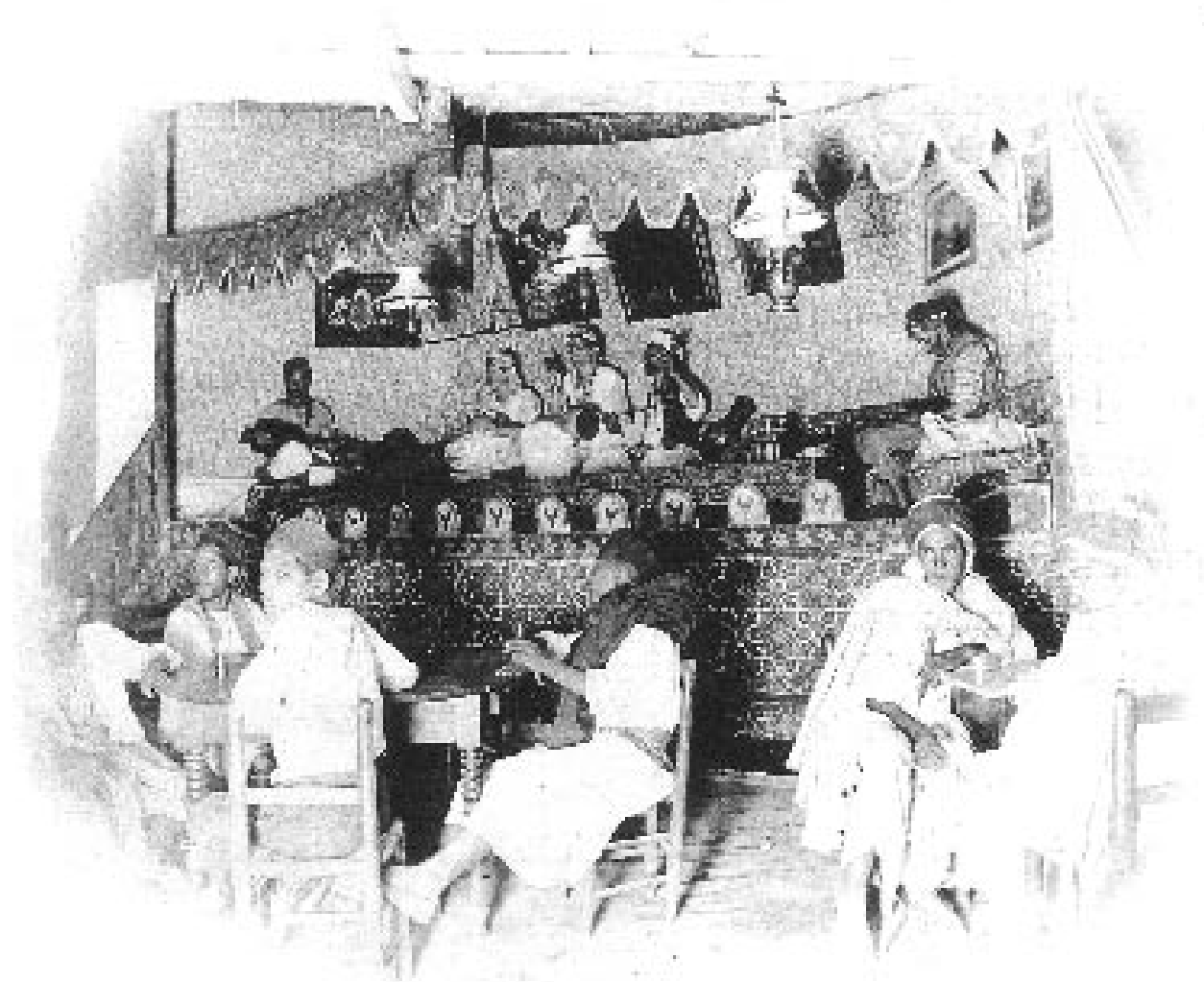
I have made a start on my novel and I am very pleased with my efforts. I can recall everything with such clarity that it is a continual source of surprise for me. The only period I have difficulty remembering is on the final stretch of road here, just after we left Slim. It is here that I lost consciousness altogether. Léon, who visits everyday, has been describing how he found water to cool me. There is something of the magician about him. He kept me alive and travelling even when my temperature was running at a dangerously high level.

With Léon as my translator, I have been speaking with the midwife who is also a belly dancer. It was she who diagnosed my illness and arranged for me to be looked after in her community. My condition was caused by two factors, food poisoning and a phantom pregnancy. I cannot tell you how phantom pregnancies occur, other than to admit that the phantom had a basis in reality – my last months in England were quite unlike the life I led prior to Jessica's death. The phantom pregnancy is a strange phenomenon and I would not have thought it possible, but the women here have experience of it. Kindness and indulgence is their cure. I am also learning how to dance their extraordinary movements. This alone is making me stronger and it will not be long before I am fit enough to return.

I enclose a picture of a courtyard with an Ouled Nail dancer standing in the doorway. Her name is Daouia.

My great love to you both,

Nancy



# Bou-Saâda

## Cité du Bonheur

Extracts from a book by Léon Lehuraux  
translated by Marianne Fournier

Although the book is modest in size, I asked Marianne to translate only those sections where Léon described the town and the Ouled Nail women who inhabit it. There is no date of publication on this edition of Léon's book, but it is certain that it was published long after the time he and Nancy were together in Bou-Saâda. That it was in Nancy's possession might suggest that he sent it to her, but he did not write in it as he had done in the travel book, so I presume Nancy obtained it from another source.

## Bou-Saâda, Cité du Bonheur



Once the dunes are crossed a miraculous apparition appears. Suddenly, out of the golden sand, an island of greenery presents itself. It is a stunning vision that seemingly explodes in torrents of light that is capable of burning both sky and earth.

This is the oasis of Bou-Saâda, la Cité du Bonheur, the city of happiness.

Arabic folklore is incredibly rich. The oriental imagination gives to all things something poetic, picturesque and magical. The name of each place, each village, each watering hole, originates from legends. They are local knowledge and they have been handed down through each succeeding generation. Here is the legend that is commonly told about the naming of Bou-Saâda.

In the first centuries of Islam, a powerful Arab tribe owned huge lands from the Hodna to the Mont des Ouled Nail. The people of this tribe were called Les Bedarna and their leader, Bel-Ouacha, was a fine example of *un homme de grande tente*.

The wandering tribe lived happily from the products of its herds and they blessed Allah, the great dispenser, for the gifts they received.

One day, a Cherif arrived from the mysterious and remote Seguiat-el-hamra and the whole tribe welcomed him courteously. The Cherif had been living a wandering life, travelling on the desert trails and going from douar to douar, but he could not resist the charm of the area where the Bedarna made their camp. Seduced by the abundance and clarity of the water, by the luxuriant vegetation and the beauty of the landscape, the holy man set up his tent near to the place where his hosts camped. It was at the bottom of the Djebel Massad, in Aiun-Defla, the well of oleander.

The holy man's name was Sliman ben Rabia and all this happened in the sixth century of the Hegire, which is the twelfth century of our era.

Soon after Sliman joined the Bedarna, a man named Si Tamer also arrived on this land. Some said he was dangerous, the chief of a gang of looters who had come to make trouble, but he was touched by divine grace and decided that here was the place he would settle. This bandit of the desert sent his criminal companions back to the western lands and made his camp close to the holy man.

As it happened, Si Tamer and Si Sliman lived peacefully together, surrounded by their hosts. They possessed significant knowledge and displayed generosity and a sense of justice and before long their saintly reputation began to spread across the whole land. From all over the Maghreb, numerous nomads visited the two hermits to receive a benediction.

One day, while the two marabouts and their disciples were looking for new land to cultivate, a female jackal suddenly appeared. The animal, usually very fearful and timid, came straight to the hermits and licked their hands. The holy group interpreted the event as a manifestation of Allah. They believed he was telling them to build their city in this place. The marabouts and their disciples bought the land from the Bedarna and proceeded to clear it, plant palm trees and build houses of dried clay.

The city grew rapidly and before long the inhabitants decided they should choose a name for their city. Uncharacteristically, Si Tamer and Si Slimane couldn't agree about the name and their days were filled with a constant round of argument. This continued until an insignificant incident put an end to their disagreements.

A caravan was passing and behind the camels came a woman, walking along with her dog. The dog suddenly ran off in a panic, moving in the opposite direction to the caravan.

The woman shouted to her dog, “Saâda! Saâda!” hoping it would respond to her plea and return.

Saâda means happiness. It was a revelation. To Si Tamer and Si Slimane, the word was the perfect omen for naming the city. The village was then named Bou-Saâda, which means City of Happiness. In this way all their indecisions were over.

To this day, Bou-Saâda retains its reputation for being a city of happiness. When we arrive here, we Europeans give up our blasé and sceptical qualities. The moment we see these cool shades, these abundant waters, this harmonious unity of habitation filled with life and happiness, we are instantaneously filled with enthusiasm. All around there are sterile dunes and dry mountains, but when we arrive in this place we can only think how good it would be to live here.”

Bou-Saâda fully deserves its beautiful and gracious name. Beauty contributes to the wellbeing to the soul and in this fortunate oasis, beauty abounds. No one could be insensible to the luxuriant orchards that emerge out of the golden, flowing plains that surround it.

An oued (a river) with fanciful banks runs through the palm grove and small amounts of water trickles among the stones and the pink bay trees.

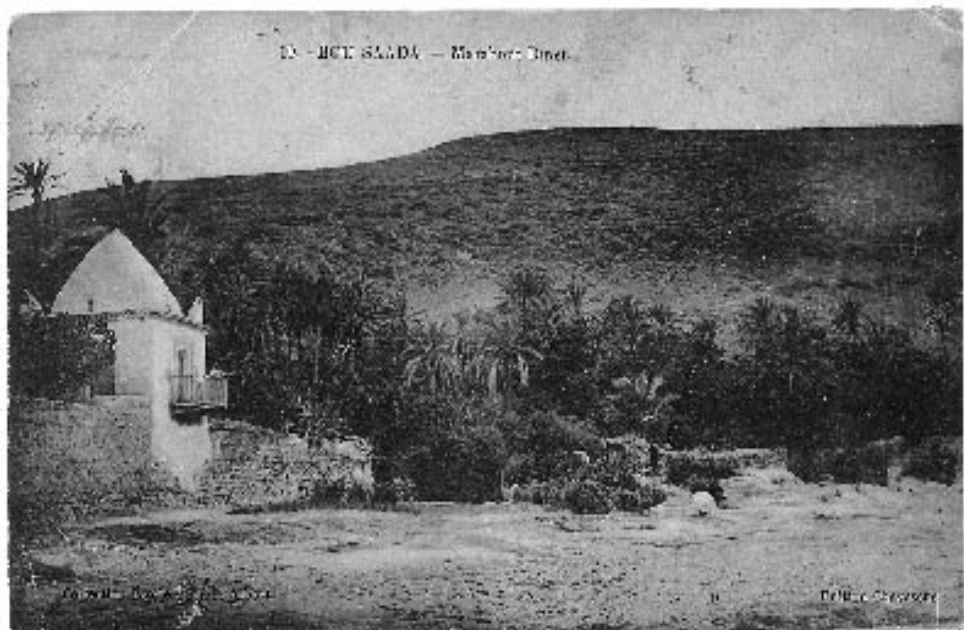
The tree which dominates the place, both in number and dimension, is the palm; it is the king of the oasis. Around it we can see pomegranates, vines, olives, peach, apricot and fig trees. Everywhere life is manifesting itself in all its exuberant magnificence. Golden marrow, green watermelon, henna, tobacco, melons, broad beans, carrots and onions, offer a symphonic mosaic of colours. The scene is illuminated by rays of light which shine through the thick drape of palms in the oasis.

On one bank of the oued, a whitewashed building draws our attention. It looks like one of the countless funeral monuments found on Muslim lands, a Marabout, where holy ascetics are buried, but this monument doesn't shelter the precious remains of a descendant of the Prophet. The one who came here bought it so that he could meditate and savour his Moorish coffee. He was a Frenchman named, Etienne Dinot, the one-time owner of



this land. He now rests in a Muslim Koubba next to the palm grove at the base of the mountains, in a building he constructed before his death. He was a great admirer of the South and loved this place.

Etienne Dinet was an artist of considerable talent. He was and remains the greatest of the painters who came to the Algerian South. He understood best of all the soul of the inhabitants of this area. Other artists left superb work depicting Bou-Saâda, but their concern was the landscape; Dinet wanted to portray the culture; to give expression to the men and the women living here. He was very successful in this quest and his extraordinary work appears to speak to us of ecstatic truths. The whole of Islam is in his painting; its beauty, its pride, its luxury, its misery, its poetry and its great melancholy. No one before Dinet ever captured the beauty of Arabic men with their burning eyes or Arabic women with their beautiful and provocative curves.



The life of Etienne Dinet reads like a novel. His first contact with Algeria amazed him, it captivated and bewitched him. Dinet embraced the Arabic life as another might embrace opium. It absorbed and magnetised him, causing him to modify his occidental psychology. The life here inspired new dreams.

The magic of colour is the secret of Algeria's indefinable charm. It is the hold that the South has on the souls infatuated by the beauty of its nature. By the sun's will, this melancholic country shines under the beautiful light of a festive sky.

When the day ends, the sky turns a lighter blue, becoming almost pink under an oblique shaft of light. The sun goes down rapidly, drawing purple shadows on the mountain sides. Calm follows the day's animated activity and in the defuse twilight all objects change like the mirage. Here we stay, completely still, without any other thought than the desire to fill our eyes with the prodigious vision that is about to disappear. Then the night expands, soft and voluptuous; the incandescent fairy sky, ablaze with thousands of stars, becomes beautiful jewellery that one can sit and contemplate for ever.

We must wake up early if we are not to miss the spectacular sunrise on the desert lands. Isabelle Eberhardt wrote this of it in her *Notes de route*.

"The red sun rises behind the mountains; they are draped in a light mist as though providing a veil of decency. The emerging rays hang like egrets of fire, lighting up the top of palm trees. The clay domes of the Marabouts seem to be made of gold. For a moment the old, tanned city is ablaze, charred by an internal flame. Below the gardens, the river and the narrow paths remain in shadow; they are vague and consumed by a blue smoke that makes the forms indistinct and the angles of things soft. Between the small law walls and the palm tree trunks, far-off mysteries are created."

## The Ouled Nail in Bou-Saâda



Among the crowd in Bou-Saâda, you will notice some women who walk in pairs. They come and go, smoking all the while. They are the residents of the dance hall and the guest-houses. You may watch as they make their preparations to perform choreographic exercises to the accompaniment of a picturesque orchestra.

The dance hall is full of locals waiting for the dancers to arrive. When they make their entrance, followed by the owner of the hall, the music explodes. All eyes are directed on the Nailiat; the local term for the Ouled Nail dancers. They are wearing dresses of glittering colours. They move very slowly to the centre of the room. This is the place where their daily performance begins. They show no expression on their faces.

Here they are, the desert women who have inherited such an extraordinary destiny. Their disturbing faces, sensual to the point of being animalistic, are full of fierce charm. The Nailiat is the biblical courtesan. She exudes aromatic herbs and covers herself in superstitious amulets and jewellery. She is the voluptuous goddess with her wet, slick skin and her young

panther's musculature. Her eyes are thoughtless and her laughter is both tender and cruel. Yes, she is here; passive and crafty, arrayed like an idol in copper and stones. These Nailiat most certainly carry the symbolism of cults that have subsequently vanished.

The dancer's hair is now floating gently in the air. It's like the mane of a beast of Libya. The henna on their hands, red as flames, captivates their worshippers. The male audience, feline humans, become locked in silent contemplation; feeling all the attraction, all the madness of their desperate instincts.



The air is filled with smoke. The Nailiat enter the circle formed by the audience. They come alone or in pairs. Their eyes are darkened with kohl and tattoos embellish their forehead, cheeks and hands. They are wearing long necklaces, heavy bracelets and enormous earrings. An aerial profusion of hair, framed with black plaits, stands above their faces.

They move slowly, as though another hierarchy of laws governs their relation to gravity. They appear to be walking while dreaming, staring in front of themselves. Then the Nailiat cover their faces with their arms, an act that is a prelude to the love poems. Their faces, strangely, stay impassive, revealing no sign of the collective flames of passion.

Gradually, they move their entire body. The jewellery twitches and jingles to the sound of silver. Bellies perform swift actions and sudden changes and in this way the lascivious dance continues. Later, other dancers

arrive. The one who started the dance furtively leaves the stage and returns to drink mint tea. Encouraged by the complicity of the divine desert *clair de lune*, men and women join as couples and disappear into the Saharan night; another Saharan night.

Tomorrow we will go on a little trip to the plain of Hodna, a place beyond Bou-Saâda where the desert and its sun will reveal to us a cruel but exhilarating show. For now we remain in our city of happiness, away from the road that stretches like a long ribbon, straight and monotonous, through the uniformly flat plain.

“You rise up beneficial, oh Sun!” This was the invocation of the ancient Pharaoh, but in this area, it must be said that the contrary is true. The sun has delivered nothing but total, irreparable destruction and to perfect his work he gives wonderful illusions, mirages, to the miserable human beings who are lost in his despicable land.

We should remember what was said by M. Vaysettes, the wild traveller who went through the Hodna three quarters of a century ago;

“As far as the eye can see, nothing comes to interrupt the tiring monotony of these steppes; neither shade, vegetation or water. But wait, I am mistaken. Surely that is water I see in the four corners of the horizon. It stretches as far as the mountains. The surface of its quiet waves is beautiful, more azure than the Mediterranean Sea and whiter than the great vaulted sky. It reflects green trees and villas, grand castles and villages and there in the distance I can see luxuriant chains of islands. We advance, but suddenly the waters disappear. Instead of finding green trees, where we hoped to rest, we find only a clod of earth and poor shrub land. Everything has run away and disappeared. The promise was a bitter deception. It is a mirage.”

In the distance, an Arab is chanting psalms. His monotonous song vanishes in the vast plain like the high pitched sound of a flute.

We do not know any more if it's a dream or a reminiscence of the past. Maybe, we are actually seeing the eternal life of nomads as we imagined them from the Bible stories.

The solitude of the desert on an African evening is unique. We will faithfully remember it when it is time to say goodbye and return to civilisation, to our tormented life in the big cities where the hours are too short to accomplish all our duties.

## Closing Comments by the Authors

These are the documents Bérénice had at her disposal to make a portrait of her great grandmother. Now we must complete our narrative. It was a simple enough task to get it underway; an invitation was made, the authors declared their availability and connections were quickly established. Contributions from each of the collaborators followed soon after and we listened as the connections between us developed.

We have seen our identities grow within the group and all agree that the collective position is preferable to the solitary one. The expectation that individuals must somehow shine out or forever give up the possibility of knowing themselves, is never an attractive proposition. Like an orchestra we play different instruments, only together do we make the sound you hear in this book. It's like being a member of a tribe. We were, after all, seeking to get closer to an Algerian tribe.

Rilke put it like this: "When two or three persons gather together, it doesn't necessarily mean that they were already together. Suddenly they become puppets, allowing their threads to be controlled by different hands. As soon as they agreed to be handled by one hand a community occurred. The combined strength of the group is then directed at these new hands."

In our case the singular hand was our willing sensibility to make a journey together. It was at times a complex journey; not all of us had visited this land before and for those who had, the places no longer exist as they once did. We visited a vanished time and a vanished place, witnessing the beauty of a certain Algeria that once was.

Travelling back into the past is an intricate adventure for the imagination. Most commonly the journey is a solitary one and the pleasures it invites come close to indulgent nostalgia. This is a longing for things we have never experienced. Alone, we discover no personal mementos and never come across anyone to meet us. If the place we have been seeking has long been forgotten, then the solitary traveller may become despondent. By undertaking the adventure together we have managed to avoid the dangers of wandering solitude and we have shared the pleasures that a journey into the past offers.

We went to Algeria like invisible companions of Léon and Nancy and we saw everything we wished to see. We forgot time and the fatality of History. We allowed ourselves to belong to the mirage we've created.

Agreeing to meet and being met is what happened to us, but others also joined our ranks, while staying on the periphery of our activity. Our honorary guests shared and contributed to our fictional discoveries and became accustomed to the ways coincidences fed us. They contributed by being close and by listening to the discussions. Kheira Fasse even made the journey to Bou-Saâda for us, because we could not do so; her quest was not to record it, but simply to go there while thinking of us, mindful of our invitation to each other and our shared ambition.





## Credits and References

The images in this book come from the following sources:

1. The postcard collection of Dominique Fasse
2. A series of magazines entitled *Algeria* published by OFALAC in the 1950's. Printed by Baconnier
3. *Lehnert and Landrock – Orient 1904 –1930*, Henri Favrod and André Pouvinez. Editions Marval, Paris 1999
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7. Arrival in Algiers on page 82, by A. Khelil, Alger

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## Images of the Ouled Nail Dancers











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