



THE AZEROU TALETAT
(6370 FEET)
IN THE JEBEL JURJURA

From a Photograph

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ACROSS THE KABYLE HIGHLANDS.

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(WITH A NOTE BY DOUGLAS W. FRESHFIELD.)

A FEW notes on a recent tramp amongst the mountains and valleys of the Kabyles may possibly interest some readers of the ALPINE JOURNAL as supplementing those furnished by Mr. D. W. Freshfield under the heading of 'An Ascent in the Lesser Atlas.' These, which appeared in the number for August, 1886,* were the stimulus to my own little expedition, and I hope that a brief description of the latter may, in its turn, help to incite other visitors to Algeria to include this charmingly picturesque district in their tour.

After five weeks spent in the Canaries, and two or three in southern Spain, I crossed from Malaga to Oran, and thence made my way *viâ* Tlemçen, Miliana, Hammam R'hira, and Blidah to Algiers, where I communicated my plans to our well-known and most courteous and accomplished Consul-General, Sir R. Lambert Playfair, K.C.M.G., whose house is a focus of all that is interesting and hospitable in that city. On mentioning that I proposed to make a walking tour of two or three days through the mountainous country north of the Jurjura range between the Oueds Sebaou and Sahel, and over a portion of the route followed by Mr. Freshfield, he strongly advised me to devote a little more time to the expedition, and aim rather at covering fresh ground, or ground which at least had not been traversed, he believed, by Englishmen since his own journey in 1875, described in the fourth chapter of his 'Travels in the Footsteps of Bruce.'

Gladly adopting the friendly counsel of such an authority, I proceeded through the night of April 15 to Menerville and

* Vol. xiii. pp. 40, 41.

Tizi-Ouzou by a diligence whose *intérieur*, *banquette*, and roof were occupied by some twenty-five Kabyles returning to their native hills for the haymaking season. Tizi-Ouzou was reached in 13½ hours at 6.30 on the following morning, and then came an uphill drive in an omnibus of nearly five hours, involving an ascent of some 2,200 feet, to Fort National, situated at an elevation of 3,005 feet upon the new road which is in course of construction, and is expected to be completed before long, across the Jurjura by the Col de Tirourda to Beni Mansour in the valley of the Oued Sahel. The morning was wet, but there was a temporary lull in the steady and rather hopeless-looking downpour in the course of the afternoon, which permitted a stroll, and enabled me to get some lovely glimpses of the extraordinary and complicated system—characteristic of the scenery of all this region—of valleys and ridges crowned by picturesque villages whose red-tiled roofs occasionally caught fugitive gleams of sunshine. Soon the mists closed again round the mountain fortress, and still wrapped it in their folds on the morning of the 17th.

The day, however, gradually improved, and, determined not to lose it in inaction, I set off at noon up the high road with a Kabyle guide, named Mohammed Naït Si Umahad, and a mule for my baggage—a Spanish *alforja*—our destination being Aïn Hammam, twenty kilomètres distant and a walk of three and a-quarter hours. An establishment frequented principally by people connected with the works of the new road, and called 'Hôtel des Touristes,' furnished humble but adequate accommodation, and, as the sky cleared and the setting sun gilded some twenty-five villages, seated astride of the crests and ridges, and gave hopes of a return to settled weather, my spirits rose and I slept in peace, disturbed only at times by the snoring of a road inspector who shared my bedroom.

On the 18th I awoke to a cloudless sky and superb view of the noble range of the Jurjura, now for the first time fully visible, as it stood out with marvellous sharpness after the rain, sparkling in the morning air, and clad with an amount of snow which gave it the appearance of a much greater elevation than it can really lay claim to, its loftiest point, Tamgout Lalla Khadija, being only 2,308 mètres (7,572 feet) in height. The keen, clear mountain air was most refreshing and stimulating, and at six I was off in high spirits. Further on there was a point on our route from which I counted fifty-six villages all visible at once. The landscape

reminded me irresistibly of a bit of Corsica, and more especially the district of La Castagniccia, the similarity of position in the villages of the two countries being probably due to the same reasons—greater salubrity and defensibility—and perhaps most of all to the absence of suitable sites on the steep slopes and in the narrow bottoms of the deep ravines, where the river-bed often constitutes the only level space. The bright green of the young barley was exquisitely beautiful and refreshing to the eye, and olives, ashes, ever-green oaks, and fig-trees added richness and charm to the smiling landscape.

We followed the well-engineered new road for about seven kilomètres and then, instead of proceeding up it to the *maison cantonnière* at the northern foot of the Col de Tirourda, and thence *viâ* Soumar, as Colonel Playfair's party did in the reverse direction, we struck off to the left by a good bridle-path, skirted the flank of an ilex-covered hill, and reached a picturesque but filthy Kabyle village on the further shoulder. A descent of some 1,600 feet by a rough track winding down amongst huge olives and amidst the richest verdure, brought us to a torrent, which was forded by the help of the mule carrying my *alforja*. Then followed a somewhat similar ascent on the other side, during which a halt was called for a second breakfast in a charming nook close to a welcome spring. Lively parties of Kabyles with donkeys, mules, sheep, and cows passed us on their way to a village market, and all greeted me with a friendly *bon jour*, which I fancy was, in many cases, the limit of their knowledge of French.

Then we went on and up to a most picturesque place—but dirty as all the Kabyle nests are in this the district of the Zouaouas (whence Zouave is derived)—Ti-Filkouth, dropped down 500 feet or so a second time to another stream, and then mounted steadily through delicious lanes beneath shady ashes, olives and ilexes, to Ait Aziz and the Col de Chellata (4,905 feet), a pass over the Jurjura further to the east than that of Tirourda, and commanding a splendid profile view of the range which Colonel Playfair considers to be scarcely equalled in all Algeria. A short distance below on the further or eastern side was a copious spring of delicious water, at which we halted for a meal, and were joined by various bands of passing Kabyles with their flocks, some of them really grand-looking fellows. My guide subsequently got rather confused about the track, which split up into several smaller ones, and certainly was puzzling; but after some *détours* we came out all right, and reached the military post of

Akbou in the valley of the Oued Sahel at five, where I found very comfortable quarters in a little *café* with a dash of inn about it.

Mohammed my guide, who was of the Zouaoua tribe, had proved a very decent fellow, walking excellently, and speaking French with ease ; but on proceeding to discuss arrangements for the morrow, I was surprised to find him averse to going on with me to Bordj-bou-Arreidj through the country of the Beni-Abbas on the other or eastern side of the valley of the Sahel, on the ground that, though he would be safe in my company, he might probably be attacked on his return, and, at any rate, have his mule stolen. Finding that this view was confirmed by the people at Akbou (as it subsequently was by the *garde forestier* at Bordj Boni), I agreed to release him from what I had supposed to be our original arrangement, and secured instead a mule from the village, and a powerfully-built negro, Lakdar Ben Mohammed, who was recommended as the strongest man in those parts, and as such well known and feared.

So at seven on the 19th we started for Bordj Boni, a sort of mountain fort, *maison forestière*, and farm combined, *viâ* Ighil (pronounced Iril) Ali, which, with Tizairt and Azrou, forms the largest village group in Kabylia. The day was superb, and I looked forward with much interest to visiting the little frequented region before me. Soon after quitting Akbou we passed on an isolated conical hill a large Roman tomb, which is very conspicuous for miles around. Traversing the flat valley bottom for a couple of hours, and crossing the river, which, though nowhere deep, was of considerable width, we ascended over undulating ground covered extensively with olives, passing quaintly-perched villages surrounded by a dense growth of cactus traversed by a single path, which would offer serious obstacles to an attacking force. Behind us the view of the plain in its brilliant spring greenery, backed by the snow-clad peaks of the Jurjura range, became increasingly beautiful as we ascended. The ground often seemed very arid, but showed evidences of industrious cultivation, though a better supply of water is required to make it really productive. The villages are in every way superior to those north of the Jurjura, many of the houses being two-storied and of much better construction, with some attempts at architectural effect and, occasionally, arcaded fronts which look very effective and relieve the uniformity. Unlike those of the Zouaouas, the roofs are dullish in colour instead of red, which of course dimi-

ishes the picturesque effect, but nothing can detract from the charming position which they occupy. This was the season of oil-making, as it seems that the olives produce a much larger quantity after being kept through the winter, and I saw the rather grimy operation going on in more than one place.

At eleven we reached a sort of sloping isthmus between the two great villages of Ighil Ali and Tizairt, separated by an interval of scarcely 200 yards, and halted at a *café* till 12.20. From thence the road wound up past weird rocks and gorges and along the face of the hill behind, commanding splendid views, and then, crossing a col over a spur, we traversed a sort of rolling plateau the soil of which was almost perfectly bare of all vegetation except Aleppo pines, evergreen oaks, and fine oleanders wherever streams appeared. The rock formations were most curious, sometimes resembling the vertebræ of fishes sticking out of the ground, or arranged staircase fashion, and at others set perpendicularly on their edges like gigantic lumps of streaky bacon. In places we went along through the bottom of a sort of gutter, only a foot or two wide, worn deeply in the soil by ages of traffic and the action of water, the steep sides cutting off all view; and in such a spot, near the village of Mouka, the *garde forestier*, my host of that night, told me that assassinations were frequent, the Arabs coming up and waylaying and murdering the Kabyles for the sake of their mules.

At last we came in sight of the Bordj, high up in the pine woods to our left, but what with descents into hollows and all sorts of twists and turns, not to mention the considerable altitude to be attained (for the fortified enclosure, or 'Bordj,' of Boni is some 3,800 feet above the sea), the ascent seemed endless. However, when at last I arrived, I had the heartiest possible reception from the excellent Corsican *garde forestier*, Rinucci, who made me promise to stay two nights, in order thoroughly to see the extraordinary Kabyle village and mountain fortress of Geläa (or Kaläa), some distance to the north. He was delighted with my praise of his native land, and pleased to find that I knew his village and neighbourhood; but the establishment was not in exactly the most fitting state to receive a guest, as the poor wife, besides suffering sadly from toothache, was momentarily expecting her confinement, and an Italian woman of *Servavezza*, who had come up to assist from Ighil Ali with her husband and a sickly squealing child, was down with intermittent fever; whilst, out of doors, a panther had taken the

opportunity to make a raid on the sheep, and when they were shut up in the courtyard at night could be heard, in spite of the fury of the dogs, growling and clawing at the doorway! Poor Rinucci seemed sorely beset, and I believe it was a real relief to him to have some one to sympathise and talk to. I was also able to be of some practical use by prescribing cotton wool soaked in whiskey for the wife's tooth, and supplying a dozen quinine pills to the sick Italian, the benefit of which was already apparent before I left; whilst magnesium wire, conjuring tricks, &c., helped to keep the children quiet, and were not despised by their elders or the Kabyles, of whom one or two families had quarters in the enclosure.

To my surprise I learned that, besides wild boars, which abound in the ilex woods, and panthers, which are the most dangerous of all the wild beasts of the country, sometimes even attacking men, lions still exist in this particular district, and Rinucci informed me that one was seen only two days before in the pastures, some 300 yards distant. I suppose there can be no doubt of the fact, but somehow the larger and rarer *feræ naturæ* seem to have a bad habit of putting in an appearance a day or so before the arrival or after the departure of a stranger. A dead donkey, as a decoy for the panther, lay 100 yards from the house opposite a small *gourbi*, or hut, with a couple of holes for shooting through, and an Arab was stationed there that night, and saw and fired at but missed the beast, who, however, was so bold that he returned after the man had left, and tore off the hind legs of the victim, as I saw next morning. The position of the Bordj, on a lofty plateau surrounded by forest and commanding a superb view of the Jurjura, is very fine and the air keen and healthy.

All retired for the night about nine, but, so far as I was concerned, it proved by no means a restful one. A bed had been made up for me in the kitchen, between the room occupied by my host and his wife and that given up to the Italians, and a big Italian boy and two puppies lay on the floor. The watch-dogs barked furiously at short intervals, at any rate during the earlier portion of the night; cows gave expression to their feelings; sheep and goats cleared their throats; two geese shrieked out of tune; the lad snored prodigiously and then choked, going off like a geyser at irregular intervals; the two puppies apparently spent most of the night in licking themselves or one another; and the baby yelled, whilst its father and mother sang to it by

turns! I never remember such a discord, but I dropped off at last, and contrived to repeat the process when again and again roused.

I was glad to turn out at six on the morning of the 20th into the clear, fresh, frosty air, and get a good wash, and then my host dismissed my negro and mule, promising to supply substitutes the next day, and at 7.45 I started with a Kabyle—a young married gentleman of twelve!—to pay a visit to Hamed Ben Mouzian, the great Sheikh of Geläa, who is a man of much influence throughout the district. It seemed odd to have such a lad for protector in this out-of-the-way region, but, though we passed by most extraordinary paths through the wildest and most lonely scenery, and met troops of natives, I felt as perfectly safe as if I were in the Alps.

It is a really marvellous walk of $1\frac{3}{4}$ hours by narrow ridges and tracks carried along precipitous slopes of rock of fantastic shape, with wonderful views down into magnificent ilex- and pine-clad gorges, through one of which a wild boar scuttled out of sight far beneath us. The peaks around were of picturesque form, and glorious distant peeps kept opening out on one hand or the other, and my boy sang Kabyle songs and chattered unintelligibly to me, his knowledge of French being apparently limited to the numerals up to twenty. After various ups and downs and turnings, reminding me of the path between La Laguna and Taganana in the north of Teneriffe, we reached the highest point of the sloping cliff-surrounded plateau on which the upper and lower villages of Geläa are placed, and looked down upon them and over a wide extent of country.

Descending to the upper village, my guide took me to the large and ancient-looking *café* where the Sheikh was said to be, and there we found a grand old gentleman, who received me in the most courteous and hospitable manner. I was soon presented with a cup of delicious coffee as we sat and chatted, whilst Kabyles in their picturesque costume listened around, or played draughts or cards. The apartment was spacious—some 45 by 30 feet, perhaps—and the roof, whose timbers were blackened by age and smoke, was supported by an ilex-trunk and a thick stone column. Presently the Sheikh disappeared, but soon returned with another man who spoke French rather more fluently, and then we started for a walk to see the village rock cisterns, mosque, &c., and gazed down the great precipices upon the ravines and valleys beneath, looking like a sort of petrified sea in their strange billowy surface.

The manufacture of burnouses is the special industry of the place, so I went to see a woman at work, and was told that it would take her forty-five days to complete one. The thinner and commoner sorts for summer use cost from 20 to 30 francs, but the finer qualities, and those of heavier substance suitable for winter wear, fetch 40 to 50, and, in exceptional cases, as much as 100. I bought a fairly good one for 30 francs as a souvenir, and it is a garment by no means to be despised for camping out. The French supply a machine-made article for 10 to 15 francs, but these have nothing like the wear of the native make. Next I was conducted to the Sheikh's house, whither he had preceded me, and saw the curious receptacles called 'Zarâas,' made of Alfa or Esparto grass, in which the Kabyles store their barley or other grain, sometimes for as long a period as 50 years, and it keeps perfectly good in the dry, cool mountain air. They are like gigantic bottles without the necks, some 10 to 12 feet high, and 5 to 6 feet in diameter, and are supported on a wooden stage, in order to keep them safe from mice, and well-ventilated and free from damp. In some houses several are met with, and I think the Sheikh had three, two quite full and the third partially so.

It became gradually apparent that the Sheikh was having a meal prepared for me, and soon an excellent soup with vermicelli and of the colour of tomatoes was served. I found that the colour and really delicious flavour were imparted by a mixture of powdered dry apricots and pepper. Good mutton was next served, and then delicious 'couscous' with some of the soup for sauce, the *menu* being completed by a sweetmeat of honey and dates, which was more curious than nice to one who remembered Mr. Ormsby's suggestive comparison of 'cockroaches and treacle.' I gave the attendant, privately as I thought, two francs, but the Sheikh somehow found it out, and ordered him to return it. When, however, I presented the old gentleman with a genuine Norsk knife in a metal-mounted sheath, and told him that I should not have dreamt of offering *him* money for his great hospitality, but that I trusted he would accept the little offering as a souvenir, his eyes glistened with pleasure, and he at once permitted me to replace the coin in his servant's hand. On telling the *garde forestier* of this, he remarked, 'Mais, vous avez bien donné votre beau couteau à ce vieux coquin-là? Tiens! Il va faire payer à chaque maison 40 centimes pour les frais du petit déjeuner qu'il vous a offert,

et il en retirera 100 francs, ou bien 150. Il est assez bon garçon, c'est vrai, mais il est bien fin !'

Taking my leave of Hamed Ben Mouzian, I started at 12.30, and returned to Bordj Boni at 2.15, M. Rinucci arriving a little later from an appointment at some distance, which had prevented his accompanying me to Gelâa, as he otherwise would have done.

He told me that the Arabs and Kabyles cure rheumatism, even in very confirmed and obstinate cases, most successfully though in a somewhat painful manner, by a sort of modified actual cautery, and he knew of some Frenchmen who had derived the greatest benefit from the treatment. They heat a dozen of their small reaping-hooks to redness, and, rapidly and lightly touching the part affected with them in succession, afterwards apply pitch to the partially burnt or browned surface.

At night a watch was again set for the panther; but he was on his guard, and, though his growls were heard close at hand, he had not sufficient courage to venture up to the remains of the donkey. I passed a better night, as the noises were much less frequent and distracting, and I had become more accustomed to the medley, and at 7.45 on the morning of the 21st I started with an Arab and a mule, and accomplished the walk of forty-five kilomètres (twenty-eight miles) to the railway station of Bordj-bou-Arreridj, in superb weather, doing the distance entirely on foot in seven hours, including forty-five minutes' halt for luncheon. For the first hour the forest scenery was charming, but afterwards the route became comparatively uninteresting. My Arab, who was a very inferior pedestrian to Mohammed the Kabyle, complained of the rate and the distance, so I let him ride the baggage-mule from time to time, and he made himself much at home and even patronised my umbrella, whilst I tramped ahead in my shirt-sleeves to keep up the pace, as it would not have done to miss the train to Setif, there being only one in the twenty-four hours.

Thus ended an extremely pleasant little expedition, full of novelty and variety both as respects the landscape and the very interesting human element, for further descriptions of which I would refer the reader to Col. Sir L. Playfair's work already cited and Mr. Edgar Barclay's charming '*Mountain Life in Algeria.*'