



THE MOSQUES OF TLEMCCEN.

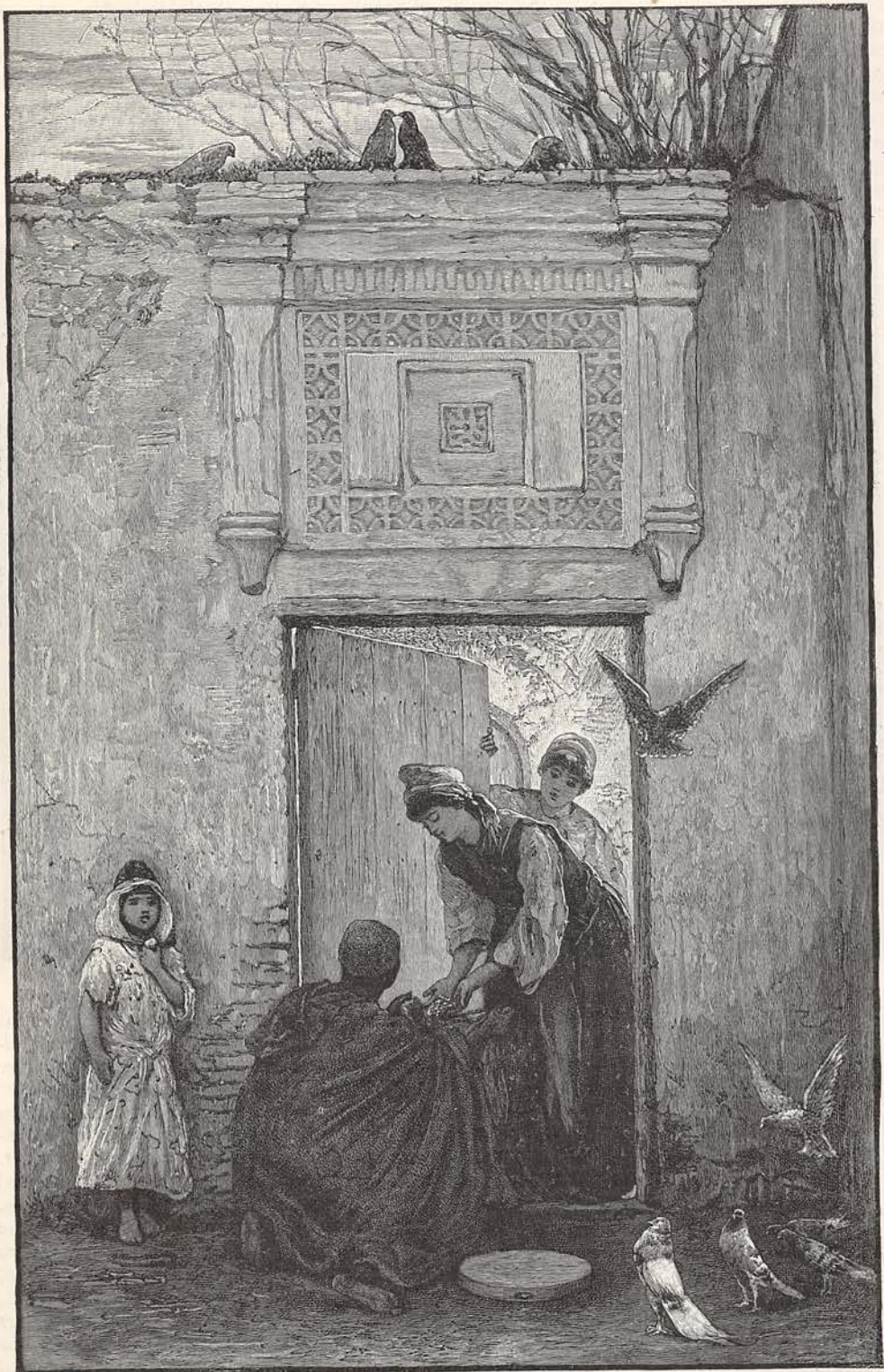
Written and Illustrated by EDGAR BARCLAY.



T was not until I visited Tlemcen that I realized how thoroughly Saracenic in character are the towns of the islands in the Bay of Naples. Those who have visited Procida, Ana, Capri, or Forio in the island of Ischia, can perfectly picture the appearance of the Hadhar. In the streets of Tlemcen however the uniformity of white wall is relieved here and there by some piece of architectural elegance. The illustration given of a doorway is an example. Whilst sketching this subject, a poor negro sat on the ground strumming a tambourine and singing for alms; in response, the mistress of the house opened her door and poured figs into a bag which the negro kept ready to receive such gratuities. The incident was concluded in a moment, and the action caused by thus giving in kind instead of in money, realized the biblical expression relating to the good wife, "She reacheth forth her hands to the needy."

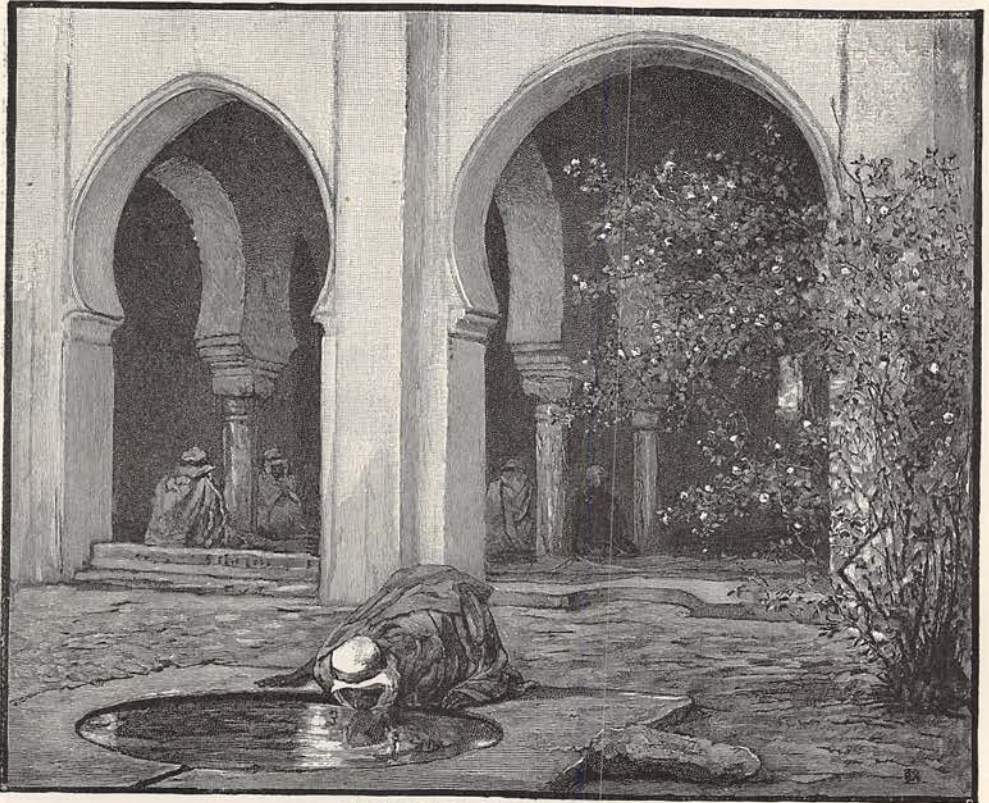
The glory of Tlemcen lies in its mosques. An Arab record shows that sixty-one formerly adorned the city, but of this imposing list I could only discover ten. The more important of these structures are planned upon similar lines. They are oblong enclosures, externally plain white walls, the minaret and grand portal being the only decorative features. The chief entrance, at one end, leads to an open court, in the centre of which is a fountain, and on three of its sides a corridor with arched colonnade, in the manner of a mediæval cloister. On the fourth, the one opposite the entrance, is the mosque proper, "El Jamad," the place of assembly. This is usually open to the court, and consists in a series of horseshoe arches that support a flat roof, and springing from successive rows of low columns that run at right angles to those which constitute the façade of the mosque. In the outer wall, in the depth of the building, is the "mihrab," or sanctuary, a semicircular recess with vaulted roof; and close to this is the "mimbar," or pulpit, from which the "Imam" leads the chaunt of the Koran. The illumination is chiefly derived from the outer court, which, flooded with intense sunlight, sheds a soft glow of reflected light throughout the mosque. To aid in relieving the obscurity of its depths, the outer wall is pierced with small windows artistically designed. They are delicate perforations in white plaster, combined in beautiful patterns. Their effect depends upon the proportion that the dimensions of the openings bear to the thickness of the plaster. The light passes through a network of white passages, or so to say little tunnels; these only admit direct light from a distance. Thus seen, a window presents the appearance of a constellation of stars glittering in the gloom; upon a nearer approach the effect is softened, the light being reflected from the white plaster forming the sides of the perforations. The appearance is then very beautiful. The mosques give an impression of size in excess of real dimensions, partly owing to their harmonious proportions, but also to the fact that the supporting columns or piers are short. This lowness is in keeping with oriental manners, as the worshippers squat upon the carpeted floor.

The most beautiful of the mosques is one named El Jamaa Sidi Bon Medeen, situated about a mile and a half distant from Tlemcen, at Hubbad. It has a beautiful minaret, an attractive feature in the landscape when approached by the winding path that leads up to the village. The front of the great portal is enriched with a gem-like mosaic of glazed tiles, elaborate in design and perfect in execution, each tile being carefully cut to its required shape, and fitted to its place with precision. A few steps lead up to the lofty porch, domed and honeycombed; the massive doors are of cedar, covered with bronze wrought into an open geometric pattern of great intricacy. An inscription commemorates the foundation, and runs thus:—"Praise be to God! This



“SHE REACHETH FORTH HER HANDS TO THE NEEDY.”

blessed mosque was erected by the orders of our lord Sultan Abd'Allah Aly, the son of our lord Sultan Abou Said Othman, the son of our lord Sultan Abou Yacoub, the son of Abd el Hack, whom may God console and comfort, in the year 739 H. [1361 A.D.] For this work may they derive profit and honour at the hand of God." The white walls of mosque and cloister are completely covered with a fretwork ornamentation carved in the plaster, a marvel of beauty and wealth of design. The varying play of light reflected amongst the arches enhances the charm of this lace-like and exquisite decoration. The cedar roof is embellished with the addition of gold and bright colours. Attached to the mosque is a college now disused, and inscriptions record numerous endowments of land, set apart by former rulers for its maintenance.

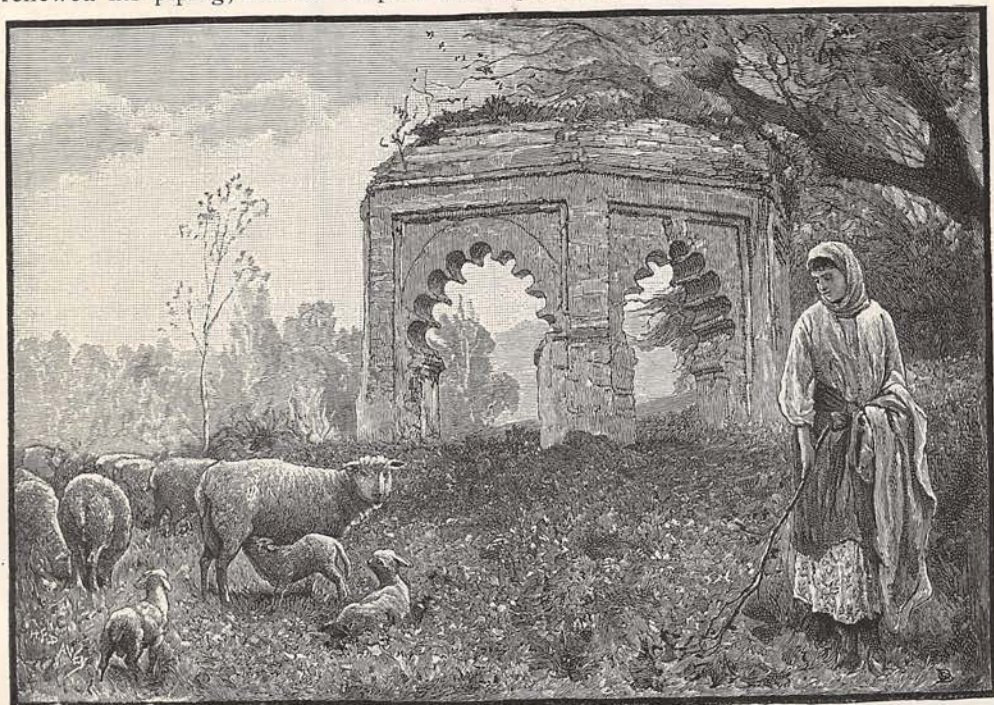


THE MOSQUE OF SIDI HALONI.

Facing the porch, but on a lower level on the hill-side, a small enclosed space contains various graves, and a kouba, or mortuary chapel, where lie the remains of two celebrated saints, Sidi Abd-es-Salem, who died 1211 A.D., and the patron saint, Sidi Bon Medeen, who died 1216 A.D.

To the south of Tlemccen there is a depression in the mountain barrier which forms a line of demarcation between the Tell and the Sahara, that is to say between the corn-producing country, and the pastures of the table-land that extends towards the desert. This valley is well cultivated, water is plentiful, and a stream is utilized by several mills. In the upper part, where the cliffs encroach upon the terraced olive gardens, "masarie," as they would be called in Southern Italy (a word derived from the Saracens, meaning a place for the pressing of fruit), are numerous caverns, where shepherds pen their flocks and herds by night. When examining some ruined koobas, domed buildings erected over graves, situated in this part amidst a tangle of fig trees, my attention was suddenly diverted by hearing a song shouted with eccentric violence close by me, each verse alternated with notes played on a pipe. I soon espied the minstrel, a well-featured young man, but with an expression of countenance so wild that it at once assured me he was demented. He had undone his girdle, and having fastened it to the boughs of a fig tree growing before the mouth of a cave, where (as

I subsequently learnt) he dwelt, was swinging himself upon it. I had produced my sketch book, when a garrulous old Arab at work amongst the olives approached, and, giving me credit for a knowledge of Arabic I little deserved, offered an explanation of the strange spectacle. I was unable to follow his story, but noted that he made frequent use of the word meaning woman. Afterwards, I often saw the daft piper playing and singing in the city, and learnt that once he had been in comfortable circumstances, but through some misfortune being suddenly ruined, his reason became unhinged. I discovered too that he was a favourite with the children. Sketching one day in an open space of the town, he appeared, and commenced piping. Quickly the doors of the neighbouring houses flew open, and a crowd of eager children gathered round him. He flung sweetmeats amongst them, causing a general scramble, then renewed his piping, and as the poor fellow passed through the city gate homeward



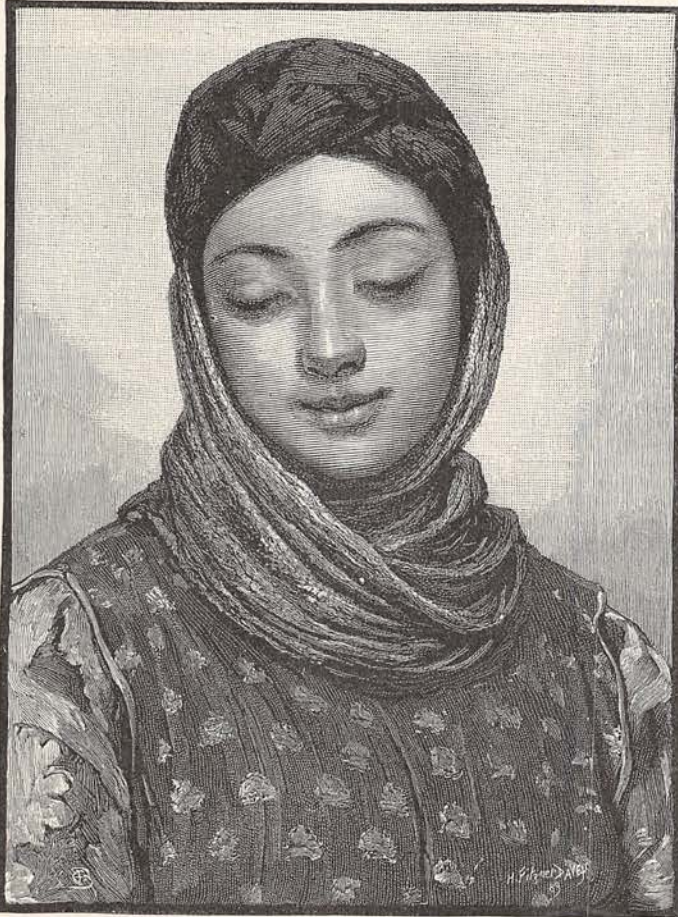
RUINED TOMB AT AGADIR.

bound to his solitary cave, the gay and brightly dressed children streamed after him; a pretty sight, and one that reminded me of the legendary piper of Hamelin.

A Moorish author, Ibn Dehak el Aousy, a native of Spain, relates the following story of the saint Sidi el Haloni, to whom a very beautiful mosque at Tlemcen is dedicated. He says: "When sojourning in this city I one morning saw the sheik with a basket on his arm, occupied in selling candied almond cake to a crowd of children, and to the destitute he gave away wheaten cakes. When the children thronged round about him, he pirouetted, danced, spun round like a whirligig, and sang verses in praise of charity." "Beholding him act thus," continues our author with enthusiasm, "I doubted not, but that the sheik belonged to the company of Saints and Friends of God." The poor piper I have mentioned distributed his sweetmeats with all gravity—I conceive that he regarded the act as one incumbent on his calling; that, upon finding his worldly prospects blighted, he determined to embrace the long neglected and now discredited profession of anchorite, that he followed this calling with commendable zeal, and his adoption of grotto, mendicity, psalmody, and the sweetmeat business, prove his thoroughgoing spirit.

Agadir, the site of ancient Tlemcen, is situated in a wood of olive, walnut, elm, and ash, at a short distance north-east of the present city, and beneath the village of Hubbad already described. At one time Tlemcen was composed of two separate towns situated close to one another. The most ancient of these was named Agadir, a

Berber word meaning the ramparts, the other was named Tagrart, Berber for camp; the latter is modern Tlemcen, a name derived from two Berber words Tilim (it unites) and Cin (two). Yahia ben Kaldoun, who gives this derivation, considers that the name applies to the situation of the town, uniting as it does the Sahara with the Tell. Leaving the town by the eastern or Oran gate, and passing some market-gardens, at the distance of less than half a mile a point is reached where a brook flows at the bottom of a wooded gorge. Here the ancient crenelated walls of Agadir remain in good preservation. Numerous picturesque tombs are dispersed amongst the trees, and nameless masses of ruin bear witness to the former city.



A JEWESS.

The broken nature of the ground, the luxuriant vegetation, the extended views, the various ancient remains, combine to give a romantic charm to this neighbourhood.

Agadir was founded by Edrissite Arabs; the date is not clear. According to Gibbon, Edris founded a dynasty at Fez, 829 A.D. He erected a mosque at Agadir, which was restored and a minaret added by the Berber Sultan Yarmoracen 1255 A.D. This tower is well preserved; the lower portion is built of solid blocks of masonry taken from some unknown Roman building. This is proved by various inscriptions on stones built into the walls, and we learn from these and other sources that as early as the reign of the Emperor Caracalla, a Roman camp was fixed at this spot, which was named Pomaria, the place of fruits. In this quarter numerous epitaphs have been disinterred, showing that in the fifth century the Christian population was

considerable; and Christians continued to reside here long after the invasion of the Arabs. A Moorish writer of Cordova, Abou Obeid el Becry, says that in his day, 936 A.D., amongst the antique monuments of Tlemcen were several churches; and that at later date the sultans of Tlemcen had Christian troops in their pay is a fact proved not only from Arab but from Christian sources. A bull of Nicholas IV., 1290 A.D., commences thus:—"Nicholas, bishop, the servant of the servants of God, to his well-beloved sons, notables, barons, headmen, soldiers, and all other Christians who receive pay in the service of the kings of Morocco, Tunis, and Tlemcen."

In the year 1084 A.D. Agadir was besieged and conquered by an Almoravid king named Youssoug ben Teschifin. His camp, Tagrart, was the foundation of the present city of Tlemcen. A century later the town was again besieged by a chief named Abdel-Mouman, an Almohad, the name of a sect founded by an impostor who claimed to be Mahdi. Tagrart capitulated, but Agadir maintained itself for another four years, when this quarter was likewise taken by assault, and the rule of the Almohads estab-

lished. The conqueror repaired the fortifications of Agadir, surrounded the citadel Tagrart and the buildings gathered about it with a wall, and erected the grand mosque. Thus there were two fortified towns side by side, not a quarter of a mile distant the one from the other. In 1203 A.D. Abou Imran Mousa united them with a new wall, and a few years later Yarmoracen founded the Berber dynasty, some account of which has been already given, and which endured until the domination of the Turks. Under Berber rule, Tlemcen rose to importance, and is said to have contained a population of 100,000 souls. It was embellished with numerous buildings, and became noted for its manufacture of finely-woven fabrics, saddlery, and carpets. It was also the centre of an extended commerce. Caravans brought hither the produce of the far south, whilst



ARAB CHILDREN PLAYING MARBLES.

from the north, Genoese and Venetian merchants anchored their ships in its port of Mers el Kebir. Under Turkish domination the population of Tlemcen decreased and gathered more and more around the citadel, and the ancient quarter of Agadir fell into ruin and became the solitude we witness to-day. Such in brief terms is an outline of the fortunes of the city. First, a period of slow development, followed by the vicissitudes of repeated siege and conquest, until under a powerful dynasty it enjoyed an era of splendour and prosperity; then long centuries of slow decay; finally the advent of the French, when the genius of Abd el Kader imparts momentary lustre to the expiring fortunes of the Moors. In 1828 Abd el Kader, then a young man who had just completed a pilgrimage to Mecca with his father, returned to Tlemcen. The austere simplicity of his life, and daily visits to the tomb of Sidi Bon Medeen, soon gained him a reputation for piety, and when shortly after war with the French broke out, he was signalized by his audacity. In 1832 he attended a great gathering at Mascara, when he, then a penniless cavalier, was proclaimed leader of the Arab forces. On the 6th of June, 1836, he suffered a severe defeat on the banks of the Tafra, with the result that Marshal Bugeaud advanced and occupied the city of Tlemcen.