



Deux chasses avec des levriers, en France et en Algérie.

## Second part of an article published in "La Chasse Illustrée"

### "Hunt in Algeria" (Translated by Susan Bamford)

When I visited the province of Constantine for the first time, communications between sea and city were still slow, difficult, and perilous; Philippeville was just coming into existence, with an as yet barely marked out road linking this new port to ancient Roman Cirta. I returned here in 1843, and those few years had been sufficient to enable ammunition wagons and civilian carts to establish a regular service, and travellers to cover the eighty kilometres that separated the two towns without too much risk of being attacked by bands of Arab marauders, a situation maintained by their salutary fear of immediate reprisals.

General Négrier was in charge of the province at that time and had established French influence over these warlike and rambunctious populations, by calling in the tribal chiefs and making them jointly liable for any crimes carried out on their territory.

There is no call for me to discuss this here, but only to report on the results of such measures which had restored calm and safety to the country, for as far as our soldiers had shown their flag.

On the 1st of May, the Koudiat-Ati plateau provided a magical show.

To celebrate the Feast Day of king Louis-Philippe, all the province's chiefs hastened to appear, bringing with them hordes of riders. Weapons, embroideries of gold or silver almost totally concealing the velvets of their clothing, the Moroccan leather of their saddles, their *djébira*<sup>1</sup>, their gun and cartridge belts, were all gleaming in the sunlight, while the red *burnouses*<sup>2</sup> of the principal chiefs, the white *haïks*<sup>3</sup>, the silk canopies in

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<sup>1</sup> decorated leather bags

<sup>2</sup> long cloak of coarse woollen fabric with a hood, usually white in colour, worn by Berbers and Arabs throughout North Africa

<sup>3</sup> capes

vivid colours with which the horses were covered as in the good old days of tournaments, floated in the slightest gust of wind.

A gigantic parallelogram shape, on one of the edges of which had been erected a large tent for the governor, his staff and his guests, was about to be used as a racecourse or rather a battlefield; the fantasia would commence as soon as a cannon shot fired from the *Kasba* gave the signal.

At one end of the parallelogram, horse riders were grouped by tribes in solid masses, while the whole population - an indescribable mixture of costumes and skins of all possible hues - waited anxiously, held back with difficulty by *spahis*<sup>4</sup> and Moorish gendarmes spaced out at intervals along the ropes and posts forming a barrier.

Some Arab wrestlers were attracting scarcely any attention, when two negroes crossed the enclosed area, carrying on their shoulders an object covered with a piece of silk material, which they came and deposited a few paces in front of the governor's tent. Once the veil had been lifted off, there appeared a crudely constructed model steamship, mounted on four small wheels and painted in all the colours of the rainbow. The negro who had built it made a speech in lingua franca, placed a few lumps of lighted coal in the boat's hold, a black smoke came out from it, and once a starting handle had been turned, the wheels came majestically into movement; the steam powered boat was working, the crowd was applauding, and the triumphant negro was following it while capering about in a frenetic *bamboula*<sup>5</sup> dance, rolling his eyes and showing his large white teeth like piano keys. All of a sudden, the boat moved away at a speed of ten leagues an hour, stopped for a second, performed pirouette after pirouette, jumped, turned a somersault, leapt in the air; the negro rushed over and, at the very moment when he was about to seize it, was hit right in the belly by debris from the ill-fated steamship, which had just exploded like a bomb. Faced with this unexpected outcome, the spectators cheered madly, stamping their feet and clapping their hands! meanwhile the women filled the air with their shrill cries of yoo-yoo-yoo!! We were laughing like madmen, but the negro himself was not amused, and his *bamboula* dance was replaced by an energetic massaging of the affected part. He needed nothing less to console him than the approach of the governor's *chaouch*<sup>6</sup>, who handed him a sum of money in proportion to the mishap that had occurred, and he had scarcely disappeared from sight, slipping into the crowd, when a cannon shot from the *Kasba* sounded from afar: silence fell immediately, a deep and emotional silence, precursor to the main show - the Fantasia!

From the south side, the *goums*<sup>7</sup> were advancing at a walk, the various tribes positioned in order. We could still see only the gleams of weapons, the thousands of red, green or white pennants that were floating in the breeze like the banners of lancers; but soon the amazed eye was able to grasp the overall picture, the details, and I have never before been given occasion to see a scene more grandiose, more picturesque, more unexpected.

At the head of the procession, formed into a single line, marched the chiefs clothed in velvet, silk and gold, with their fine *haïks* held on their heads by twisted coils of camelhair, some brown or black, others fawn or almost white, held at the level of their cashmere belt by artistically knotted scarves, while two *burnouses*, one in fine white wool, the other red or black, elegantly thrown back, complemented the sumptuous costumes without hiding them from view.

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<sup>4</sup> soldiers of native cavalry corps of French army

<sup>5</sup> African dance accompanied by drums

<sup>6</sup> bailiff or usher

<sup>7</sup> native auxiliary unit in the French army

The eager horses, stamping their feet and champing at their bits, were barely visible under their harnessing of Moroccan leather covered with gold or silver embroideries, trimmings, tassels, crescents (some in gold, others made from boars' tusks), and under their saddlecloths of brown, golden yellow, dark red or sky-blue silk, embroidered with gold flowers, descending to their hocks. These noble warhorses seemed to identify with their proud riders who used their right hands to hold their long muskets embellished with inlays of pearl, coral, with wide barrel bands of hammered silver, and maintained upright with butts supported on the thigh.

After this first rank of elite troops, this staff of noble Arabs, walked the servants holding leashed sighthounds, true Sloughis, admirable for their strength and finesse, their necks encircled with women's necklaces of amber, coral, threaded *boudjous*<sup>8</sup>, also bearing small square bags made from embroidered leather, containing verses from the Koran, true talismans that only purebred horses and hounds had the right to wear. Next to the sighthounds, staying behind the master's horse, also walked the falconer - on his head the favourite falcon, on his wrist a second bird, both wearing elegant hoods that the women had covered with golden filigrees, tiny beads and fine feathers.

Twenty paces behind advanced the entire troop of the most famed warriors in the whole province, guns placed upright on their thighs, a proud and soldierly appearance. Only the clever brush of Mr. Fromentin could give an idea of the strange but harmonious view of all these vivid or sombre colours, of these gleaming weapons, of these strange hairstyles, smothered in ostrich feathers; of these thousands of different coloured horses, painted with henna, with their flowing manes and their tails touching the ground or carefully shaved down to the skin, marching in tight rows, without any apparent order, under a splendid sun from which the gold, iron, steel and silver took their sparkle, while the flags and pennants of each fraction of tribe swung with the rhythmic movement of this impressive march, so serious and full of majesty.

When arriving alongside the governor's tent, the long guns were tilted downward and the Arab flags were lowered, paying homage to French authority which alone in the course of thousands of years had been able to bring to peaceful assembly these formidable contingents, that even the Turks had never been able to overcome, and whose worthy sons I could see warming up before the enactment of battles, calm and serious before the action which was shortly to take place once the riders had returned to their first position.

At last, the field is free; in vain the Arab music batters our eardrums under a pretext of harmony, the full attention and the eyes of all spectators are focused far away; all of a sudden an extraordinary shriek reverberates - wild, strident, incomparable, unforgettable once heard, making one's heart shudder and tremble - this is a war cry uttered by warriors arriving at headlong speed; then there is gunfire sounding like thunder, wreaths of white smoke rising up in the air, a hundred riders seeming to flee before a large horde, although this flight does not stop the fighting since, in accordance with Arab methods, those being pursued stand up in their stirrups, twist the whole of their upper body around and fire off their weapons against their pursuers, while mingling with the firing of guns and pistols can be heard shouts of rage or triumph.

Episodes succeed each other in the general fray, faithful images of real fighting: here, a lone rider defends himself against two or three assailants; firearms have become useless and are replaced by the *yatagan*<sup>9</sup>; the horses themselves seem overcome with fury, and try to bite each other; there, a wounded warrior is supported by a

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<sup>8</sup> Algerian coins

<sup>9</sup> short sabre

companion at arms who, with reins between his teeth, is defending him with his free arm, while the two horses, galloping side by side, seem to understand that the dying man's safety depends on their union. On all points of the arena, attack and defence present the spectator with an animation and movement making it difficult to follow the details, but which captivate, enthral, suffocate, intoxicate him so to speak; for my part, I was barely able to breathe, my throat was dry, my heart was thumping, my ears were buzzing; it was time for the battle to be won by one side or the other.

I shall not dwell on the races, the proofs of ability to handle horses and weapons that followed the battle - everyone knows the proverbial skill of the Arab horse rider - but there came a moment when, in honour of the governor and his guests, each of the warriors, following each other on their knees and in Indian file, threw his big gun up in the air, caught it again and, holding it sharply to his cheek, let off a shot just in front of the tent, lowering the barrel towards the ground which raised a small cloud of dust. Highly intrigued, I questioned my neighbour, Colonel Thomas, in command of the Turkish battalion, and he answered with a laugh:

- Each ball makes its hole.

At these words, a lady sitting in front of us, got up hurriedly and, moving to the back, said to us with a very uneasy look:

- I should like to see less honour and more safety.

An hour later, we were all together in the corridors of the governor's palace, with the principal Arab chiefs. During lunch, talk was only of the splendid fantasia, the horses, the sighthounds, and what I heard tell of the latter gave me such a desire to participate in a hunt that, immediately and with an affability which I shall always remember, the Arab bureau head of Tinsilt and Mzouri *Chotts*<sup>10</sup> promised to take me with him the day after next, and to have me accompanied on my return towards Constantine by the service *spahis*. I eagerly accepted this unique opportunity which would allow me to realise my greatest desire under the best possible conditions, and that very same day, the captain's staff left to carry out the organisational functions.

We were only meant to be two to start with; however a military quartermaster, Mr. La Pique, and a principal clerk in provisions, Mr. Rolin, asked the captain if they could join us; and it was agreed that, the day after next at daybreak, we would be precisely on time at the rendezvous, arranged for the foot of the small minaret standing above the Koudiat-Ati, opposite the Valée gate.

We met at the agreed time, forming a group entirely military in appearance, since I was the only one wearing civilian clothes; these gentlemen were accompanied by their sergeants, six *spahis* made up the rest of our little detachment, to be followed by two mules loaded with tin trunks under the supervision of two Arabs whose only weapon was a strong *matrak*<sup>11</sup>, a real bludgeon, while we carried a veritable arsenal.

As I have said, our travels no longer offered any real dangers, but it was nonetheless prudent to show marauders that in any event they would receive more blows than *boudjous*, and we departed joyfully with splendid weather. We made a halt for an hour on the right-hand bank of the Oued-Bou-Merzoug that we were about to ford, and we arrived before sunset in a *douair*<sup>12</sup> of Oulad Rahmoun, where we would be sleeping.

Two tents had been emptied of their owners, but not of all their inhabitants; despite my tiredness, it was impossible to close my eyes due to the wanderings and repeated assaults of legions of insects showing their affection to humans; the barking of Arab

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<sup>10</sup> dry salt lakes

<sup>11</sup> club or truncheon

<sup>12</sup> rural administrative division

dogs who, constantly vigilant and having chosen our tent as an observation post, were continually going up and down, running around and fighting above our heads; my companions were sleeping like logs, while I needed to get used to African nights again, nights that were doubtless picturesque but, to start with, decidedly lacking in charm.

As soon as dawn appeared, when, according to the Arab expression, one could distinguish a white thread from a black thread, I engaged in an active hunt, the results of which were sufficient to console myself for the pleasantries and allow me to peacefully enjoy the coffee that the *spahi* brigadier had just poured into cups no bigger than eggcups; half an hour later we were once more on horseback and proceeding along a valley covered with olive trees, fig trees, jujube bushes and mastic trees, hemmed in between lofty mountains, the highest of which displays the exact shape of an eagle's head and is called Nif-en-Nser.

Many *douairs*, and even more numerous flocks filled this marvellous landscape with life; soon the valley closed in and the mountains came together to show only a narrow slit, a goat track to get there, this was the route that we were to follow in order to climb up to the pass, Bab-el-Mlilia, the Mlilia gate.

From the high point that we had just reached, the view stretched into the distance; with the fertility of the valley that we were leaving behind us providing a striking contrast with the aridity of the land that we were about to cross; tussocks of esparto grass, a few bushes of wild jujube with hard and hooked thorns so well named by our soldiers as greatcoat strippers, were the only things to be seen; however on the horizon two points shining in the sun like two plates of polished silver told us that we were reaching the end of our journey, these were the *Chotts* of Tinsilt and Mzouri.

This country, in appearance so sad, so desolate, was nonetheless a thousand times preferable to a hunter's eye than the banks of the Oued-Merzoug, than the beautiful valley, where not a single bird, not a single quadruped had shown itself to us, while here, at the noise of our horses' hooves, a hare was running, jerboas were jumping, companies of partridges and bustards were flying, and despite the terrible heat, we were unable to resist making our powder speak: at the same time as walking, we opened fire with a mixture of luck, since it is not easy to fire from up in a saddle, when not accustomed to it.

All of a sudden, gunshots that were still far away came in reply to ours, a large troop of riders was coming towards us at breakneck speed. The captain brought us to a halt and with the help of his pocket telescope scanned the view for a moment, then closed it quietly and told us:

- Let's go, sirs, time to gallop, Kaid Achmet, our host, is coming to meet us; we should spare him some of the distance.

With the speed at which we set off, the two troops soon came together, the salutations and greetings were exchanged with that cordiality full of distinction that sits so well with the Arabs and which the lowest chief possesses to a supreme degree.

Achmet was what is known as a man from a great tent, i.e. of noble descent, and possessing great wealth. Around forty or forty five years old, for the Arabs only ever know their approximate age, he had rendered great services to France at the time of Constantine's conquest and had been rewarded for this by the reinstatement of his family's former authority over tribes in the *Chotts*, and by the officer's cross of the Légion d'honneur which could be seen shining on his *burnous*. His influence had made it possible to establish an Arab bureau which, at that time, was one of the furthest away from Constantine and yet was producing excellent results.

Half an hour later, we were putting our feet to the ground in front of the great tent of the captain and head of the Arab bureau, at the entrance to Achmet's *douair*, made up of some forty tents and in the middle of a crowd of servants, *spahis* from the *goum*, women and children who were using sticks to chase away a pack of madly barking Arab dogs.

It was midday, under a suffocating heat; the coffee drunk at daybreak seemed a long time ago, and despite all the wellbeing that I felt from finding myself in the shade and bathing my face and hands in water cooled by porous earthenware pitchers, it seemed a long wait until lunch time; as in the good old days of Caliph Aroun-al-Raschid, my wish was immediately fulfilled: the *diffa*<sup>13</sup> had been prepared in advance and was served in the first compartment of Kaid Achmet's immense tent.

On Tunisian carpets surrounded by square cushions in silk brocade with brightly coloured flowers, small round cushions in red or green morocco, embroidered with gold, we took our places around a huge brass tray, gleaming like gold, on which was standing a mountain of that famous *couscoussou*, the preparation of which is an honour for Arab women, and where each guest digs out their portion by using their fingers to shape a grotto in proportion to their appetite, and in which they can discover, rather like a geologist, specimens of a variety of animals, but predominantly sheep and poultry.

Among the fabulous quantity of dishes, following one after another, two culinary imaginings surprised me but without delighting me. This was first of all small cubes of mutton, swimming in a black sauce seasoned with paprika, sugar, and rose water; then a stew of at least six hares cooked in the oven with sugar, cinnamon and musk!!! *Ilorresco referens*<sup>14</sup>!

Alongside the land game, served in profusion and ranging from gazelle hindquarters, bustards (houbara in Arabic), through to quail, to my great amazement was also a mixture of waterfowl: duck, teal, coot, moorhen, purple swamp-hen; I learned that the brackish waters of the Chotts were covered with them until the hottest weather of summer which, by partially drying out the lakes, forced the waterfowl to emigrate elsewhere before reappearing again in the rainy season.

For the first few minutes, the comings and goings of the many servants, the strangeness of the meal, had distracted my attention and I had merely glanced at the rest of what was in this tent, on the sides of which were hung the richest of weapons, festival saddles and bridles, when a flapping of wings and a loud cry drew my eyes towards one of the sides where, on a long wooden bar were perched half a dozen magnificent falcons, and alongside them, on the carpet, were sleeping four sighthounds with coats the same fawn colour as a lioness.

Seeing this, all my instincts as a hunter were awoken, and Achmet, smiling at my enthusiasm, let out a quiet whistle accompanied by a click of his tongue; at this call, the four sighthounds rose lazily, stretched out their long limbs, arched their backs, and came to place their intelligent looking heads touching their master.

- You will be seeing them work, said the captain to me; they are as amazingly good as they are beautiful.

Achmet said a few words to him that I was unable to understand.

- Our host is delighted with the effect that his sighthounds have had on you, but as the day is too far gone, he suggests that, after the meal, we should go and hunt with guns in the direction of Chott Tinsilt, and wait until tomorrow to hunt hares.

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<sup>13</sup> Arab banquet

<sup>14</sup> I shudder to relate

The motion was adopted unanimously; Achmet gave a few orders and, after coffee and anisette, which Muslims drink with pleasure under the pretext that it is not a fermented liquor, we went out to take our guns and start walking. Twenty or so young Arabs were waiting for us, each bearing a pole and *tellis*, pouch in woven wool, with an opening for the head, in such a way that with the porter having one pocket in front and one behind, the weight rests on both shoulders; they were intended to serve us as beaters, game carriers and retrievers; thanks to them the gunfire got underway so well on the banks of the lake, in the waters of which they went and fetched fallen items, that well before the end of the day we had no more munitions, but on the other hand the pouches were packed full.

On our return, a meal just as gigantic as that of the afternoon was awaiting us; we would have needed all the gifts of an ostrich to be able to start again; I was exhausted and falling asleep: we therefore hastened the time for retiring to bed, and it was with a feeling of true pleasure that I stretched out on the canvas hung between two canteen trunks, that the captain had been kind enough to let me have instead of the usual carpet. All those who have spent a certain amount of time in Africa outside of towns will understand just how much a simple canvas or primitive hammock is preferable to the carpet, the thickness of which is far from sufficient to prevent the sleeper's ribs from feeling every lump and unevenness of the ground; and when for the most part one only has one's saddle for a pillow, it is easy to understand why one gets up so early.

Thanks to my couchette, my companions were forced to shake me awake, but I was soon ready, and coffee was served to us outside the tent.

The spectacle that I had before me was so picturesque, so full of animation, that I could not tear my eyes away from it. In front of each tent, the horses, still hobbled, were being harnessed by women with suntanned arms that were bare right up to the shoulders; their faces, free of any veil, were framed by the large plaits of their thick black hair; huge silver earrings, forming a semi-circle with hanging pendants of coral, amber or large glass beads, fell onto their necks wearing two or three necklaces, while their large bracelets, rings of silver around their ankles, made a metallic sound with each of their movements.

With gracious insistence, Achmet placed his horses at our disposal, but as we were not accustomed to the Arab saddle, Messers la Pique, Rolin and myself preferred to ride our own horses with an English saddle, and at seven o'clock we left the *douair*, in a party consisting of thirty riders and some fifty foot followers; among whom two of the Kaid's negro servants, renowned for their agility, held on leash a brace of sighthounds that I had admired the previous day. The method of holding these courageous sloughis was extremely primitive: a simple cord in camelhair, as thick as two thumbs, but supple and soft, was passed around the neck of both hounds, with the two ends together in the hands of the man walking between the two sighthounds, and behind the master's horse. ·

Many flocks of sheep and herds of cattle were moving away, scared at the approach of our group no matter how peaceful, while the camels were watching us with curiosity from the height of their great necks. Further away, the country was deserted, the view stretched away as far as the eye could see and the ground was only dotted with an occasional tussock of esparto and other grasses.

Riders and walkers spaced themselves out in a wide semicircle in the centre of which was standing Achmet, with to right and left the two negroes and the sighthounds, and we moved forward trampling the ground under the horses' feet, hitting it with long sticks right down to the smallest plants.

Partridges flew off, jerboas jumped away in uncoordinated leaps, and the walk continued in silence: all of a sudden, a great shout echoed from one end of the line to the other: three hares had bolted away at once and had been seen by everybody; riders and people on foot stopped and remained immobile, Achmet stood in his stirrups, spoke to the hounds who - almost upright, pulling on the leash, eyes afire, ears pricked - were following the hares in their flight.

This was almost a moment of suffering for me, so fast was my heart beating; my whole body was trembling with feverish impatience, and when the signal was given and the freed sloughis threw themselves forward, I squeezed my legs together so tightly that my brave Ali, not very accustomed to feeling the spur, made a huge leap forward and sped off like an arrow.

It was to let the sighthounds have more time to show their speed that Achmet had allowed the hares to take a considerable head start: his hounds were not just running, but flying, skimming over the ground and devouring the distance between them; they certainly had no need for the encouragements that were coming to them from all sides; the two negroes, while at the same time covering the ground as fast as the horses, were uttering frenetic shouts of "Arra! arra! .fissa!" We were all going like madmen, it was not so much a race as a whirlwind raising swirls of dust behind it.

The three hares, which until then had been running together, seeing the distance was visibly shrinking, separated from each other; however the sloughis imitated their manoeuvre and, with a rare intelligence, two hounds united to chase the most alert and vigorous, while the other two each chose their own victim. A few more leaps, a few more bounds, and the three hares, thrown into the air at almost the same time, were captured and slain before touching the ground.

Never had I been present at a more successful chase, and the captain was certainly right when he had assured me that Achmet's sighthounds were as good as they were beautiful.

From then until 10 o'clock, another four hares were taken; but the heat was becoming so intense that we were forced to return to the *douair* that I had thought we would be leaving the next morning; however Achmet had plenty more other hunts to take us on than a simple chasing of hares, and when, the next day, we learned that the mail service spahis had left during the night for Constantine, on the express orders of the Arab bureau head; we were the first, my companions and I, to find that everything was for the best, since they were carrying with them an envelope for the governor, explaining to him the serious reasons that detained us on the edges of the *Chotts*.

Viscount de Dax

