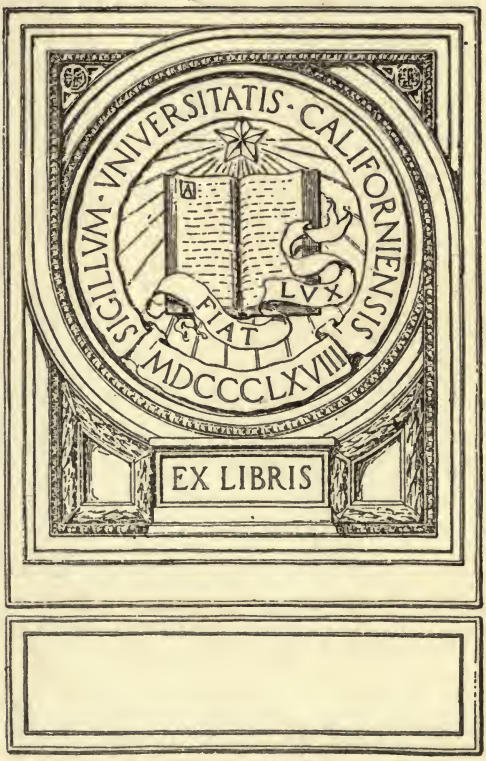
MOROCCO THAT WAS

WALTER B. HARRIS



Morocco that Was

MULAI ABDUL AZIZ.

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BY

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MOROCCO THAT WAS.

THE MOORISH COURT.

I.

THE ACCESSION OF MULAI ABDUL AZIZ.

My first introduction to the Moorish Court was in 1887, only a very few months after my arrival in Morocco, when I was invited by the British Minister, the late Sir William Kirby-Green, to accompany his special Mission to the Sultan.

Mulai Hassen was then at the zenith of his power. He was a "strong" Sultan, probably cruel, and certainly capable. His energy was never-failing, and he maintained order amongst his lawless tribes and stamped out the constantly occurring revolts by an almost unceasing "progress" through the country, accompanied by his rabble of an army. He seldom spent six months together in any of his several capitals, and the Moors had a saying, "The Imperial tents are never stored."

The great labour, the enormous transport that these journeyings necessitated, is difficult to appre-

ciate. Not only was the Sultan accompanied by his numerous ladies and all his viziers and their families and suites, but he had with him as well some ten thousand soldiers and a rabble of camp-followers. A large number of native merchants also joined the throng, for trade flowed to the region in which the Court was residing.

Some idea of the results upon the country passed through can be imagined from the fact that the very name of these expeditions in Arabic is "Harka," "the burning." No matter whether the tribes were in incipient rebellion, in open revolt, or in peace, they had to provide the food and fodder of this great horde, whose ravages more nearly resembled those of a flight of locusts than the passing by of human beings. Not only such "legal" taxation as could be extorted was collected, but the viziers and the Sultan's entourage had to be bribed and paid as well, while every soldier and every camp-follower pillaged on his own account. On receiving the news of the coming of one of these Imperial expeditions, as many of the population as could, or as dared, fled to other regions; and the Sultan often passed through a deserted country, except that the Governor and tribal representatives had to be there to pour the little wealth of the countryside into the royal coffers.

Morocco was still an almost unknown country in those days. Europe paid little attention to what was passing within its boundaries, and so long as the Sultan's actions didn't threaten to

complicate international questions, he was allowed to go his own way. The rivalry of Great Britain and France was its outstanding feature, together with the constantly recurring quarrels and petty local wars of Spain with the tribes that surround her "Presidios" on the northern coast. Morocco lived its life apart. True, it was at the very gates of the Mediterranean, but it might have been in the Pacific for all the attention that it attracted. From time to time the European Governments despatched special Missions to the Sultan—gigantic picnics to one or other of the capitals, during which the pending claims would, or would not, be settled; a commercial treaty was possibly discussed; eternal friendship was sworn where only hatred on one side and indifference on the other really existed, for in those days the general feelings of the Moors toward the Europeans and Christians amounted to hate.

Sir William Kirby-Green's special Mission proceeded by sea to Mazagan, conveyed by a British warship, and thence overland to Marrakesh, the Sultan having, as the custom was, sent an escort, transport, and tents to the coast for this purpose.

However rotten the state of Morocco may have been at that time, Mulai Hassen's strong hand held its fabric together, and presented to the outside world a front of great dignity. The British Mission travelled amongst the tribes in perfect security, and was received with all honour and with pretended rejoicings. Compliments

flowed as fast as mountain streams—happy in their wording, sonorous in their utterance, and absolutely insincere.

And then, in mingled dust and sunshine, the entry into the southern capital; the threading of its narrow streets; the throng of onlookers; the almost hopeless crush of horses and mules and men; and our arrival in the great garden of olives and oranges which surrounded the kiosks of the Maimounieh Palace, in which the Mission was housed during its stay at Marrakesh.

The reception of foreign envoys by the Sultan formed a pageant of much magnificence. Only a very few years later the whole formality was changed, and the representatives of the Governments of Europe were no longer received as vassals bringing tribute. But as long as the old etiquette lasted, there could be no question about the splendour of the ceremony. It may have been derogatory, and no doubt was, for the representatives of the Great Powers of Europe to stand bareheaded in the sun while the Sultan, under a crimson parasol, remained on horseback; but no one could dispute the picturesqueness of the scene or its oriental dignity.

The great square of the palace, covering many acres, in which the reception took place, was surrounded by yellow walls, here and there pierced by gateways. At one end, above these walls, appeared the flat terraces and green-tiled roofs of the palace, at the other extremity the cypress- and olive-trees of the great park of the Agdal;

while away to the south, towering high into the morning sunlight, rose the snow-covered peaks of the Atlas Mountains. A fitter *mise en scène* for a great pageant could scarcely be imagined.

The great square was lined with troops, ragged and parti-coloured, some in uniform and some out of it, and some in uniform so ragged that they were as much out of it as in it. Others, again, in brilliant costumes of every colour, evidently made and served out for the occasion. In detail much was wanting, perhaps; in general effect it was a rainbow. Into the centre of this square the British Minister and his suite were ushered by high white-robed functionaries of the Court, while close behind the little group of uniformed Europeans were piled the cases of presents sent by the British Government to His Shereefian Majesty. In fact, the whole traditional ceremony was based upon the reception of vassals and the offering of tribute.

A blast of trumpets, and the great green gates of the palace are hurled open, and a hurried throng of Court attendants, in white robes and crimson-peaked fezes, emerges. A band of shrill music—pipes and drums—bursts into noise. Banners and wand-bearers and spear-bearers follow, and black grooms leading horses, saddled and caparisoned in gay silks and gold embroideries, which prance and neigh at the dust and noise. Then the Sultan, a stately figure in white, on a white horse trapped in green and gold. Over his head is borne the great flat parasol of State, of

crimson velvet and gold, while at his side attendants wave long white scarves to keep the flies off his sacred person. After him follow his viziers, portly gentlemen swathed in soft white hanging garments, and then more Court attendants and slaves.

As the sacred presence of the Sultan passes into the public square a great shout rends the air, and the bowing crowd cries, "May God protect the life of our Lord."

As the procession approaches the group of the British Mission it divides to right and left, and the Sultan advances, accompanied only by his Chamberlain and one or two attendants, and followed by his viziers. The members of the Mission bow and salute, and the Chamberlain presents the Minister to His Majesty, who bids him welcome. Sir William Kirby-Green then read his speech, and handed his credentials to His Majesty, wrapped up in silk. The Sultan took them, holding the folds of his cloak between his sacred fingers and the infidel documents! The suite is presented, and after another word or two of welcome on the part of the Sultan, His Majesty turns his horse and retires again to the precincts of his palace, amid the cries of his people, the booming of cannon, and the shrill blast of native music.

It may not be out of place to give here a brief account of how this ceremony came to be abolished. I was attached, in 1902, to Sir Arthur Nicolson's special Mission to the Sultan Mulai Abdul Aziz at

Rabat. There had for some time been a strong feeling on the part of the European Governments that some new ceremonial should replace the traditional form of the reception of the representatives of the Powers, and I was sent to Rabat, a week in advance of the Mission, to urge upon the Sultan the expediency of this change. I was at that time upon very intimate and friendly terms with His Majesty, and had ample opportunity to put these views before him. Mulai Abdul Aziz always had, and has, the true instincts of a great gentleman, and he agreed readily that the form of reception in vogue at his Court was derogatory to the position and dignity of a special envoy from the Sovereign and Government of Great Britain. At the same time, he maintained that it was extremely difficult to introduce radical changes in Court etiquette without creating a hostile feeling amongst the people, or at least running the risk of much criticism. For a few days he hesitated; but the evening before the arrival of the Mission he authorised me to inform Sir Arthur Nicolson that the old ceremonial would no longer be carried out, and that his reception would take place in a room in the palace. In order to explain the change of procedure, it was allowed to be whispered in the town that His Majesty was a little unwell, and unable to stand the fatigue of the great function in the open air.

The reception accordingly took place in an upper room of the palace. The young Sultan was seated

cross-legged on a pale blue Louis XV. sofa, the greater part of which was covered by his outspread robes. At his side stood his Minister of Foreign Affairs and his viziers. The Chamberlain introduced the British Minister, who read his speech in English, the interpretation being made by an official of the Legation. The Sultan whispered his reply to the Foreign Minister, who spoke it out aloud.

The scene was attractive, and of course much more "intimate" than the great ceremonial of the past, but was never lacking in dignity. The "audience," confined strictly to the reception, lasted only a very few minutes, when the Minister and his suite retired. As we were proceeding down the staircase, I was hurriedly called back into the Sultan's presence. He had thrown off the great white cloak in which he had been almost enveloped, and discarded his heavy turban of State for one of much less weighty dimensions. His viziers and courtiers had departed. Calling to me to come quickly, he cried, "Climb up here with me, on to the back of the sofa; we shall be able to see the Mission ride out of the palace square"; and he clambered up and stood on the gilt carving of his throne, whence, by pulling himself up by his hands, he could just see out of a little window high up in the richly-decorated wall of the room. Following his example, I mounted beside him, and together we watched the Minister and the Mission mount their horses and depart from the palace, to the booming of guns.

At the time of my first visit to the Court, Si Ahmed ben Moussa, better known as Bou Ahmed, was the predominant figure amongst the native officials. He held at this time the post of Chamberlain, one of great importance and influence, as its holder was in constant contact with the Sultan, and could gain his private ear. He was undoubtedly devoted to the Sultan's interests, and served him faithfully and well. His father had been a palace slave, and he himself was very dark in colour, and of most unattractive appearance. He was a man of no particular intelligence, but of indomitable will, and cruel. He made no pretensions to understand the foreign relations of Morocco; and except in so far as he was anti-European, more from political than religious motives, he seems to have had no fixed policy. Even later, when he became, under Mulai Abdul Aziz, Grand Vizier, he was content to leave the discussion of all affairs of foreign policy to the other viziers, though no doubt he took part in the decisions arrived at. Mulai Hassen's Foreign Minister was Sid Fadhoul Gharnit, a wily and intelligent gentleman, who is still living. When the Government of which he was a member fell —and the falls of Government in those days often meant the falling of heads too—Sid Fadhoul Gharnit was seized by a stroke, and disappeared into the recesses of his house. For years he was supposed to be paralysed, and was no doubt in bad health; but another change of Ministry came about years afterwards, and he emerged again,

miraculously cured and looking younger and more spry than ever, to become Grand Vizier for a time. He has now retired from public life, and resides in Fez. No doubt his paralysis, real or feigned, saved his family from ruin, his fortune from confiscation, and probably himself from prison or even death. Difficult as was the work, great as were the responsibilities of Cabinet Ministers in Morocco, they were not pestered by an Opposition, for if—rarely—any members of the outgoing Government survived, they were always in prison.

In 1893 Mulai Hassen determined to visit the desert regions of Morocco, including far-off Tafilet, the great oasis from which his dynasty had originally sprung, and where, before becoming the ruling branch of the royal family, they had resided ever since their founder, the great-grandson of the Prophet, had settled there, an exile from the East.

Leaving Fez in the summer, the Sultan proceeded south, crossing the Atlas above Kasba-el-Maghzen, and descended to the upper waters of the Wad Ziz. An expedition such as this would have required a system of organisation far in excess of the capabilities of the Moors, great though their resources were. Food was lacking; the desert regions could provide little. The water was bad, the heat very great. Every kind of delay, including rebellion and the consequent punishment of the tribes, hampered the Sultan's movements; and it was only toward winter that he arrived in Tafilet with a fever-stricken army and greatly diminished transport.

[*Photo by Author.*

MOUNTAIN TOPS, ATLAS.

Mulai Hassen returned from Tafilet a dying man. The internal complaint from which he was suffering had become acute from the hardships he had undergone, and he was unable to obtain the rest that his state of health required, nor would he place himself under a régime. For a few months he remained in the southern capital, and in the late spring 1894 set out to suppress a rebellion that had broken out in the Tadla region.

While camping in the enemy country he died. Now, the death of the Sultan under such circumstances was fraught with danger to the State. He was an absolute monarch, and with his disappearance all authority and government lapsed until his successor should have taken up the reins. Again, the expedition was in hostile country, and any inkling of the Sultan's death would have brought the tribes down to pillage and loot the Imperial camp. As long as the Sultan lived, and was present with his expedition, his prestige was sufficient to prevent an attack of the tribes—though even this was not unknown on one or two occasions—and to hold his forces together as a sort of concrete body. But his death, if known, would have meant speedy disorganisation, nor could the troops themselves be trusted not to seize this opportunity to murder and loot.

It was therefore necessary that the Sultan's demise should be kept an absolute secret. He had died in the recesses of his tents, themselves enclosed in a great canvas wall, inside which, except on very special occasions, no one was

permitted to penetrate. The knowledge of his death was therefore limited to the personal slaves and to his Chamberlain, Bou Ahmed.

Orders were given that the Sultan would start on his journey at dawn, and before daylight the State palanquin was carried into the Imperial enclosure, the corpse laid within it, and its doors closed and the curtains drawn. At the first pale break of dawn the palanquin was brought out, supported by sturdy mules. Bugles were blown, the band played, and the bowing courtiers and officials poured forth their stentorian cry, "May God protect the life of our Lord." The procession formed up, and, led by flying banners, the dead Sultan set out on his march.

A great distance was covered that day. Only once did the procession stop, when the palanquin was carried into a tent by the roadside, that the Sultan might breakfast. Food was borne in and out; tea, with all the paraphernalia of its brewing, was served: but none but the slaves who knew the secret were permitted to enter. The Chamberlain remained with the corpse, and when a certain time had passed, he emerged to state that His Majesty was rested and had breakfasted, and would proceed on his journey—and once more the procession moved on. Another long march was made to where the great camp was pitched for the night.

The Sultan was tired, the Chamberlain said. He would not come out of his enclosure to transact business as usual in the "Diwan" tent, where

he granted audiences. Documents were taken in to the royal quarters by the Chamberlain himself, and, when necessary, they emerged bearing the seal of State, and verbal replies were given to a host of questions.

Then another day of forced marches, for the expedition was still in dangerous country; but Mulai Hassen's death could no longer be concealed. It was summer, and the state of the Sultan's body told its own secret.

Bou Ahmed announced that His Majesty had died two days before, and that by this time his young son, Mulai Abdul Aziz, chosen and nominated by his father, had been proclaimed at Rabat, whither the fleetest of runners had been sent with the news immediately after the death had occurred.

It was a *fait accompli*. The army was now free of the danger of being attacked by the tribes; and the knowledge that the new Sultan was already reigning, and that tranquillity existed elsewhere, deterred the troops from any excesses. Many took the occasion of a certain disorganisation to desert, but so customary was this practice that it attracted little or no attention.

Two days later the body of the dead Sultan, now in a terrible state of decomposition, arrived at Rabat. It must have been a gruesome procession from the description his son Mulai Abdul Aziz gave me: the hurried arrival of the swaying palanquin bearing its terrible burden, five days dead in the great heat of summer; the escort, who had bound scarves over their faces—but even

dishes of cooked meats, or what was left of them, had been removed, there remained great plates of fresh butter, the very first of the season, hard and rolled into large balls. The learned tutor of the Sultan's sons stated that it was much to be regretted that such splendid butter should be wasted by being eaten by the palace slaves and attendants, and forthwith he tore off a length of his fine white turban, rolled up one of the large balls of butter, and replaced the package in the crown of his high-peaked fez, which formed the foundation of his headgear.

One of the slaves told Mulai Hassen what had occurred, and he determined to amuse himself at the expense of his sons' tutor. He entered the great chamber where the guests were assembled and bade them welcome, paying a few compliments to each. When it came to the turn of the learned man, the Sultan congratulated him on his great attainments, adding, "He shall be specially honoured. Bring rose-water and incense."

Now, it is the custom at Moorish feasts to sprinkle the guests with rose and orange-blossom water, and to perfume their robes with incense. So the long-necked silver bottles and the brass incense-burner were produced. From the latter, laid upon red-hot charcoal, the burning sandalwood diffused its smoke in delicious clouds. Having received the regulation sprinkling, the incense-burner was placed before him. Lifting his wide sleeves, the slaves held the censer below them, allowing the smoke to permeate his volum-

inous garments. Then drawing the hood of his "bernous" over his head and face, the customary perfuming of the turban was begun. But the slaves held tight, and instead of the performance lasting half a minute, it was unduly prolonged. At first it was only the richly-perfumed smoke of the sandalwood that entered his nose and eyes; but presently the delicious odour changed, for the butter concealed in his fez, melting under the applied heat of the red-hot charcoal, was beginning to drop into the incense-burner, giving forth a penetrating and unpleasant odour of cooking. From drops to a trickling stream took a very little while, and soon the whole room was full of the smoke of burning butter, while the aged scholar presented the most pitiful sight—half-blinded, choking, and dripping all over. When he had been washed and cleaned up the Sultan had gone.

Mulai Abdul Aziz was, at the time of his succession (1894), about twelve or thirteen years of age. He was a younger son of the late Sultan, for Islamic thrones do not necessarily descend by primogeniture. It is not unseldom a brother who succeeds, and at times even more distant relations. The throne is almost elective inside the royal family, though, as a matter of fact, a Sultan generally nominates his successor. The descent from the common ancestor—who in this case of Shereefian families is the Prophet Mohammed—is of far greater importance than the relationship of the deceased and succeeding Sultan. After the