

THE HILL OF CARTHAGE

IN the sunlit evening I saw a little railway which led out of Tunis on the north : a railway which looked too young and small to be able to go very far, but which would be almost certain to go to some enchanted place. And sure enough, when I asked for a ticket as far as possible I was given a ticket for Tunis : the train was of the kind that does a magic circle. It started, and at once it seemed to run into heaven without further delay ; the town vanished and the sky lay under us as well as over us, luminous and blue and flecked with rosy clouds. After the first airy vision this under-sky turned out to be a wide shallow lake stretching away to the eastward, with flocks of rosy flamingoes standing motionless in the blue water. They stood there like the clouds of sunset, perfectly still, and entirely happy, wrapped up in some lovely dream of their own.

On the other side of the lake was a hill of bare red earth crowned by a big white mosque. The train left the lake and in a little while came to the southernmost point of the promontory, where the green waves of the Mediterranean broke on the sand ; then it began to turn on its circle and came to a place called Ste. Monique, where cherry trees in snow-white bloom fluttered everywhere against the red earth of the hills. Behind them a cliff-head rose above the sea, with a white Arab village crowded upon its crest. Then the train stopped on a hillside among a few villas and cornfields, and the station placard said in huge white letters, CARTHAGE. The letters needed to be huge and white, as if to emphasise a truth very difficult to believe. It simply did not seem possible.

I got out, and the little train went on towards Tunis. On the right the hill rose fairly sharply to where the big white mosque stood silhouetted against the sunset.

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In front of it was a little museum, and there was a hotel, and a few small whitestone houses. On the left the ground fell gradually half a mile to the sea's edge and the great sweep of the Bay of Carthage. There were bright green cornfields, gay with poppies which did not seem to think it odd that they should coincide with cherry-blossom. There were several Arab huts made of boards and sacking and surrounded by bundles of prickly thorn-bushes for defence; and some scattered villas cropping up without form or plan; and the big motor road to Tunis cut through it all. At the sea's edge, in some waste land lay two circular ponds, perfectly round like dew ponds but much larger. The first pond was nearly filled up by an island, also perfectly circular in shape, and the water lay round it in a narrow stagnant ring. Just beyond these queer sinister ponds, with their air of death and desolation, was the sand of the shore and the gay green waves breaking and the sharp breeze blowing, salty and alive. It was life and death in immediate juxtaposition. Five miles away across the Bay, frowning in the fading light, was a horrible mountain, dark purple, with a cleft peak which rose in two horns, like the priestly mitre of some dark ancient false religion. My flesh crept as I looked at it. I was to learn that in Carthage the flesh creeps as often as in Rome the heart is stirred.

The veils of the twilight were thickening, and in Africa the air after sunset turns faintly poisonous. Except for an ox-cart lumbering up the hill and an Arab child or two playing in the fields there was no living being in sight. The villas were all shuttered and obviously empty—not to be inhabited till the hot weather. I took the next train back to Tunis. It ran along a causeway with more lake and, this time, shadowy flamingoes on each side of it. Beyond the lake the gathering darkness hid the hill of Carthage from sight.

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I came back next day, and an Arab guide appeared. Together we went to look for the lost city. But the city was under our feet. The hill of Carthage *is* Carthage. There is many an ill-treated city which has turned into a hill; or at the most a mound. But Carthage had its own hill once, the Byrsa, the steep height now crowned by the white mosque of St. Louis. Here of old, stood the citadel, and now down its slopes, mixed into the earth and beaten into it and starting up in patches of rubble were the stones of ancient Carthage; and scattered under the red earth and among the new green grasses of the spring were the scattered fragments of the walls that had fallen before Scipio. Mixed with these, ground into the same memoried dust, were the walls of the Roman city and the stones over which St. Perpetua, dignified and introspective and young, had gone to her doom.

In Carthage, Christianity crowns the hill: like the grass and the sharp green corn, it is on the surface, seeking the light and the air. Its roots are among the Roman stones, and deeper down than these lurks the ancient city, driven away into the darkness underground. Pagan Rome lies heavy upon it, keeping it under, crushing it down; but across the Bay its essential spirit springs into sight again in the shape of the haunted mountain: Bou Kornine—Arabic for ‘The two-horned one’—where Carthage had for hundreds of years its chief shrine to Moloch. The temple stood near the summit, between the twin peaks, and the memory of the dark and filthy ceremonies which for centuries defiled the mountain still hovers about it like a cloud. In Carthage you feel a dying Mahommedanism, and Christianity renewing itself like the new grass and the cherry blossom; while Bou Kornine stands there at a distance, a banished evil, a horror withdrawn: a queer monument ‘not made with hands,’ standing witness to the amazing vitality of evil. The

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demon forces that were focussed there long ago have sullenly survived the march of the centuries, the clearing of the minds of men, and the blossoming of a thousand springs. And in bright sunshine there is darkness on the mountain.

When I first saw Bou Kornine in the gathering dusk I knew nothing of its history. But ignorance leaves the emotions free, free of the trammels of reason, free to receive impressions far more powerful and direct than any process of thought: impressions also of an uncanny accuracy. When I looked at the mountain on the first evening a faint and subtle sense of horror touched my soul, and the fear which is the forerunner of real nightmare terror stirred in my being. Next morning I was interested in all that the guide told me about the mountain; but not so painfully interested as I had been in all that the mountain had told me about itself the night before.

We went to the museum on the hill top, kept by the White Fathers whom Cardinal Lavigerie brought to Africa in the last century. They were the first archaeologists of neglected Carthage and their museum is small, but terrifying, and properly in keeping with Bou Kornine. There are hundreds and hundreds of little stone masks and amulets, faces of twisted evil, and horrible little urns of stone that had contained the charred bones of children. Among so much ugliness was one really beautiful relic of ancient Carthage: the statue of a winged priestess, more than life-size, with kind searching eyes and the gold on her wings and robes still bright. But I forgot her again when the guide took me down across the fields to the garden of one of the villas where they had lately found the remains of a temple of Astarte. We went down below the level of the garden into little ruined stone rooms opening out of each other, where there were the same heap of pathetic incinerary urns, and amulets marked

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with the triangle of Astarte : the sign of the Trinity which seems to have been the central idea of all religions, good or bad.

We went on across the fields to the two round ponds, forgotten by God and man. The first had been the harbour. Here once had been the stone quays and the white buildings and the strutting captains, and the sails and the oars, and the dark shouting sailors : and the bundles of precious merchandise, and spices, and the sandalwood, and the cloths of gold and silver that were unloaded at the wharves of the most luxurious city of the ancient world. In its glory this harbour may have been about the size of the Vieux Port at Marseilles ; but there was plenty of room for ships to lie in the lake which in these days was much deeper. The inner pond, more shapely circular, with its island in the middle, was once the Admiralty, grand with marble colonnades, the armaments stored in the central building on the artificial island, and the ships of war lying star-shaped round the island with their noses against the marble quay. The outer and inner harbours were joined by a short canal. Beyond these two deserted ponds the land stretches inland for a mile or so, flat to the shore of the lake, and this was once a packed mass of streets and houses ; for Carthage, like London, was a spreading, sprawling city, not concentrated and compact like Rome. The great nobles lived near the harbour in big houses with gardens where the irrigation kept everything shady and cool. The house of Hannibal was supposed to be somewhere near the ancient harbour, and that of Hamilcar, his father, near where the railway line passes to-day ; the next station to Carthage is named Amilcar to mark the site. Northward towards the headland the city did not stretch so far, and the Byrsa with its citadel and its temple to the god of health was not in the actual centre of Carthage. There was a great wall round the city, high and solid,

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and under its shelter were the stables of three hundred elephants. These were the property of the nobles and the army, smallish African elephants with enormous ears, and they must have looked very jolly lumbering about the narrow streets, rather like our London omnibuses. Carthage was hardly a police-run city, but there must have been many pretty problems in traffic control when someone driving a high-speed chariot with three horses met in a narrow lane an elephant carrying at least two slaves, and a noble going out to dine, and all dressed up to kill. Though I imagine the elephants always got the better of any traffic dispute. But they must have cost their owners a fortune in hay. The hay must have come into the city in ox-wagons from the irrigated fields and gardens of the suburbs. North Africa is a land of irrigation, and good water is a thing of price. Near the road from the Byrsa to Sidi Bou Said, the Arab village on the headland, there are gigantic stone cisterns whose rounded roofs show among the green corn, characteristic relics of ancient Carthage. They are empty of water now, and echo hollowly if you throw in a stone: a queer sinister echo, like the voice of Carthage itself, complaining from underground. A quarter of a mile away on the shore itself is a fountain of fresh water encased in a round arch of stone called the Fountain of the Thousand Amphorae because of the hundreds of stone vases and water-pots, both Carthaginian and Roman, which were found near it. This fountain and any others like it must have become places of tragic significance during the last great siege of Carthage. The city held out for three years, from 149 to 146 B.C., an amazing feat of endurance, and only fell after Scipio had destroyed Nepheris, a town on the other side of the lake, which had kept Carthage supplied with food. His final attack was in the early Spring, though by then there must have been no flut-

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tering cherry-trees, no grass or poppies in the stricken city and the devastated land. He fought a way into the city near the merchant harbour, from the Taenia, a tongue of land which runs between the lake and the Bay. From the market place he looked up at the Byrsa, with its narrow streets and frowning walls, and he may have felt at that moment that the city was his; but so savagely courageous was the final stand of the Carthaginians that there remained six days of fighting and massacre before the Byrsa fell: 'Storming the first house to which they came, the Romans put its inhabitants to the sword, and then passing step by step and inch by inch from building to building, or from roof-top to roof-top, by planks laid across the intervals, they massacred every living thing they met. Each house was a castle, and a castle defended by its garrison to the last extremity. The battle raged on the house-tops, within the houses themselves, and in the streets below. Many of the inmates were hurled down from the windows or the roofs and caught on the pikes of the assailants.'

The last survivors took refuge in the temple on the height; and when they realised they could not hold out any longer they set the temple on fire. Hasdrubal, the cowardly and inept commander of the Carthaginians, crawled out and begged the Romans for mercy; and Scipio, who seems to have been a most liberal-minded man in spite of the particularly violent scenes in which he appears in history, granted Hasdrubal his life. Then, as the fire raged round the last stronghold of the doomed city, Hasdrubal's wife appeared on the roof and by a magnificent and despairing gesture more than atoned for her husband's cowardice: leading her two little sons by the hand, she greeted Scipio as a noble foe, her voice loud above the din of battle and the roar of the triumphant flames; then turning to her two children she killed them with a sword, threw their

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bodies into the fire, and herself leaped into the flames after them. So perished in blood and fire the city which Dido had founded and sealed in blood and fire uncounted centuries before.

Polybius says that Scipio burst into tears and quoted Homer's words: 'The day will come when sacred Troy will fall, and Priam and Priam's people too.'

There is this disastrous touch about ancient Carthage that its chief memories are of its horrible religion and its chief records are of its destruction and fall. Of its ships and their amazing journeys from Syria to the pillars of Hercules, to Britain and down the far coasts of Africa, there is mention, but little or no description. There is only the *Periplus of Hanno*, posted up by himself in the temple of Baal on his return from Senegal, and translated by a wandering Greek. Of the ordinary happy life of its citizens and sailors there is conjecture but no intimate record. If there were poets at all, or if their work was destroyed we do not know; but Carthage has no songs. There is a space in the mind as bare as the hill of Carthage itself, as open as the seas where its ships sailed for centuries. Then guesses and conjectures and silence suddenly give way to the uproar of battle on the Byrsa and the death-cry of Carthage amid the flames: after the unrecorded centuries of brilliant effort and success there come the blood-stained details of Polybius's tale. The tale goes on to tell how Scipio justly and generously sent back to the Sicilian cities the treasures that Carthage had looted during its long struggle with Sicily. This done, Rome's violent word to Carthage was kept. The city was utterly destroyed, and the buildings razed to the ground; a plough was driven over the site and the furrows filled with salt.

Ancient Carthage has not only been driven underground; it has been driven into the sea. One day, coming back along the shore from Sidi Bou Said, I saw

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a row of squarish rocks covered thick with barnacles and seaweed. They lay a few yards out, in a long line parallel with the shore, with the waves washing round them. I waded out to them, and jumped from one to another, going a long way and getting very wet. But before I had finished with them there came over me a feeling of rather creepy suspicion: were they rocks, after all? Although the sea had rounded them and smoothed them and shifted them and broken them and covered them with prickly and slippery things, they were not rocks, but all that remained of the proud sea wall of Carthage. They were the stones that had seen the first explorers' ships go out to range the shores of the dim Atlantic and beat southward to Sierra Leone: that had seen the ships of Scipio, slipping like shadows of ill-omen into the Bay; that had stood the siege and the fall, and themselves had fallen to lie for long centuries among the breaking waves at the sea's edge: the kind sea, which had clothed them as it clothes its own children, and lulled them into forgetfulness with the singing of a legend more ancient than Carthage, and a traveller's tale of lands further than Sierra Leone.

The remains of the Roman city are few, but fairly solid. Here and there along the footpaths and among the green corn you come across patches of mosaic pavement, some of them with very beautiful patterns, all of them charmingly irresponsible: there in the sense of having grown there like the grass. No one has scraped them or fenced them in or bothered with them at all. Suddenly among the soft grass you put your foot on a pavement and look down at someone's atrium floor of the first century A.D. Then there is the lovely Greek theatre, almost complete, with seating room for thousands, and acoustics so perfect that an English lady sitting in the top tier of stone seats heard the Arab guide down on the stage say to his flock of Ameri-

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cans: 'Voilà le théâtre Grec: ce n'est pas grande chose.' The perfect system of acoustics lifted this remark up and up to her so that she heard it as if it had been spoken in her ear.

With the coming of Rome there is more record and less conjecture: if a new light shines on the city re-built after the ploughshares of Scipio, it is almost a spotlight that shines on St. Perpetua. One among a thousand heroes, history picks her out early in the third century, because in an age when writing was rare, she took pen and wrote. There is something curiously modern about this girl of twenty-two, clear-headed and strong-willed, writing down her ideas for posterity with death waiting for her on the morrow. Mother of a child and head of a household, yet she was a real writer, writing to relieve her eager heart and mind: analysing emotions, recognising issues, reporting events, describing the fantastic fabric of her dreams at night. Writing in the stinking common prison of Carthage, she tells her tragic story of separation and farewell: of love and hope undying. The prison was up on the Byrsa, and she went with her companions downhill to her death, to the arena which lay then, as it lies now, on the southward slope of the hill. As she went down, did she, as any modern girl would do, look away across the housetops to the steel-blue lake with its flocks of motionless flamingoes, rose-coloured in the sun? I think not. There she would be the true child of her own century, and her heart would be altogether set on the inward vision of God. More likely she looked across at the two-horned mountain of Baal, where it sulked, threatening the town; and she, who knew the physical anguish and glory of motherhood, might well have seen in her martyrdom a birth which made her the mother of Christianity in Africa. There is an ecstatic touch of joy in her writing which is like a faint echo of the Magnificat.

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At any rate Christianity was born and flourished in Carthage. Nearly two centuries later comes St. Monica, with her son St. Augustine. Carthage was by then one of the important centres of the new religion—if it could, by then, be called new. There was a Christian university, and among the many churches there was one which remains to-day, an oblong of broken marble columns among the cornfields at Ste. Monique. There, tired of her solicitations and arguments, before his conversion, Augustine took his mother and begged her to wait till he came back to fetch her; he was going down to the harbour, he said, to meet a friend. He went down to the harbour and took ship to Rome. One does not like to think of poor St. Monica sitting in the dark church through the long hot afternoon, listening for the footsteps which never came. But she did not waste much time in grieving. When she discovered where he had gone, she took the next ship to Rome after him.

St. Louis is the last saint of Carthage, coming there to die in 1270, long after the city had vanished again. The Mahommedans held Tunis, and in the stifling summer St. Louis came with his army and pitched his camp on the bare red hill of the Byrsa. There the plague attacked the army and there St. Louis died in his tent—like St. Monica, too lost in God to be homesick for the earth of his native land. He was buried first in Carthage, then later taken back to St. Denis to lie among the kings of France: later still to suffer the same fate that befell all that royal dust at the sack of St. Denis in the Revolution. At St. Denis they will tell you that he is still in Carthage: as if to save him, at least in thought, from the anger of the people; for in Paris to-day even the most ardent Republican loves St. Louis. It is a pity that he does not sleep still in Carthage. The Arabs loved him for a chivalrous opponent and made him a Mahommedan Saint. The

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village of Sidi Bou Said on the headland above Carthage—'the village of the two saints'—is named after him and Saladin. And the big white Catholic cathedral, built like a mosque, is for St. Louis, the twice canonised.

Meanwhile, in the fields that were Carthage, life goes sleepily on. There is a sudden stir among the friendly people in the inn: 'Hocine Ben Brahim has found a lamp.' An Arab boy is showing them the little stone oil lamp of the first century which he found this morning when he was hoeing turnips. He has already sold it to an American tourist from the liner anchored outside the Bay: 'Et pour combien?' says Madame sharply—'Twenty francs! The stupid boy—he could have got five times the price. But then these Arabs—what would you?'

The boat which leaves Tunis for Sicily sails in the late afternoon. Through the confusion of the inner harbour and outer basin of Tunis, of the lake and the narrow Taenia, she makes her firm way by a straight canal of deep water, out into the green bay of Carthage. There, across the waves, you see the Byrsa and the church of St. Louis against the light, their height lessened by distance, their colour of red earth and white walls lost against the flood of glory behind them. It is a deserted scene, small, silent, and still: an insignificant point between the lit wonders of sea and sky. By the time the ship has made the open sea, the sun has disappeared and there follows the brief violent afterglow of the African sunset. Sea and sky are flushed to a strange golden-russet colour, and there reaches you for the last time that queer hint of poison in the air: of darkness and danger in the night; and from the deck of the moving ship your eyes are drawn unwillingly from the hill of Carthage to Bou Kornine, the demon mountain, where it broods and watches across the Bay.

ELIZABETH BELLOC.