

FOUNTAINS IN THE SAND

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Fountains in the sand by Norman Douglas

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NORMAN DOUGLAS

**FOUNTAINS
IN THE SAND**

FOUNTAINS IN THE SAND

By the same Author
South Wind
Old Calabria
They Went

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I. *En Route*

LIKELY enough, I would not have remained in Gafsa more than a couple of days. For it was my intention to go from England straight down to the oases of the Djerid, Tozeur and Nefta, a corner of Tunisia left unexplored during my last visit to that country—there, where the inland regions shelve down towards those mysterious depressions, the Chotts, dried-up oceans, they say, where in olden days the fleets of Atlantis rode at anchor. . . .

There fell into my hands, by the way, a volume that deals exclusively with Gafsa—Pierre Bordereau's "La Capsa ancienne : La Gafsa moderne"—and, glancing over its pages as the train wound southwards along sterile river-beds and across dusty highlands, I became interested in this place of Gafsa, which seems to have had such a long and eventful history. Even before arriving at the spot, I had come to the correct conclusion that it must be worth more than a two days' visit.

The book opens thus : *One must reach Gafsa by way of Sfax.* Undoubtedly, this was the right thing to do ; all my fellow-travellers were agreed upon that point ; leaving Sfax by a night train, you arrive at Gafsa in the early hours of the following morning.

One must reach Gafsa by way of Sfax. . . .

A fine spirit of northern independence prompted

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me to try an alternative route. The time-table marked a newly opened line of railway which runs directly inland from the port of Sousse; the distance to Gafsa seemed shorter; the country was no doubt new and interesting. There was the station of Feriana, for instance, celebrated for its Roman antiquities and well worth a visit; I looked at the map and saw a broad road connecting this place with Gafsa; visions of an evening ride across the desert arose before my delighted imagination; instead of passing the night in an uncomfortable train, I should be already ensconced at a luxurious table d'hôte, and so to bed.

The gods willed otherwise.

In pitch darkness, at the inhuman hour of 5.55 a.m., the train crept out of Sousse: sixteen miles an hour is its prescribed pace. The weather grew sensibly colder as we rose into the uplands, a stricken region, tree-less and water-less, with gaunt brown hills receding into the background; by midday, when Sbeitla was reached, it was blowing a hurricane. I had hoped to wander, for half an hour or so, among the ruins of this old city of Suffetula, but the cold, apart from their distance from the station, rendered this impossible; in order to reach the shed where luncheon was served, we were obliged to crawl backwards, crab-wise, to protect our faces from a storm which raised pebbles, the size of respectable peas, from the ground, and scattered them in a hail about us. I despair of giving any idea of that glacial blast: it was as if one stood deprived of clothing, of skin and flesh—a jabbering anatomy—upon some drear Caucasian

En Route

pinnacle. And I thought upon the gentle rains of London, from which I had fled to these sunny regions, I remembered the fogs, moist and warm and caressing: greatly is the English winter maligned! Seeing that this part of Tunisia is covered with the forsaken cities of the Romans who were absurdly sensitive in the matter of heat and cold, one is driven to the conclusion that the climate must indeed have changed since their day.

And my fellow-traveller, who had slept throughout the morning (we were the only two Europeans in the train), told me that this weather was nothing out of the common; that at this season it blew in such fashion for weeks on end; Sbeitla, to be sure, lay at a high point of the line, but the cold was no better at the present terminus, Henchir Souatir, whither he was bound on some business connected with the big phosphate company. On such occasions the natives barricade their doors and cover within over a warming-pan filled with the glowing embers of desert shrubs; as for Europeans—a dog's life, he said; in winter we are shrivelled to mummies, in summer roasted alive.

I spoke of Feriana, and my projected evening ride across a few miles of desert.

"Gafsa . . . Gafsa," he began, in dreamy fashion, as though I had proposed a trip to Lake Tchad. And then, emphatically:

"*Gafsa?* Why on earth didn't you go over Sfax?"

"Ah, everybody has been suggesting that route."

"I can well believe it, Monsieur."

In short, my plan was out of the question;

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utterly out of the question. The road—a mere track—was over sixty kilometres in length and positively unsafe on a wintry night; besides, the land lay 800 metres in height, and a traveller would be frozen to death. I must go as far as Majen, a few stations beyond Feriana; sleep there in an Arab funduk (caravanseraï), and thank my stars if I found any one willing to supply me with a beast for the journey onward next morning. There are practically no tourists along this line, he explained, and consequently no accommodation for them; the towns that one sees so beautifully marked on the map are railway stations—that and nothing more; and as to the broad highways crossing the southern parts of Tunisia in various directions—well, they simply don't exist, *voilà!*

“That's not very consoling,” I said, as we took our seats in the compartment again. “It begins well.”

And my meditations took on a sombre hue. I thought of a little overland trip I had once undertaken, in India, with the identical object of avoiding a long circuitous railway journey—from Udaipur to Mount Abu. I remembered those “few miles of desert.”

Decidedly, things were beginning well.

“If you go to Gafsa,” he resumed, “—if you really propose going to Gafsa, pray let me give you a card to a friend of mine, who lives there with his family and may be useful to you. No trouble, I assure you!”

He scribbled a few lines, addressed to “Monsieur Paul Dufresnoy, Engineer,” for which I thanked