

498 French Possessions in North Africa

and until noon we traverse broad grassy plains similar to those of yesterday. At midday we change trains, and strike south towards the desert. The country is still of the same character ; but there are rugged hills on the east of the line, and high up in the crannies we see native villages, each surmounted by its whitewashed minaret. Now and then we pass a *shott* or lake, from which the water-fowl rise in hasty flight as the train roars by. Yonder are two tall, bearded Arabs, leaning on their staffs, engaged in earnest conversation ; behind them are flocks of sheep and goats, tended by their herdsmen. Exactly so might Abraham and Lot have stood in those far-off days at the moment of their parting.

Now the grassy plains begin to give place to barren steppe ; the sun-baked ground is cracked and split, and we pass sandy tracts with bare red rocks. The hills close in on either side, and seem to bar the way. We have come to the gate of the Sahara, the gorge of El Kantara, beyond which lies the Great Desert. We plunge into a succession of tunnels, and then emerge upon an oasis where the palm-trees are waving in the evening breeze, and flocks of goats are being led home for the night. The moon has risen by the time we pull up at Biskra, the end of our journey and the end of the railway.

Biskra, called by the Arabs the "Queen of the Desert," has now become a popular winter resort. Its climate is one of the finest in all the world. Here East and West seem to meet. At one end of the town is the railway station ; at the other end the caravans come creeping in from the desert, and the natives perform their wild barbaric dances beneath the glare of the electric light. The oasis of Biskra is wonderfully fertile, the water being obtained from underground reservoirs, which are filled by the winter rains and the melting snows of the neighbouring mountains. There are more than a hundred thousand palms and other fruit trees on the oasis of Biskra.

Tunis, which lies to the east of Algeria, has the same natural divisions, and its main features, both geographical and social, are very similar.