

## THE PORTER-LADS OF TUNISIA

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AMONG the several classes of native life which make up the large towns of Tunisia and which perhaps appear the least hopeful from the Gospel point of view is the porter class. Belonging as they do mostly to the Bedouins who, after wandering from place to place, settle on the outskirts of the towns, their lives are free, wild and unrestricted. From his earliest days each child has to seek out a living often by begging or theft.

It is characteristic of Islam that this class is entirely neglected—no effort whatever being made to educate or help them, but, on the contrary, they are looked upon as a nuisance—only to be kept in order by the police. In the town they are to be seen in quiet corners playing pitch and toss or hanging about the *cafés chantants* picking up cigarette ends, listening to the foul conversation of the drinkers, only to be kicked and cuffed by everyone. Thus in time, by force of circumstances, they add to the numbers of the criminal class, some of them drifting to the lowest dens of vice and wickedness.

Gathering around the market place in such numbers, offering to carry home the morning's purchases of house-keepers, they become a positive nuisance, and the police, in order to bring them more directly under their control, compelled them to take out licenses which were supplied them with a numbered disc for a small sum. They are so irrepressible and high-spirited that only by the application of a small whip can the policeman whose duty it is to look after them keep them in any kind of order.

How to lay hold of these lads was a problem which could only be solved by carefully noting their peculiar position and its limitations, and by finding out the natural possibilities. On the one hand their inability to read and

total lack of any kind of training was a drawback, but their good memories and love of shouting were the assets. A cup of native tea or handful of nuts was sufficient for a first attraction and the promise of a simple native feast as a reward of regular attendance after six months, enabled a register to be kept and thus created the first element of order.

The method of teaching is the constant repetition of specially chosen texts in a colloquial form, which contain a clear teaching regarding sin and the Saviour, and certain passages of Scripture such as the first Psalm, also in colloquial form. This is interspersed by vociferous singing of Gospel hymns—simple and suitable to their comprehension—accompanying the chorus with clapping of hands in true native style. There is never a dull service among them; their natures are thoroughly restive and any kind of stiffness would be fatal to success. A loving sympathy for their need and their untoward circumstances, with a firm and strict adherence to impartiality and straight dealing with each other, and an unlimited fund of patience, and you find there is a response to your appeal and in their rough manner a certain affection which disarms suspicion and makes way for the Truth.

Their very ignorance is an advantage as they have never been taught as the town lads in the Koranic schools passages of the Koran chosen expressly to deny Christian doctrine. Their minds are therefore not suspicious but open to receive the Truth—the interpretation of which they are so ready to read in the conduct of the leader towards them.

Their despised position is also an advantage, as no one troubles about them and all think they are beyond any comprehension of religion.

As to results, if one has only to judge from the social standpoint there are benefits to the lads, for they make better porter boys; and some have become house servants and obtained other respectable positions in business whilst several have joined the ranks and are fighting

under the French in France. In addition, who can estimate the power of the Word committed to memory during the most impressionable years of life? Many of us after years of effort among the adults of Islam have come to the conclusion that the hope of the Gospel is in the rising generation.

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