

The CHARM of BISKRA

By ISABEL CLARK

It was by way of Philippeville, one of the brightest of the smaller Algerian ports, that I journeyed to Biskra, and passed through, for the first time, the beautiful landscape of the North African Tell. It was in December, but there was little to suggest winter in the scene that met my eyes. The tracts of forest, filled with cork, ilex and olive trees and thick bushes of arbutus, were colored tenderly in shades of softest green and gray, and the endless orchards of orange and citron trees were hung with bright fruits. Great blue stars of convolvulus decorated the hedges and twined over the porches of the little French homesteads. Overhead, the sky was of cloudless sapphire and the mountains were sharply etched against it. It was only when I passed the wide vineyards, empty except for the stunted brown stems, that I could realize it was December. Beyond Constantine, upon the high plateaus that make a well-defined ridge between the green and fertile strip of the plains and the endless waste of desert to the south, an arid, rocky land presents itself. Scant and grudging is the pasturage offered to the flocks that move ceaselessly across the hills. Thin and meager are the crops grown upon that land so patiently plowed. Here and there a chott, or salt lake, clear as crystal, gleamed like a shield of polished steel, reflecting every detail of the mountains with faithful exactitude. Here, too, may be seen the green, scrublike growth of the alfa grass, so much exported to England, where it is used in the production of highly glazed paper. So far it has resisted all the efforts that have been made to cultivate it. Early in the afternoon the train dipped down suddenly into the oasis of El Kantara, known to the Arabs as Fom-el-Sahara—the Mouth of the Sahara. It is a place of palm trees and orange groves, watered by sweet springs, and possessing strange old Roman tombs and delicate fragments of Roman architecture. But the great marvel of El Kantara lies in that deep and narrow gorge where the huge violet sides of Djebel Metlili, risen asunder as if by the mighty stroke of an ax, disclose that abrupt and wonderful entrance into the Sahara. At its narrowest the rent is about 40 yards wide and the length is 300 yards. From the verdant and palm-clad beauty of the oasis the traveler gazes through that rent torn in the high rocks, and sees before him the illimitable white expanse of desert, silver pale and shining as if encrusted with gems. A little wind came up from the south, blowing the fine white sand into my face, reminding me of the desolate solitudes that lay beyond, the endless empty sands dipping far southward. Groves of date palms grew close to the river bank, and hedges of wild oleander still showed a few belated blossoms of fragile pink. It is thus almost dramatically that one enters the desert from the stony alfa-strewn ways of the high plateaus. No longer needed now were the fur coats and foot-warmers that had been so necessary at the hour of our early departure from Constantine. We seemed to have passed suddenly into a sub-tropical land quivering in the burning sunlight.

It is the fashion to say of Biskra that she has been spoiled since "The Garden of Allah" awakened the world to her hidden beauty, made her popular to the hordes of Cook's tourists and gave a fresh impetus to the loafing profession of guide, which the Arab is always only too ready to adopt. He is, indeed, somewhat more of a pest than he used to be; he knows that he has been written about and perhaps presented in too flattering an aspect, and it has made him conceited and self-conscious. But he is really no worse at Biskra than he is in Tunis. Immense and luxurious hotels have sprung up to supersede the simpler caravanserais of former days, when the little town was a favorite but quite unfashionable resort of French people in search of simplicity and sunshine. But I am inclined to think that Biskra is unspoilable. "The Heart of the Desert," as the Arabs affectionately call her, she was the Ad Piscinam of the Romans, and the famous Third Legion sojourned in that wonderful and fertile oasis which can now be reached on the fifth day after leaving London. "Two things are necessary," says Stevenson, "in any neighborhood where we propose to spend a life—a desert and running water." Biskra possesses these essentials in abundance, and she has the additional advantage of constant, almost perpetual, sunshine. Her palm and olive and orange groves are watered by springs that have never failed. Close to her—so close, indeed, that she almost seems to mock at its parched infertility—lies the white splendor of the desert with its pallor as of a calm sea faintly touched with blue haze. The moonlight-colored city with its blanched streets lies surrounded by a fringe of perpetual verdure. Watch the dawn waking iris-hued in the eastern sky, painting the Aures mountains to a deeper rose and drawing a filmy amber veil across the sands, and I think you will agree with me that Biskra is unspoilable.

There are many simple sights that cannot fail to interest the unaccustomed visitor from the North, on account of their novelty. The Arab school, with the bright-eyed, inattentive little turbaned or befezzed scholars, listlessly reciting verses from the Koran, under the aegis of the toba, or schoolmaster; the market-place, teeming with native vendors, story-tellers and sand diviners; the groups of picturesque Arabs wrapped in their white burnouses or shabby gray haicks; the caravans arriving almost daily from the south with their loads of dates; the swaying palanquins within which the women travel on the camels' backs, hidden and mysterious; the fine garden of Count London, with its lovely tropical trees and flowers; the village of Old Biskra, with its clay-built huts swarming with dark-eyed children—these are but a few of the picturesque, quaint or beautiful things that Biskra offers to the visitor. The nomad camps, too, are a source of interest with their tents of camel-hair cloth, guarded often by a white Kabyle dog. The nomad



certainly gives a very practical example of the simple life, for his needs are reduced to a minimum. Food, shelter and clothing of the rudest kind are all that he requires as he wanders from desert to desert with his flocks. Like the bishop of Browning's poem, he seems only to ask that "That hutch should rustle with sufficient straw" but he is nevertheless said to suffer greatly from rheumatism caused by incessant exposure to all weathers, and also from ophthalmia, which is a real scourge among the natives of Algeria, and results all too frequently in complete blindness.

About a week or ten days before Christmas the "courses indigenes," or native race meeting, takes place at Biskra. This meeting is, of course, much less popular than the fashionable one which is held in the spring, but a good number of French people always attend it. There is a superstition in Biskra that this particular week is always the windiest in the year, and certainly, on the solitary occasion of which I have had experience, the reputation was justified. Even in the shelter of the stand we were thickly powdered with fine white sand that was blown in upon us by the high, strong wind. We drove out to the course in one of the shaky little carriages drawn by two swift ponies, which can be hired so cheaply in the town. The Hippodrome d'El Alla was thronged with people, French for the most part, with a sprinkling of English and Germans, and some native Kalds gorgeously appareled. The first part, "Courses du Ministère de la guerre," consisted only of two events, the distance in each case being 1,500 meters. In the second part, "Courses de la Commune indigene," there were three events, and the longest distance run was 2,400 meters, this race being open to horses of all ages. The horses bore such names as Boucocha, Lamari, Salah and Mabrouk, while the jockeys figure on the program under such nomenclature as Messaoud-dou-Chebba, Belgacem-ben-Mohamed and so forth. The course is of hard, white sand, upon which the flying hoofs beat with a noise like thunder.

The streaming burnouses of the Arab jockeys—red and white and blue of all shades—made patches of brilliant color. There were no rows of raucous-voiced bookmakers shouting the odds; but as the Arabs are inveterate gamblers, no doubt a good deal of quiet betting went on. Among the spectators were many French officers, wearing the pale blue tunic of the famous Chasseurs d'Afrique. Most of them were combining business with pleasure, for the Arabs from all parts of the desert bring their best horses to compete in the races, and these are frequently bought for the remount department of the African cavalry. Every effort is being made by the French government to encourage horse-breeding among the Arabs.

Close to the grand stand some of the harem carriages, with their shuttered windows, could be seen wherein the Arab ladies of quality were sitting, concealed, catching imperfect glimpses of the races and also of what probably interested them far more—the toilettes of the French women. A group of Spahis, in their bright red burnouses and high red boots, added to the picturesqueness of the gay scene. When the races were over we were invited to mount up into the judge's box to witness the fantasia. This was a thrilling and rather dramatic finale to the day's proceedings.

The men of each goum, or tribe, rode past, headed by their kaid, or chief, galloping in rapid suc-

cession down that hard, white course, waving their swords and firing their guns as they went. The very smell of powder never fails to fill the Arab with maddest excitement, and the fantasia had all the appearance of a fierce cavalry charge. I retained an impression, vivid if fugitive, of kaleidoscopic colors passing swiftly by, blurred by the blue mist of the smoke mingling with the thick, white desert dust. The noise of the firing, of the beating hoofs and of the wild cheering of the multitude of spectators, the sight of the many-colored burnouses and the bronze faces under their white turbans, left a confused sense upon my mind as of something strange and fantastic, almost unreal.

Driving home, we saw the sun setting behind the groves of palms in a sky that was colored like a pomegranate blossom, with a glow that turned the very sands to flame. Djebel Ahmar-Kraddou, tallest peak of the Aures mountains, caught the reflection of it and shone as with rose-colored fire. The palm fronds were softly stenciled against the sky. Then the swift, sudden twilight of the South drew its delicate purple veil over the scene. Strange music stole out of the silences, the faint flute notes, liquid and tender, of the gazbah, the dull throbbing of tom-tom and derbouka. The moon rose over the white city of the desert and, touched by its matchless radiance, the streets looked as if they had been wrought of gleaming marble; the cold indigo shadows flung by the houses were sharply defined. And surely nowhere in the world can one see a wider expanse of sky, filled from end to end with clusters of golden stars, than that which hangs its canopy, velvet-soft, above the Heart of the Desert.

SLANGY PA.

Mother—Now, Willie, put away those drumsticks. Don't you know your father has a headache?

Willie—But, ma, when I was going into the parlor with my drum he told me to beat it.—Boston Evening Transcript.

DOING HER BEST.

"Does your wife run to meet you when you come home in the gloaming?"
"Well, her gown is a trifle tight for running. She hobbles toward me as rapidly as she can."

THE LONGER THE BETTER.

"I took a long walk yesterday," said Boreman, as he collapsed into a seat at Busyman's desk. "Take another, old man," suggested Busyman; "it'll do us both good."—Puck.

WHICH IS UNGENEROUS.

Bix—I always keep my trouble to myself.
Dix—Quite right, too! When you tell them you are taking up the time of the man who is waiting to tell you his.

HOW TO KILL CHICKEN

ILLUSTRATIONS SHOW MANNER OF GRASPING FOWL.

Thirty Per Cent of Poultry on New York Market is Incompletely Bled, Resulting in Loss of 2 to 5 Cents Per Pound.

(Prepared by the United States Department of Agriculture.)

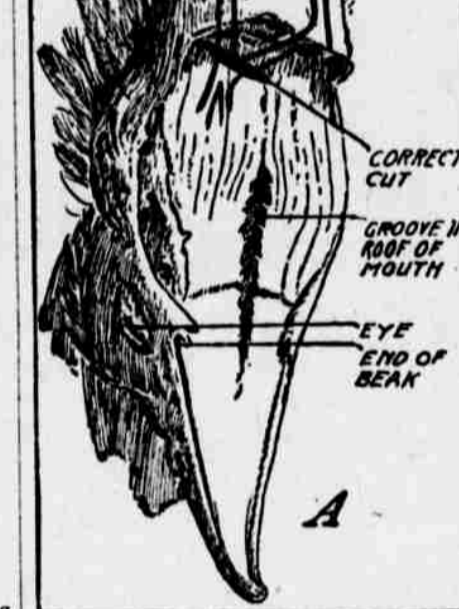
"Grasp the chicken, when killing, by the bony part of the skull. Do not let the fingers touch the neck. Make a small cut with a small, sharp-pointed knife on the right side of the roof of the chicken's mouth, just where the bones of the skull end. Brain for dry picking by thrusting the knife through the groove which runs along the middle line of the roof of the mouth until it touches the skull midway between the eyes. Use a knife which is not more than two inches long, one-fourth inch wide, with a thin, flat handle, a sharp point and a straight cutting edge."



External View of Head and Neck, Showing Position of Veins.

The above instructions on the proper methods of killing poultry were issued by the department of agriculture. At least 30 per cent. of all the poultry coming into the New York market is incompletely bled. Much of it is so badly bled that it results in a loss of from 2 to 5 cents a pound, as compared with the corresponding poultry which is well bled and in good order, continues the department.

Aside from the bad appearance of incompletely bled chickens, their keeping properties are very inferior. The flesh loses its firmness sooner; its flavor is not so good; the

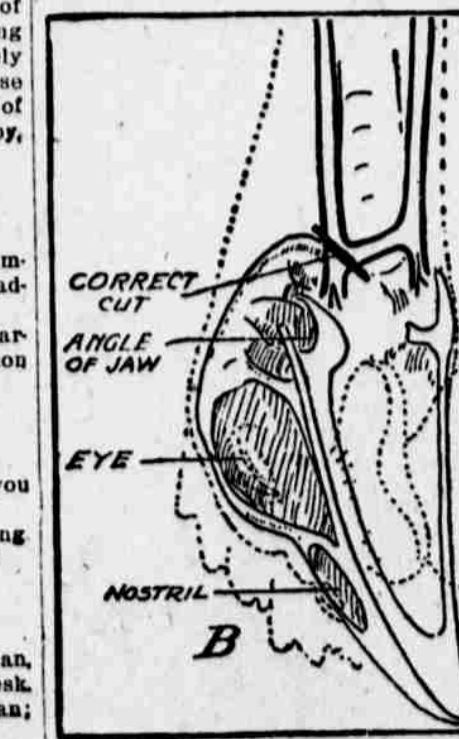


Lower Jaw of Fowl Removed (A).

odor of stale flesh and finally of putrefaction comes sooner; and in every way the product is more perishable.

A very large proportion of the unsightly poultry in our markets aside from the rubbing and tearing of the skins, is caused by an incomplete removal of the blood. This is evidenced by red dots which frequently occur where the feathers have been removed, especially over the thighs and wings, or by the small veins which are seen over the breast and in the angles of the wings, or larger veins, which mar the appearance of the neck.

Two sketches of a chicken's head are here shown from which the lower jaw has been removed. The lower jaw of the chicken is much longer than the beak. It runs back to a point just below the ear, where the hinged joint can be felt. The skin which makes the corner of the mouth and limits the length of the beak ends is indicated in the anatomical drawing

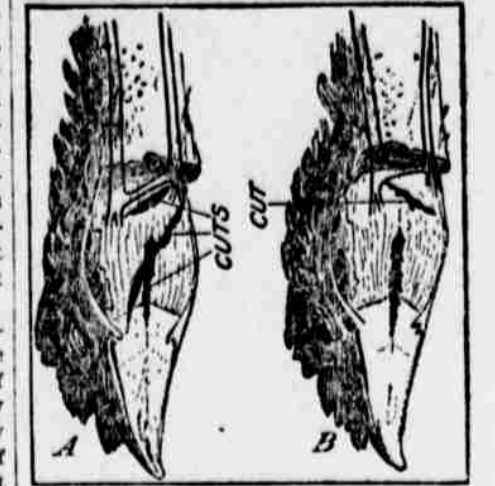


Showing Angle of Jaw (B).

marked "A." The skin and lower jaw have been cut away in order that the position of the veins which lie far back of the roof of the mouth and just below its surface may be seen. The groove which occurs in the roof

of the chicken's mouth is a guide to the position of the blood vessel which it is desirable to cut, this point being behind and to the left of the end of the groove when the chicken is held head down and with the lower side of the head uppermost. The direction and position of the cut which is to sever the veins is shown in figure 2 to be on the left side of the chicken's head when in the position just described.

It will be observed that just in front of the line which indicates the point at which these veins are to be cut they divide into two small branches, the course of which is not further shown. This is because they very soon pass through small holes in the



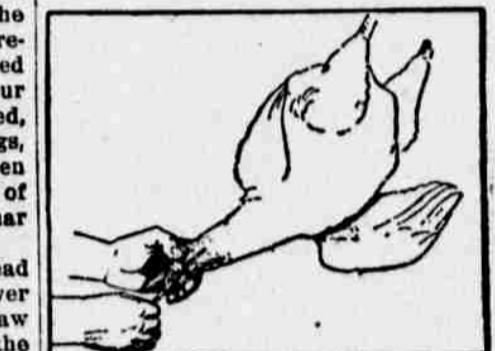
Location of Cuts in Mouths of Badly Bled Chickens (Lower Jaw Removed.)

bone and go into the inside of the skull, and into the deep tissue, where they are quite safe from the killer's knife. If these large veins are to be severed, the cut must be made far enough back to reach them before they penetrate the bones of the skull. On the other hand, if the cut is made too far back and over the edge of the skull, as is shown in connection with the illustration, much of the blood will settle in the loose tissue of the neck instead of running out of the mouth, thereby clogging the vessels and preventing complete bleeding, as well as making unsightly discolored areas in the neck near the head.

Below is shown the position of a chicken ready for killing and held by the feet in a U-shaped shackle. Notice that the thumb of the killer is pressed firmly down on the head just below and behind the ear in the space to which attention was called when discussing the bones of the skull. Here, too, is the hinge of the jaw. Pressure of the thumb on one side of this portion of the skull and on the other side at the same place with the forefinger, or with the forefinger and second finger, will result in opening the chicken's mouth, and holding it open while the operator makes the cut to bleed. Held in such fashion, there is nothing to obstruct the blood vessels, thereby preventing the blood from escaping even though these vessels be cut.

The position of the knife in the mouth, which is shown by the dotted line, needs no further explanation. The knife itself, however, is very different from that ordinarily used in the bleeding of chickens. The knife in common use is much too large, both too long and too broad for the most successful work.

Ineffective cutting, due to a lack of knowledge of the structure of the chicken's neck and head, the use of force rather than skill on the part of the operator, and a knife ill adapted to the work which it has to do is illustrated by the cut above, which shows



Correct Grasp of Head at Angle of Jaw and Position of Small Knife When Cutting Vein.

some of the most common types of cuts in badly bled chickens. A study of these illustrations indicates very plainly why these chickens are badly bled. The lower jaws from these heads were removed so that the position of the cuts could be noted. Head A has had two cuts. One has run parallel with the connection between the two veins and very close to it but has not cut it, and another has run from the angle of the mouth too close to the point where the blood vessel on the left side of the head breaks into the two smaller vessels and penetrates the bones of the skull. The only vessels which were cut in this chicken were the small superficial veins supplying the roof of the mouth and from which the bleeding amounted to almost nothing. Head B shows a cut in the right direction but it did not go quite far enough back to reach the veins at their junction. Head A, in the cut shows the cross cut which is advocated by so many killers. In this case it was made too far front. Both of the large veins escaped and only the small vessels of the roof of the mouth were disturbed. "B" is a good illustration of indiscriminate cutting by a badly directed knife, which in all probability was far too large, since the upper cut extends all the way across the roof of the chicken's mouth and almost as far front as the beak. Another cut which partly follows the groove in the roof of the mouth would indicate that the killer had tried to make a cross cut.