

WINTERS IN ALGERIA





RUE PORTE NEUVE.

GORGAS HISTORICAL TRAVELS 2

Winters in Algeria

Written and Illustrated

by

FREDERICK ARTHUR BRIDGMAN



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WINTERS IN ALGERIA.

CHAPTER I.

THE "WHITE DOVE."

LATE in November, 1885, and at a late hour in the day, we left the harbor of Marseilles, made glorious by the reflections from a splendid sunset; for the filthy water of the busy port assumed a very different aspect from what it wore in broad daylight. In a few minutes we had distanced the black shipping, an inextricable net-work of rigging, the enormous floating wharves, and the light-house. Our fine steamer *Ville de Madrid* then turned her nose towards Algiers at full speed, giving us but a few moments to look upon the island of Château-d'If and to recall Monte-Cristo. On a high promontory Notre Dame de la Garde, the beacon for sailor devotees, rose and faded in the steel-blue sky, suggesting a diminutive Matterhorn.

The Mediterranean—"beautiful wretch"—enticed us on through her smooth waters, which would have been, by sunlight, so blue at the ship's side as to make a piece of lapis-lazuli appear almost gray in comparison. "Beautiful" in her behavior until the following day at noon; but by the time we had passed the islands of Majorca and Minorca, where white houses and win-

dows were glinting in the sun, she verified the appellation of "wretch." She is proverbially treacherous, and certainly, according to my own record of her conduct, I can say very little to her credit.

Was it due to the fact of my having been born in Alabama, with sunlight in my bones, that I felt at home in Algeria when I first set foot on her genial soil in 1872? Or was my satisfaction the effect of the contrast to dark and dingy Brittany, where the interiors are black, and the mud floors absorb the sun's rays; where the low gray clouds could serve as an appropriate frame and background to no other low-toned, sullen, and sombre figure than the Breton, and where white objects are not luminous, because they are not supported and encouraged to shine by the reflections from their surroundings? Certain it is that my first impressions of North Africa can never be dispelled. The near prospect of revisiting its sunny shores was to me one of those delightful anticipations in life which haunt the fancy; and no sooner had I set foot on land than I began with joy to sniff the odors so peculiar to Oriental towns—perfumes of musk, tobacco, orange-blossoms, coffee, hashish—a subtle combination which impregnates Algerine clothing and hovers about the shops and bazaars.

Algiers, seen from the sea, is a mass of white surrounded by the dark green of the olives: the Arabs compare it to a diamond set in an emerald frame. The city is also called "Alger la Blanche," and again Algiers has been compared to a white dove settling on the hill-side. The aspect of the old town which suggested to its author this comparison must have been similar to that presented to us on this ideal night; and how difficult it was to realize the change which had taken place in this hot-bed of corsairs and pirates during the nineteenth century! Only as far back as 1830—when the

French took possession of Algiers—anything but “doves” had settled on this hill-side; blood-thirsty and tyrannical deys gloated on murder, bondage, slavery, rapine, and on the extortion from the rulers of surrounding countries of money, ships, cannon, munitions of war. Their formidable batteries would have made short work of any ship like ours, sailing quietly into their harbor to anchor for any purpose but that of affording them the opportunity to plunder its contents, to put the captain to languish and die in chains, and to stuff the crew into mortars and fire them off at the heads of any foreigners who dared to come to their rescue.

But this was a horrid dream, which must be shaken off in the presence of the tranquil reality.

Nothing could surpass the loveliness of the spectacle before us; the moon was almost full and shone nearly perpendicularly on the compact mass of white houses, with an occasional Jewish dwelling tinted pale blue; here and there the faint red flame of a lamp was seen through the little apertures, rather than windows, from a café where the Arabs often indulge in late-hour gossip and in playing drafts, or from a *m'chacha*, where hashish-smokers, stretched out on matting, were dreaming of their better world, the Paradise of Mohammed.

All was motionless, and no sounds were heard from the shore, as we glided into the harbor, save the plashing of the oars of small boats coming to meet us. The “White Dove” lay asleep on the hill-side against the softest of blue skies—clear, and yet having the appearance of a transparent enamel like the tender old Chinese blue one is so fond of. The calm and lucid surface of the water mirrored the whole scene, and the “great stars that globed themselves in heaven” were doubled in the profound stillness of the sea.

Something like forty years ago there were no modern well-built quay and boulevard running the whole length of the city; the Arab town came down to the water's edge, and boats were moored to rings in the very walls of the houses. What a picture!—fishing-smacks, one mast raking forward, the other backward, with colored sails thrown over the boom to shelter sailors making their *bouillabaisse*, the blue smoke curling up through the rigging. Boats of this kind are still there to-day, and at sunset the smaller ones snugly pack themselves side by side, and Frenchmen, Italians, Spaniards, Maltese, and Arabs crack their jokes and cook their supper under awnings and sails worthy of the reputation of dear old Venice.

Nearly all the passengers were now on deck and prepared to go ashore, to avoid being awakened again at five o'clock in the morning by the unloading of cargo in the grip of that demon, the jerky, cranky, dislocated machine known as the donkey-engine; so called in honor of the being who invented it. We landed in small boats, and paid according to a fixed tariff. Oh, delightful innovation! to be fully appreciated only by the sleepy traveller who has set foot on some Oriental shore, and has had his coat and collar torn off by Arabs—forty, we will say, to strike an average—trying to get possession of him and his baggage.

“Here, you handsome big chap, take charge of my things—hotel So-and-so. What's your name?”

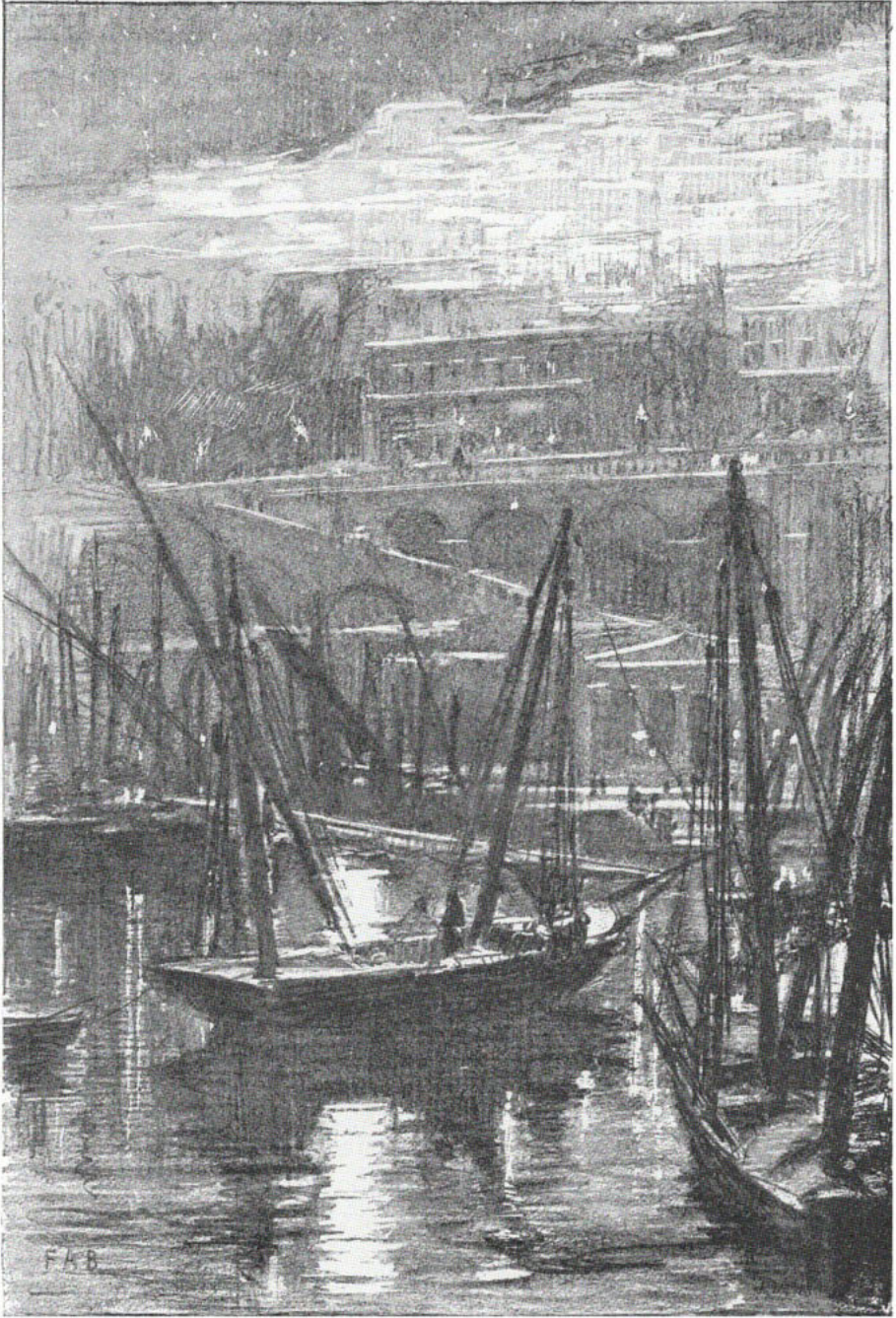
“Mohammed.”

“Yes, of course; I know that much already. Mohammed ben what?”

“Ben Aïssa, mister. You Inglesy?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then you Melican?”



THE HARBOR OF ALGIERS BY NIGHT.

"I am a *saouarr* [artist], and I am going to paint your portrait. Where shall I find you?"

His willingness to pose was not overwhelming, but we made an appointment which, of course, he never kept. This "appointment which, of course, he never kept," may almost be converted into a rule when dealing with Arabs. At any rate, I concluded that two o'clock in the morning was not the hour for engaging models.

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGERS' QUARTER.

ONCE I knew a little chap who always began reading the story of Aladdin thus: "Na town in Tartary there lived a tailor whose name was Mustapha," omitting the big ornamental "I," which made an intelligible beginning—"In a town," etc. Just out of Algiers are suburbs called "Mustapha Supérieur" and "Mustapha Inférieur," and I seldom hear the name of Mustapha without being reminded of the poor tailor; and this reminiscence has always served me as a kind of connecting link between the old Arabian story of the "Wonderful Lamp" and anecdotes and legends of the people in the midst of whom I have spent a good deal of time.

At Mustapha Supérieur, then, let us pitch our tent for the winter season, in the midst of semi-tropical vegetation. The fuchsia, geranium, cactus, and many other plants which struggle for a stunted and diminutive existence in Northern climes, attain here remarkable size, especially the geranium, with twisted and snake-like stems and branches, growing to the height of six feet or more, and enlivening the surroundings with its vermilion flowers. On the pale green cactus grow bright yellow and red flowers, and the beautiful but treacherous prickly-pear, so well armed with its nettled down. Twisted fig-trees, with pale gray trunks and branches, aged cypresses, great swaying olives, pines moaning when fretted with the lightest wind of heaven

(but they are here so surrounded by sunlight and flowers that their mournful influence must be subordinate), almond-trees, large-leaved vines, malachite aloes growing out of red earth, and forming impenetrable hedges on each side of steep and stony paths—these are the most characteristic growths of this soil. The roads they border are sometimes old Roman ways, paved, and overshadowed by the luxuriant growth, and so dark towards evening that coming from El-Biar one stumbles down a long and lonely lane that seems to have no end.

At the back of our hotel, and starting at the governor's summer palace, perhaps two miles from the town, runs the most charming of roads, "le Chemin des Aqueducs," quite level, but twisting and turning round every old landslide, and retreating again to the depths of every ravine, bringing the traveller within a stone's-throw of his footsteps of ten minutes previous. At last, after fascinating glimpses and pictures ready-made, and framed in by olives and cacti, of the bay, the town, and harbor, he comes to the old citadel, the *Kasbah*, high above the town.

Returning to our starting-point, we find ourselves in the midst of white villas, roses, and vegetation, and on the high-road and thoroughfare leading out of Algiers, the daily drive of the winter residents, the road for omnibuses, diligences, and for miserable Arabs coming and going, urging home their laden donkeys and others their camels, carrying immense loads of brushwood, straw in nets, or merchandise in well-stuffed *tellis* (enormous double bags), brushing against the garden walls and passers-by. This is the high-road to Blidah, passing through Birkadem and other villages.

An important feature in the aspect of Algiers is the citadel. Overlooking the town at the corner of the high fortified walls, which were built down to the sea, stands the old palace

of the deys, now used as a garrison for Zouaves. Within its walls are several interesting buildings—in fact, a small city in itself—a palace, garden, a mosque constructed in an unusual way, with four marble columns united to support each arch, and another curious building of immense vaults under one roof, resembling a round loaf of bread flattened on the top, and standing separate from the surrounding buildings. This was the treasury in the palmy days of piracy, when millions upon millions in money and jewels seem to have puffed out its sides, although of masonry. It now serves as a powder-magazine.

Built out from a balcony looking into the court is the “Pavillon de Coup d’Eventail,” of historical interest. The French consul paid a visit to the Dey to demand certain accounts of financial affairs for which the Dey held himself responsible; but this potentate answered by slapping the consul in the face with his fan, a moment of satisfaction which cost the Dey his dominion; for the French landed not long after on the shores of Algiers, and the irascible ruler was sent to recuperate in foreign atmosphere never to return.*

“Alger la Blanche,” seen from the roof of the palace, tumbles down and down, terrace after terrace of dazzling white under the noonday sun, and almost without shadows. Evening creeps on, and the sun, setting behind the hills of the Sahel, gilds at last only here and there a house-top and a minaret faced with glistening tiles; the long blue shadows soon merge into one;

* This happened in 1830. Hussein Pacha, the Dey (Sir L. Playfair tells in his interesting work, “Hand-book for Travellers in Algeria and Tunis”), embarked with a suite of one hundred and ten persons, of whom fifty-five were women. After residing in Italy for a time he went to Egypt, where Mohammed Ali Pacha received him with the consideration due to his rank and misfortunes. One day, after a private audience, Hussein retired to his private apartments and died a few hours afterwards, it is said, in violent convulsions.



BALL AT THE GOVERNOR'S PALACE.

the sun still lingers on the sails of fishing-boats out in the bay; and lastly on Cape Matifou and Djurdjura.

Many of the foreign residents on the heights are English, who spend successive winters in the beautiful villas, in which are combined the charms of Arab construction with the modification of English detail. Here they exchange English hospitalities under Algerine conditions, and a dinner party with European friends in the Moorish court, or patio, is certainly a novel and charming entertainment. An awning is stretched overhead, and in the centre of the court, paved with marble or colored tiles, stands a fountain, the water playing over roses and jasmynes, and trickling down honeysuckle, lilies, and green palms, and splashing on the fish in the basin below; and all this in the winter months. The circular table, laden too with flowers, is placed within the columns and around the fountain.

The governor and admiral give two or three official balls during the winter season—one at the admiralty, situated on the ancient harbor, others at the governor's palaces at Mustapha Supérieur and in the town. The reception, of which an illustration is given, took place in March, at the winter palace in town; the guests were composed of the French residents, civil and military, English, a few other foreigners, a dozen Arab chiefs, and the Mufti. The latter dignitaries, with the native military officers, scattered among the Europeans in the Moorish interior, gave the local color to the reception. The chiefs, notwithstanding the heat of the ball-rooms, wore their ample cloth pantaloons, red leather boots in black leather outer shoes, several burnouses, one over the other, scarlet, black, fawn-color, pale blue. They did not seem very much in their element.

The English afternoon tea and tennis receptions are delightful, in gardens luxuriant with trees and bushes bearing fruit of all sorts. Besides oranges, bananas, grapes, lime, lemon, are

fruits less familiar to us: the Japanese medlar, of a bright yellow, acid, and very refreshing, with four big brown seeds, resembling the kaki of Japan; another (the name of which I do not recall) very much like the mango of India, in consistence more like a thick mass of very hard cream than anything else I can think of, and with very delicate flavor, the exterior symmetrically ornamented with fish-scale design like the pineapple.

The papyrus, so well known as the plant with which the ancient Egyptians made a tissue resembling paper, and upon which they wrote, grows in these patios in the basins of the fountains. The long, straight stem is three-sided like a bayonet, and can be split into fine fibres and woven.

There are a few comparatively wealthy Arab families who live in this quarter, and the women are pleased to receive European ladies, and occasionally make appointments to return their calls, but with the understanding that the gentlemen of the house must keep themselves well out of the way, so that they may unveil themselves and take tea comfortably with the hostess.

During my first visit to Algiers, I remember seeing a kind of conveyance which I have never noticed since. It was like a carry-all covered with a cage formed of close lattice-work, in which sat half a dozen young women, the well-guarded wives of some jealous lord, who only allowed them the privilege of a pleasure-drive under those conditions of privacy. The only similar contrivances that I know of are the small boats at Cairo with housings over them, used for conveying across the Nile the inmates of a harem on the Island of Rhoda.

In the thorough cleaning and scraping of one of the finest villas of Mustapha, a stone embedded a little below the surface of the wall, near the ceiling, and bearing an inscription in English, was discovered; it bore the name of an

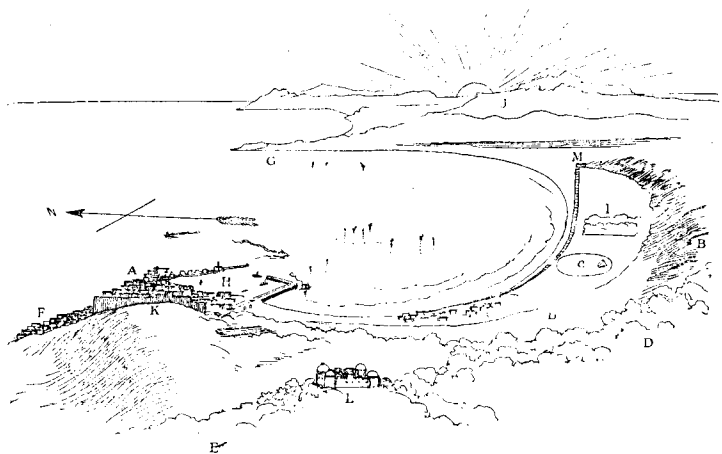
English captive and slave who had been employed in the building of the house.

Another interesting incident is found in Vasari's "Life of Fra Filippo Lippi," the old Italian painter:

"Finding himself in the March of Ancona, and being one day at sea in a boat with certain friends of his, they were all caught by the Moors who ranged about those coasts, and taken into Barbary and kept in slavery, each one being put into chains. There he remained with great distress during eighteen months. But one day, being much in the company of his master, he had a fancy for drawing his portrait. Having taken an extinguished charcoal from the fire, he drew him full length, with his Moorish costume, upon the surface of a white wall. This being told to the master by the other slaves, to whom it seemed a miracle—neither drawing nor painting being practised in those parts—it was the cause of his liberation from the chains that had so long confined him. Truly it is a glory to this great power of art that one to whom belonged by law the right of punishing and condemning should do precisely the contrary—nay, should be persuaded to give caresses instead of chastisement, and liberty instead of death. Having, then, done some work in painting for his master, he was taken in safety back to Naples."

Mustapha Supérieur is well named, as it is indeed superior in every sense of the word to the lower part of the hill, which flattens out towards the bay. The houses are almost entirely of modern construction, and form quite a separate village. Close by is a very large open space—the drilling-ground and race-course—where every morning, from my bed even, I could see the manœuvres of the French cavalry. The horses at that distance looked like mosquitoes. The sun was my chronometer and barometer. The first cold, gray flush

of dawn in a cloudless sky, mirrored in the sea without a ripple, gave promise of a perfect day, and told me how much longer it was allowable to lie in bed and make calculations for the day's work. Djurdjura, covered with snow, and rising above and beyond the long, dark blue mountains of the Atlas range, hung in space, with an unbroken band of mist dividing land and water. Now came the early morning train on its way to Blidah, leaving a trail of white smoke low and motionless along its track, which first rounds the bay, then makes a straight dash to Maison-Carrée. The sky grew warmer and of a greenish tinge, then red and more golden over the sweep of the bay, hemmed in by an out-stretched promontory—Cape Matifou—away to the left, and to the right by the beautiful hills of



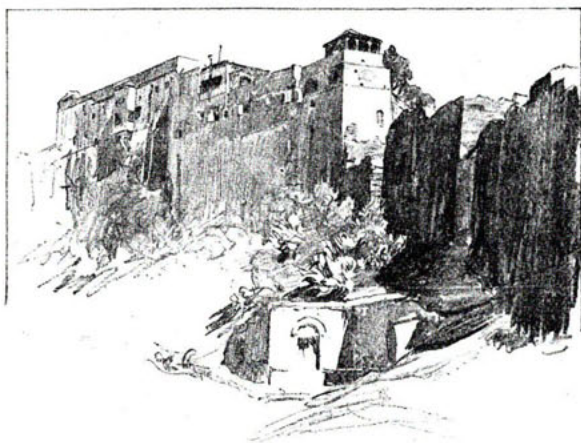
THE BAY OF ALGIERS.

Mustapha, black with olive-trees, and dotted with white Arab villas. I could hear the regular plashing of the waves on the sands, and the sound of each wave died away as it followed the beach, beginning at one end and running along like the lash of a whip.

Back of our elevated position Mustapha continues to rise to El-Biar (The Well), culminating at Bouzareah, which is about 1250 feet above the sea.

From this point one enjoys a glorious view of the Mediterranean and surrounding country. A sketch is given to show the relative positions of the environs. A stands for Algiers, which slopes

down away from us over the nose of the promontory to the harbor, H. Mustapha Supérieur is shown by two B's, and Mustapha Inférieur by c's; also the Champ de Manœuvres and race-course; D, El-Biar; E, Bouzareah; F, an unattractive suburb,



WALLS OF THE KASBAH.

St. Eugène, cold and damp in winter, for it faces north, hot and dusty and without shade in summer; G, Cape Matifou; I, Jardin d'Essai; J, Djurdjura; K, the Kasbah, or citadel, which overlooks the town (an immense wall built of brick and stone, running down to the sea on either side of the ridge, protected the Algerines from inland incursions); L, Fort l'Empereur, named after the emperor Charles V., whose camp was pitched there.

The great walls of the fort and of the Kasbah are half hidden in some places by tall eucalyptus-trees, which feed and thrive on miasma that is death to man.

CHAPTER III.

POPULAR ALGIERS.

BELKASSEM marked me as a *saouarr* on my first return to the town from Mustapha with the necessary paraphernalia for sketching, familiar nowadays to the natives of many an out-of-the-way place. He offered his services as model or guide; and as I was seeking what I might devour in the way of a bit of useful background, and was particularly anxious to see interior life, and gain access to houses and their terraces, I took advantage of the offer of the Arab in his character of guide, and followed him up narrow streets and through whitewashed tunnels to ramshackle doors hung in the most primitive manner, with big round-headed and ornamented nails in various designs, and furnished with elaborate brass knockers.

These knockers must have been intended for foreign callers. The Arab's custom of knocking at the door is as primitive as the hinges; he pounds away with the fist until some one of the inmates answers. A man or boy may come to the door; but a woman either emits a decidedly audible scream from the inner court, or she pokes her head through a window just big enough, or peeps over a terrace wall (concealing her features, of course) to question the caller as to his name and object. The outer door is very frequently left wide open, but the houses, with few exceptions, are constructed with sufficient

ingenuity to prevent passers-by from seeing anything but a blank wall and a little vestibule turning at a right angle. Occasionally, however, one's curiosity is rewarded by a glimpse of the inner court, neatly paved with little six-sided red tiles, with here and there a valuable square of ancient marble or faïence let into the door-sill or the "dado"; slender oleander boughs, or the tortuous branches of a fig-tree, throw shadows in delicate patterns across the pavement, and a thread of sunlight finds its way into an inner chamber. The artist is grateful for this blunder of the architect, or for the coquetry of the inhabitants who may intentionally leave this narrow vista, which is especially probable in the case where the owner of the dwelling is a courtesan. But in no case whatsoever is an outsider expected to enter without knocking. Should an Arab walk into a respectable neighbor's house he would run the greatest risk of being stabbed; but he would no more think of doing so than we would recognize the propriety of a gentleman walking deliberately into a lady's bedroom.

"Baïa! Baïa!"

"Eh! who's there?"

"Belkassem, with a sidi saouarr [gentleman artist]. Will you open the door to us?"

Baïa had ingenuity enough, as I afterwards learned, to conceal by the mattress of her divan a hole in the floor through which she could see visitors who knocked at the street door. The house was of the smallest possible dimensions, and had been whitewashed and bluewashed so often that the original forms of the columns and masonry had become round, and all the details filled up. Beautiful tiles are often thus found completely concealed, as well as marble columns with well-finished capitals and of good design. The bucket of lime and enormous brush on the end of a long pole go blindly to work