

# Work among Sicilians in Tunis.



NORTH AFRICA MISSION,  
18, John Street, Bedford Row, London, W.C.

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*SECOND EDITION.*

**25 copies, 1s. post free.**

# NORTH AFRICA MISSION.

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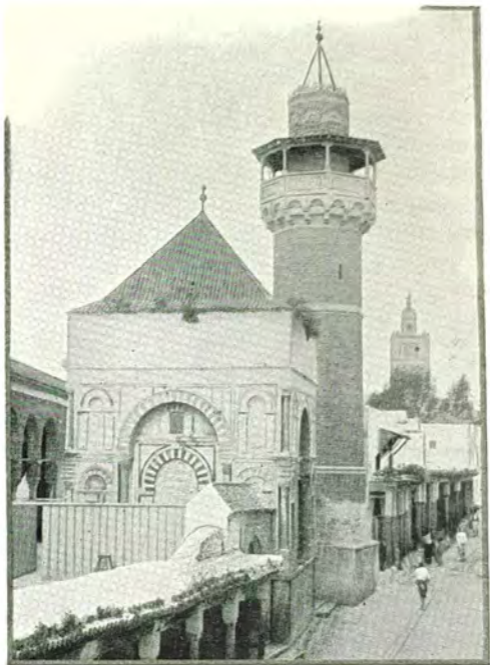
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A Street in Tunis.

## Work among Sicilians in Tunis.

The aim of this booklet is to recount "the goodness of the Lord" to many souls in North Africa, and to arouse thanksgiving in the hearts of His children at home. It is also written in the hope of enlisting their prayers and sympathies for the future.

The scene is laid in the Regency of Tunis, which corresponds with the most important part of the ancient proconsular province of Africa, including the territory of Carthage. Tunisia differs from its neighbour, Algeria, in not being placed under the direct administration of France. Until 1881, its Government was an hereditary Beylick, and the Bey acknowledged the suzerainty of the Porte. But now all is changed. Tunisia is to-day a Protectorate of France, and at the side of the Bey stands the French "Resident General," whose approbation is

necessary for all the acts of the native administration. The Regency has been slowly transformed by the introduction of Public Works, Agriculture, Education, Post and Telegraph offices, and is now regarded as a very prosperous Colony, whose population in 1900 was officially enumerated thus:— Native Moslems, 1,688,443 ; Europeans, 128,895 (not including the troops of the Division of occupation) ; Tunisian Jews, 70,501 ; making a total of 1,887,839, or nearly 2,000,000. As our tale has to do with the Italian-speaking people of the Regency, we may add here, that it is said that 100,000 of these are scattered over Tunisia.

The first Italians to settle in the Province were Jews from Leghorn—bankers, financiers of the Beylical administration. These autocrats have ceased to play a political rôle since the French régime began, but the number of Italians in general has increased. In all the Ports, from Sfax to Mers el Kebir, there has long been a group of resident Italian fishermen, whilst others have come over for the fishing season. These are chiefly

Sicilians and Neapolitans. In the towns, many have settled as masons, painters, carpenters, cabinet-makers and shoe-makers, etc. From these should be distinguished numerous Italians from the north, whose immigration is more recent and corresponds with the progress of the working of the mines in the Regency.

The Sicilians differ from these Italians in dialect and in history. The Saracens, who dominated the island of Sicily from A.D. 827 to A.D. 1091, have bequeathed to the Sicilians certain traits of character which make work among them similar in some respects to that among Arabs. Fatalism, the prejudice of the Harem, a fighting spirit, and alas! the lack of conscience are all there, together with strength, intelligence, and many noble qualities which the Gospel alone can develop.

An Englishwoman whose husband is a Pastor in Sicily writes:—

“Self-control is entirely lacking in the Sicilian character, and alike in infancy and old age one sees evidences of the most heated passions. I have seen a mother bite the flesh of her child till the blood

flowed, although only a few moments before she had been fondly kissing the little one. Every trait that we deplore in these people is encouraged and fostered by their religion instead of being rooted out by the power of God. I often think that even the Pope himself would not acknowledge the very pagan demonstrations one sees in every town and village.

“At the little village of Priolo, not far from Syracuse, a street vendor boasted that he had taken £1 5s. from the poor villagers in one day by the sale of tiny images and charms of their patron saint, S. Sebastian. He gave instructions to those who bought, that if they preserved the oil remaining in the lamp burnt during the night before the miniature image, and used it for any subsequent complaint, it would be entirely efficacious. Generally speaking, no girl is allowed out alone after passing the age of ten years. At an even earlier age her mind is filled with thoughts of marriage, and her mother has already begun to prepare her wedding outfit.”

Our friend concludes (and we add our testimony to hers) that when a Sicilian is wrought upon by the Grace of God, he becomes a most sincere, affectionate, earnest and zealous servant and follower of the Lord Jesus—a wondrous miracle. “Sicilians are a people hard to win, but well worth winning for the glory of God.”

**Inception of  
the Work.**

It was in June, 1896, that the North Africa Mission began work among the Italian-speaking people in Tunis, the capital of the Regency. Tunis is the largest city in North Africa with the exception of Cairo, and has a population of 250,000. The Europeans number 61,497, and of these over 40,000 are Italians. Moreover, most of the Maltese and native Jews (50,000) understand the same language, so that it will be seen that there was plenty of room for workers whose hearts ached for the many thousands almost as ignorant of God and of the claims of Christ as the Moslems themselves. They were without the Bible to illuminate them, and a large proportion of the Sicilians and Maltese could not have read it, if it had been placed in their hands. Some parts of Tunis, and especially one quarter known as "Little Sicily," were notorious for the low state of morality; ignorance and superstition abounding among the inhabitants, who were not all even nominally Roman Catholics, but atheists and socialists, delighting in Secret Societies—a terror to law-abiding folk of all nationalities.





Italian Sunday School.

A Hall was rented and Meetings and Sunday Schools were started. From the first there was a ready listening to the Gospel, and amidst much that sorely tried and depressed the workers, arising partly from the character of those among whom they laboured, the truth began to take root and to bring forth fruit. There were, of course, many seeds devoured by the birds of the air—many which sprang up but had no deepness of earth, and withered away when the hot sun of persecution arose—and many which were choked with the thorns of daily trials and worries. Nevertheless, some souls were found who, forsaking all for Christ, gave themselves up to His service—determined to know nothing but Christ crucified.

One who is now an earnest worker was at first angry with his son for attending the Sunday School, and hid away his Bible, telling him it was burnt; but, little by little, the boy's influence and life told, and the father began to read himself, and was filled with surprise and joy at the wonderful contents of the once despised Book. He went

on reading for years, often by night as well as by day, and the quiet work in his heart (unknown to us) at last became manifested at a Watch Night Service at which he delivered his soul in an ardent proclamation of his love to Christ and his resolve to follow Him at all costs. Since then, his wife and daughters have been converted, and the whole family is to-day zealous for the Truth.

**The  
Church.**

By degrees a little Church was formed, to which have been added more than a hundred members. It is difficult to give statistics of the number now actually in fellowship, as many of the converts go off to find employment in other towns, so that, though new members are frequently added, others are lost by emigration. We are thankful to keep them long enough to see the work of grace deepen in their souls, and those who are permanently settled generally become helpers in the work.

To put the New Testament into the hands of those who, shocked by the incon-

sistencies of Rome, have gone at a bound from Romanism to Atheism, is an untold privilege. "I felt," said one young man, a photographer of Maltese and Sicilian extraction, "when I was far away from my family and anxious about them, that I would give much to be able to believe in a God to whom I might pour out my soul in prayer on their behalf. I was an unhappy man, though sincere in my atheism." A Christian artist, making his acquaintance, lovingly tried to convince him of the existence of a Divine Being, and quite unsuccessful, went home to carry the burden of this soul in prayer to God. He left in his friend's house a copy of the New Testament; and alone, with at first every critical faculty wide awake, the young doubter read and pondered. The Spirit of God was wrestling with him, and at last he ceased resisting. In haste he sought his friend. One mutual look was enough. In another moment they were in each other's arms, and both felt the sweetness of a sinner's reconciliation to a seeking Saviour. As the first moments of 1910 broke upon us, the

young photographer came modestly forward in our Watch Night Service, and with simple words told of his great joy and peace in believing. He is now a Sunday School teacher and has charge of our new Hall, taking the greatest interest in all that concerns it, living on the premises, but receiving no salary.

**The New  
Hall.**

The approach of the hot season for some years gave us cause for anxiety. Our first little Hall, was most uncomfortably crowded. Many strangers were turned away from the door and some of our men could never sit, but were compelled to stand throughout the evening service. It was not easy to decide what to do. Could we trust and go forward to take a more suitable place with the certainty that our expenses would be doubled? At last, however, all doubts vanished, and in God's good time a suitable hall in the right neighbourhood was vacated, and after waiting upon God for guidance, the premises were secured. These consist of a Hall capable of

holding some two hundred people, classrooms, dwelling for caretaker and small garden—all for £48 per annum.

We took possession of the new premises on June 19th, 1910, all our people rejoicing with us and praising God for the comfort, space and coolness of which they had so long felt the need. Monthly free-will offerings were at once instituted to meet extra expenses, such as electric lighting, etc. Our Sunday morning collections are devoted to the relief of the poor and to defray sundry small expenses. Though our people give generously, they are too poor to contribute large sums such as are required for payment of rent, salary of evangelist, etc.

**The  
Sunday  
School.**

The Sunday School has been a source of much encouragement. Some of our former scholars are now at work in the Master's vineyard—one as a Pastor in Sicily, another as Vice-president of a Y.M.C.A., others as Sunday School teachers. It was a great relief in making the move to be able to form the School into



Sicilian Workmen and N.A.M. Evangelist.

seven classes, those for young men and young women in different rooms. The history of each teacher would be interesting if there were space to tell it, and also the way in which the children have influenced their parents.

**Bizerta.** Various calls have come to us to extend our work to other towns. We have responded according to our ability, and could do much more if we had funds for itineration, rent, etc. Having received special donations from two ladies, we have for some years been able to help Bizerta, a military port not far from Cape Blanc, the most northerly point in Africa. This is an exceptionally interesting place, and one likely to play an important part in the naval history of the future. Its lake, which is its most important feature, forms a land-locked harbour containing fifty square miles of anchorage for the largest vessels afloat. The French have spent 40,000,000 francs on this place, and have connected the lake with the sea by a deep canal. The European population of the town is 7,585, and is likely to increase. The



lake abounds in excellent fish and gives employment to many Italian fishermen. The climate of Bizerta is less trying in the summer months than that of Tunis, owing to its position between the sea and the lake. The Evangelist from Tunis visits Bizerta and holds services in a hall rented for the purpose. An earnest Bible-woman has for over a year done splendid work there among women and children.

**The Work of the Week.** The Sunday services at Tunis begin at 9 a.m., when as many of the members of the Church as are able to escape from the entanglements of Tunisian life meet together for worship. Sunday is not a day of rest in this city except to those who are determined to make it so. After the service there is sometimes a prayer-meeting for the active Y.W.C.A. members, or occasionally some necessary conference among the leaders of the work. At 3 p.m. the Sunday School assembles; also the Y.W.C.A. girls meet for a Bible Class. A class for young men is held at another hour.

The Sunday evening Evangelistic Service begins about seven o'clock, but as the orthodox time in Tunis is one hour after sunset, this is variable. The Hall is generally filled, and sometimes it is necessary to take advantage of a large class-room, the door of which is exactly opposite the pulpit; and late-comers seated there can hear very well without disturbing the crowded congregation. The average number attending is about ninety.

On Monday evening the Evangelist conducts a conversational Bible-class for men; and whereas it was formerly almost impossible to gather Sicilians together for such a purpose—although they liked to listen to preaching—there are now over thirty who gladly avail themselves of the opportunity.

On Tuesday the evangelist generally departs to hold his two evening meetings at Bizerta, returning on Thursday morning, usually very tired, but able, if no one else offers, to conduct the Thursday evening service.

Friday evening tests the consecration of the Sunday School teachers, for after their long day's work they are invited to take a weary walk to be present at the Preparation Class. This is a profitable hour.

Saturday evening is devoted by the leaders of the work to prayer and conference. At this meeting important discussions are carried on, decisions made, and guidance from the Lord sought.

This is the regular order of the week's work, but other classes and cottage meetings are frequently held. Miss Ethel Roberts has for many years given herself specially to visiting, caring for the sick and sorrowful, explaining the Gospel from house to house as she found opportunity, and seeking the lost, "one by one"; never resting until indifferent hearers became enquirers and seeking souls entered the fold. The work has, during the present year (1913), sustained a great loss in the resignation of Miss Roberts, whose health does not permit of her return to Tunis. In answer to many prayers, the Lord is sending forth other helpers, but as

yet no Brother has offered to come and lighten the labours of Signor Varvelli, the Evangelist, whose zealous spirit is pained that much work ready to hand must be left undone, owing to his want of strength to respond to the calls. Many of our young men and women are earnestly striving to carry the Gospel to villages around. In this they need supervision and training. An experienced Brother who would either go with them or else replace the evangelist at Tunis, thus setting him free to itinerate, would, if sent by God, find a happy sphere and a cordial welcome.

**Finance.** It is, of course, impossible that this work among Sicilians in the City of Tunis should be carried on without help from friends at home, and so a brief statement of financial needs will not be out of place. The sum of at least £200 is required annually to cover the support of the Italian evangelist, the rent of the two halls and other expenses. The contributions of the little church are used for lighting, medicines for the sick poor, etc.

**Needs.** Besides this sum of money the following special needs may be noted:—

- I. An American Organ or a Harmonium (costing about £10), large enough to lead the singing in the Hall.
- II. A supply of French and Italian books suitable for prizes; also garments, toys and shawls for distribution at the Sunday School fêtes.

Donations may be sent to the Secretary, North Africa Mission, 18, John Street, Bedford Row, London, W.C. Parcels not exceeding 11 lbs. in weight may be sent direct to Miss Case, at Rue Colmar 38, Tunis, by Foreign Parcel Post; but boxes, cases or parcels exceeding 11 lbs. in weight should be addressed to the N.A.M., c/o. Messrs. A. J. Bride & Son, 39, City Road, London, E.C., by whom they will be forwarded to Tunis. Particulars as to their contents and value should, however, first be sent to the office of the Mission as above, and a reply received with any necessary advice.

## THE NORTH AFRICA MISSION

was founded in 1881 by the late Mr. George Pearse, assisted by the late Dr. Grattan Guinness and Mr. Edward H. Glenny. It was at first called "THE MISSION TO THE KABYLES," but gradually extended its operations to all parts of North Africa, work among Mohammedans being its main business. At the present time, the most easterly station of the Mission is Shebin-el-Kom in Egypt, and the most westerly, Casablanca in Morocco.

**Its object** is to make known the Gospel of God's grace to those among whom it labours, and then to instruct them in the way of God more perfectly, that they may be intelligent and devoted witnesses to others. It is desired that self-supporting and self-propagating native churches should be established.

**Its character** is Evangelical and Evangelistic, embracing Christians of various denominations who seek to be loyal to Christ and to the inspired Word of God. It seeks to encourage dependence upon God in all things.

The illustrated Magazine, "NORTH AFRICA," is published monthly. It contains a full record of the work of the Mission. Price 1/6 per annum, post free.

Further information as to the Mission or particulars of N.A.M. booklets, &c., may be obtained on application to the General Secretary, 18, John Street, Bedford Row, London, W.C.

