The Inside Story of the Harem

Secrets of the Sultan's Imperial Seraglio

CHAPTER I

By N. M. PENNER

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A HORSE and carriage moved creakily along a side-street of Constantinople. It was one of a procession of thirty-one carriages. Inside it babbled six women, gazing wide-eyed through their veils at the bright tiled roofs of the city—a city in which they had lived but which few of them had seen except from the distant windows of the sultan's palace at Yildiz.

These were ladies of the imperial harem. They had been witness. They spoke of the pressures and the ignorance that had darkened their days of imprisonment within the strange world that was the sultan's harem. And from the other carriages peered sad eyes, too, for every one contained girls and women of the harem—more than three hundred of them in all. Very few of their swarthy faces showed a glimmer of confidence or hopelessness.

The year was 1009. The occasion was the final breaking up of the imperial harem and the harem system. Abdul-Hamid II, the last of the sultans, had fallen and was on his way to exile in Salonica with only a few of his favorites. An institution that had existed for more than four centuries was at an end.

Here is the way one of his subjects described the mournful procession:

"These unfortunate ladies were of all ages between 15 and 50. Finally they were all collected in the seraglio in connection with one of the strangest ceremonies that ever took place there. It is well known that most of the ladies in the harems of the Turkish sultans were Circassians, the Circassian girls being very much esteemed on account of their beauty and being consequently very expensive. As Abdul-Hamid's seraglio was no exception to this general rule, the Turkish government telegraphed to the different Circassian villages in Anatolia, notifying them that every family which happened to have any of its female members in the ex-sultan's harem was at liberty to take them home, no matter whether the girls had been originally sold by their parents or had (as the case in some instances) been born from their homes by force.

"In consequence of this a large number of Circassian mountaineers came in their picturesque garb into Constantinople, and on a certain fixed day they were conducted in a body to the seraglio, where, in the presence of a Turkish commissioner, they were ushered into a long hall filled with the ex-sultan's wives and concubines, all of whom were then allowed to unveil themselves for the occasion. The scene that followed was very touching. Daughters fell into the arms of their fathers, whom they had not seen for years. Sisters embraced brothers or cousins, and in some instances relatives met who had never met before and who were only able to establish their relationship by means of long and mutual explanations.

"The contrast between the delicate complexion and costly attire of the women and the rough, weather-beaten appearance of the ill-clad mountaineers who had come to fetch them home was the least striking feature of the extraordinary scene."

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