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The Inside Story of the Harem



(Hans Stubenrauch's "Scheherazade," by courtesy Colonial Art Co.)

Women of the harems throughout the orient and throughout the centuries were nothing more than charming chattels of their despotic masters.

Secrets of the Sultan's Imperial Seraglio

CHAPTER I.

By N. M. PENZER

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A HORSE and carriage moved creakily along a side-hill street of Constantinople. It was one of a procession of thirty-one carriages. Inside it huddled 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. Their black eyes had a certain sadness that spoke of the repression and 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 gleam of confidence or hopefulness.

The year was 1909. 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 witness 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

Foreword

If you stood today atop a certain high parapet in busy Constantinople you would behold a city within a city. This inner city would not be the mêlée of streets, trolley cars, and factory chimneys that is modern Constantinople. Instead it would be a vision of a city more dazzling than was Bagdad in the days of the Arabian Nights.

● Its white towers, shining domes, pale-hued spires, and ancient jumbled roofs would spread before your eyes for distances equal to many city blocks. The perfume of mysterious sunken gardens would tinge the air. You would find yourself thinking of Aladdin and Sindbad the Sailor—perhaps even of some famed sultan of Turkey idling away the summer hours in his harem.

● Well chosen the latter thought would be, for at the moment you would actually be in the presence of the sultan's own private realm, the seraglio, of which an important section once housed all of the sultan's many hundred women, known as his harem. This mysterious realm guarded its secrets so jealously that until now no man has even attempted to write its complete story.

● At last, however, it has been done. N. M. Penzer, a noted author and orientalist, has brought back from Constantinople the remarkable story which you are about to read. Mr. Penzer will relate for the first time all the mystery, court intrigue, tradition, and magnificence of the imperial harem of Turkey.

with one of the strangest ceremonies that ever took place even there. It is well known that most of the ladies in the harems of the Turkish

Mysterious Home Life of the Grand Turk

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 was the case in some instances) been torn 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 commission, 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 were only able to establish their relationship by means of long and mutual explanations.

"The contrast between the delicate complexions 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 not the least striking feature of the extraordinary scene. (Continued on page four.)