

The Inside Story of the Turkish Harem

Even Great Sultan Had His Woes

By N. M. PENZER
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INSTALLMENT II.

CONSTANTINOPLE, like Rome, is a city built on seven hills. Of the seven, one hill is more famous than all the others put together. It is the historic site of capitol, ranging from the earliest Byzantine temple to the vast present-day seraglio palace, of which the harem was the most glamorous feature.

As the Acropolis is to Athens and the Capitoline hill to Rome, so is this hill to Constantinople. It is known as the "first hill" and it crowns the end of the finger of land that separates the Sea of Marmora from the inlet called the Golden Horn, the latter being named for its curved shape and its profitability as an ancient fishing ground.

The population of the city in the early days was partly Athenian and partly Lacedaemonian and, being a natural fortress and a fishing center with a fine deep harbor, it was constantly fought over, sometimes one of these Greek states and sometimes the other being in possession. Also it fell occasionally into the hands of the Macedonians, though during one famous siege an advancing Macedonian army was revealed to the Byzantium sentinels despite the darkness of midnight by a miraculous sudden flash of light in the sky. Whether this was lightning or not, it mystified all who saw it and saved the town—at least for a time.

As a memorial to the divine interference, the Byzantines built an altar to torch-bearing Hecate and stamped a crescent on their coins, an emblem which survives on the Turkish flag to this day. The date 1453 is one of the most important turning points in history, for it marked the final

Foreword

● Mohammed II., sultan of Turkey, leaned over a large map in the throne room of the newly built seraglio palace in Constantinople. His grand vizier stood beside him. On the parchment the capital city of the conquering Ottoman Turks was conspicuously marked. Mohammed eyed it, scratched his prominent chin, and grunted with satisfaction. He himself had led the very army which just ten years before, in 1453, had taken this famous center of the East Roman empire by assault.

● But his majesty had not called for his maps this morning in order to gloat over past conquests. He was studying the caravan trails to Circassia, that primitive country at the opposite end of the Black sea, where the women were said to be the most beautiful in the world. For, now that he had built a secure palace in the most strongly fortified capital in Europe, he could afford to reap some rewards for his success.

● Thus came the harem of the Turkish sultans. It counted its women not singly, nor even by the dozen, but by the hundreds. Only in 1909, when the last of the sultans was deposed, did the institution come to an end. Yet still its story remained untold and was only brought to light with the recent personal investigations by N. M. Penzer, a noted orientalist, into the still guarded seraglio buildings and courtyards.

● Mr. Penzer here continues his story of the harem.

blow to the tottering East Roman empire and the coming to power of the Ottoman Turks in Europe.

*The Ottoman Turks, led by Ottoman I., had revolted from their barbaric mother tribe, the Seljuk Turks, some six generations earlier in Asia Minor. Ever since they had been swarming westward, with the conquest of European Constantinople their principal goal.

*Italics appearing in the text are the editor's explanatory notes.



A parade leaving the imperial gate of the seraglio. (1) Pasha on horseback. (2) Officer of the janizaries. (3) A halberdier or harem servant. (4) Two other varieties of halberdiers. (5) Janizary. (6) Kapici or guard. (7) Chief black eunuch. (8) Sword bearer. (9) Sultan and his kapici. (10) Grand vizier.

The great seraglio built shortly after this time made the city more impregnable than ever. But even before the building of the seraglio, complete seclusion of that whole section of the city was effected by the construction of a high land-wall running right across the hill from the Golden Horn to the Sea of Marmora. (See map.) Protection from the sea—that is to say, on the Marmora coast—was already well provided for, as the ancient Byzantine sea-walls ran right around Seraglio point till they joined the great land walls.

A description of this great fortress surrounding the imperial harem should start at the main gate, which enters into the first court, often known to Europeans as the Court of the Janizaries. The story of the janizaries, the sultan's guards, will be told presently.

This first court was of a semi-public nature, and entry was refused to nobody, whatever his rank or creed. As you entered, to the right were the infirmary, the imperial bakery, and the waterworks; to the left were the great wood yard, the Church of St. Irene, the imperial mint, the privy treasury, the palace storehouse, and two pavilions for members of the outer service.

Near the gate at the far end were two "example stones" on which decapitated heads were exhibited on occasion, and the fountain of execution in which the chief executioner and his lieutenant washed their bloody hands.

One rule strongly enforced was that of silence. Nearly all travelers have remarked on the extraordinary silence that was maintained in the different courts with increasing degrees of intensity, until in the third court it was like "the silence of the tomb." A traveler in 1700 wrote:

"Anybody may enter the first court of the seraglio . . . but everything is so still the motion of a fly might be heard; and if anyone should presume to raise his voice ever so little, or show the least want of respect to the mansion place of their emperor, he would instantly have the bastinado by the officers that go the rounds. Nay, the very horses seem to know where they are, and no doubt they are taught to tread softer than in the streets."

At the new bakery in the first court so high a standard of bread was required that even in times of shortage no excuse was taken if the pure whiteness of the royal bread was affected in the smallest degree. The traveler, Bon, who visited the seraglio in 1604, tells us that the bread was of several kinds: very white for the sultans, the pashas and other grandes, moderately good for the middle folk, and black for the gardeners.

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One of the most prevalent architectural forms in the outer parts of the seraglio is the kiosk. More than a dozen of these little "summer houses" were built at one time or another and many remain to this day. An example will show the use of these odd pavilions which arose and disappeared with the whims of the luxury-loving sultans.

The Alai kiosk at the most westerly angle of the seraglio wall is fairly typical. It serves both as a sort of secluded nook and as a lookout station. It commands an excellent view in all directions and one could hardly imagine a better place for viewing passing processions.

Many tales are told of the purposes to which it was put in bygone days. Intended primarily as a meeting place for the sultan and his attendants prior to the weekly visit to the mosque on Fridays, it was used by Murad IV. as a vantage point from which to practice his prowess with the arquebus (primitive gun) on the passersby. When popular indignation began to express itself on this particular pastime of the sultan, the royal "bag" was limited to ten heads per diem!

The kiosk also served for public audiences in emergencies, when the petitioners would gather in the street below, each keeping at a safe distance from the other. Thus in the revolt of the janizaries in 1655 the sultan was forced to appear at the window of the Alai kiosk to hear the complaints of the soldiers, and, in order to save his own head, cast headlong into the street the strangled bodies of the chief black and white eunuchs, while on the following day the bodies of nearly all the other principal ministers were



Here in the marketplace of Constantinople sit the slaves waiting to be sold. Within the window lolls the shopkeeper. At the left, seemingly little disturbed by her plight, is a girl from the Circassian hills whence came the beautiful women of the sultan's harem. (From a painting by Jean Leon Gerome.)

handed to the janizaries as a peace offering by the terrified sultan.

Another place where the sultans were wont to spend their time in warm weather was the summer palace, which was a sort of super-kiosk built right on the tip of Seraglio point. Its principal feature was its large harem quarters. One of the few visitors ever to see these halls and rooms was a Frenchman named Pouqueville who journeyed there about the year 1803. Of the harem gate he wrote:

"The enormous size of the key and the noise made by the gate grating upon its hinges, united with the solitude and sacredness of the place, seemed at first to strike us all with a sort of awe." I fully appreciate his feelings, and experienced them myself after ascending the worn wooden stairs in the harem proper and standing in silence gazing at the heavily barred bedroom of the harem girls, a spot so sacred and teeming with such romance that when I found my voice it was but a whisper.

"Twelve feet away," continued Pouqueville, "was a second gate—of wood, and between the two gates was the apartment of the female slaves on the first floor, provision being made for 300 women in all."

At the farther end of the court were the apartments of the head eunuch and the black eunuchs under his control. There was an inner courtyard connecting at its farthest point with a kiosk called the Marmor kiosk. It gave entrance to the rooms of the sultan's favorite wife and of his mother.

Now we come to the corps of soldiers whose duty it was to guard all these parts of the seraglio. As mentioned earlier in this instalment, the first court of the seraglio was often known as the Court of the Janizaries, and not without good reason, for throughout its bloody history this corps had been inseparably linked with the seraglio.

In the early days the Turks possessed no standing army, and it was under Sultan Orkhan that

a regular paid army was first organized. The result was unsatisfactory, however, because the Turkomans, from whom these troops were recruited, were not used to fighting on foot or to submitting to military discipline. Accordingly in the year 1330, on the advice of one Chendereli Kara Khalil, a system was adopted whereby a certain number of Christian youths—at first 1,000—were every year taken from their parents and, after undergoing a period of apprenticeship, were enrolled as *yeni cheri*, or "new troops."

...

The venerable Haji Bektash, founder of the Bektashi dervishes, blessed the corps and promised them victory. He remained ever after the patron saint of the janizaries. Standing in front of their ranks, he stretched the sleeve of his gown over the head of the foremost soldier and cried:

"Let them be called janizaries [from *yeni cheri*!] May their countenances be ever bright, their hand ever victorious, their sword keen! May their spears always hang over the heads of their enemies! And whosoever they go may they return with a white face!"

And as the holy man raised his hand in blessing the thick sleeve of his robe hung down in a double fold, and in commemoration of the benediction a cloth flap modeled on the sleeve was henceforth attached to the hat of the janizaries, as can be seen in the accompanying picture.

Recruits for the janizaries were obtained from all conquered countries, but mainly from Albania, Bosnia, and Bulgaria.

The laws were at first most strict, enforcing implicit obedience, absolute concord among the corps, abstinence from all forms of luxury, forbidding marriage or domestic ties of any kind, and demanding observance of all religious laws of Haji Bektash. Members of the corps were not to trade in any way, were to have no pay in peace time, and

were to receive arms only in time of war. Their rations were quite inadequate and soon led to the breaking of some of the regulations. As time went on all kinds of abuses occurred, as we shall shortly see.

In 1551 a visitor describes the janizary as being armed with a "scimitar and a dagger, with a little hatchet hanging at his girdle, using also long harquebusses, which they can handle very well." Janizaries were not allowed to wear beards, but, "to the intent that they should seem the more cruel and furious in the aspect of their faces, they let their mustachios grow very long, gross, and thick."

The names of the officers were all connected with the culinary art. Thus the *agha* was known as the head soup distributor; then came the head cook, followed by the head water carrier. Their standard was emblazoned with a huge kettle, which merits some detailed consideration. It is hard to say exactly when these kettles began to play such an important part in the history of the corps. In actual fact, the kettles were mess caldrons covered with a lid used for the distribution of the food. Each barrack had a large regimental copper, while the ordinary sized kettles were distributed in the proportion of one to every twenty janizaries.

And so the kettles came by degrees to be symbols of military pride and, like our drums, were piled in front of the tent of the *agha* when the janizaries were in camp. On the march the kettles were carried by recruits in relays, and their loss during a battle was a lasting disgrace. The large regimental copper was borne by older men, and its loss was considered so grave that only some exploit of great daring could efface the stain.

In times of peace the janizaries assembled in the second court after midday prayer every Friday to receive their due allowance of *pilaf*. The sultan waited in the kiosk between the divan and the gate of felicity

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