

The Inside Story of the Turkish Harem

The Eunuch Role in the Seraglio

Foreword

● Sultan Mohammed II. of Turkey had a problem. In 1453 he had captured the coveted city of Constantinople for his people and later had established in his new-built capitol and palace a luxurious harem of the most lovely girls his agents could find.

● This was his treasure. But how was he going to guard it? Strange as it may seem, this problem was a new one to the sultans of Turkey in the fifteenth century. A vigorous Asiatic tribe which had recently come into great wealth and power in Europe, the Turks were then relaxing the sword for the first time. They had just begun to learn the ways of leisure and luxury. And so Sultan Mohammed naturally turned to the sophisticated Byzantine Greeks, the former masters of historic Constantinople, for the answer.

● The answer was "eunuchs." "Let eunuchs guard your women," said the subject Greeks.

● And so it was done.

● Only the eunuch, the man who is not a man, could be trusted to guard the harem without defiling it.

● In today's instalment of Mr. Penzer's story of the harem we meet the eunuchs and see what these strange beings really were and really did.

By N. M. PENZER

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INSTALLMENT IV.

HE LOOKED like a fat and rather formidable middle-aged colored woman who had long since abandoned all hopes of appearing attractive. He wore a long coat of scarlet silk trimmed with sable and other rare furs which reached to within an inch of the ground. His hat was a huge sugar-loaf affair, worn at a slant on the back of the head.

Thus appeared the *kislar agha*, or chief black eunuch of the imperial seraglio palace in Constantinople. Curiously enough, his was a position of high responsibility and power. He was considered in the later days of the sultans to rank second only to the sultan himself, and considerably higher than any of the white eunuchs.

Until about the beginning of the seventeenth century the status of the white eunuchs had been much more important than that of the black, but so great had been their greed and graft and thievery that they were little by little divested of their authority. This was transferred to the black eunuchs, who were to a certain extent their rivals.

Especially in the case of the chief eunuch the loss was very considerable, for it included not only the high position of captain of the girls but also the lucrative post of *nazir*, or inspector of the religious endowments of the imperial mosques, including those of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. With time the power of the *kislar agha* grew. He became commander of the corps of halberdiers, held the rank of "pasha with three tails," was confidential messenger between the sultan and the grand vizier, and alone was entitled to have both eunuchs and girls as slaves.

He was allotted the surprising number of 300 horses for his personal use, and he alone could approach the sultan at all times of day and night. In fact, he was currently described as "the most illustrious of the officers who approach his august person, and worthy of the confidence of monarchs and of sovereigns." Certainly he was the most feared, and consequently the most bribed, official in the whole of the Ottoman empire.

As a member of the privy council, and in consultation with the sultan's mother, he made appointments to vacant posts both in the seraglio and outside. Anybody wishing to gain a favor



The second court of the seraglio, from an early nineteenth century engraving by A.-I. Melling. Generally called the court of the divan, it was for many years the scene of impressive ceremonials, military, religious, and civil. Note the servants filing out of the sultan's kitchen on the left with trays of food upon their heads.

from the sultan, even with the help of the sultan's mother, would only be able to do it through the *kislar agha*.

Naturally the *kislar agha* was an enormously rich man and rarely relinquished his post of his own accord. But when such occasion did arise he was sent to Egypt. Several *kislar aghas*, in fact bought property in Egypt solely with a view to retiring there later and spending their last days in oriental splendor. No objection was made by the sultan to these acquisitions, since he himself was the heir of the *kislar agha* and knew that everything would come back to the crown in time. A handsome pension was given the honored black on retirement.

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When one thinks of all this dignity and importance it is hard to keep in mind that the chief black eunuch was really just a crude, ignorant, and corrupted colored man—and that the thrusting of such power into his hands actually played a large part in the decline of the Ottoman empire.

Next in importance to the *kislar agha* came the *hazinedar agha*, or grand treasurer, who generally succeeded him in office. To him was entrusted the financial side of the harem, as well as that of the halberdiers (porters).

Next was the *bash-mussahib*, a liaison officer between the sultan and the *kislar agha*, and who had eight or ten eunuchs under him who were on duty in pairs for the purpose of carrying orders from the sultan to the mistress of the harem. Other officers were the master of the chamber, the chief gatekeeper



The courtyard of the black eunuchs, those strange unsexed creatures who guarded so closely the women of the Grand Turk's harem.



Women in the sultan's harem at the time of its greatest development numbered 1,200. Many lands adjacent to Turkey were combed for beautiful female slaves. Gerome's painting shows the sale of a slave, the prospective purchaser testing the soundness of her teeth.

of the apartments, his assistant, and a whole set of officers in the service of the sultan's mother if she were alive. Thus the total number of black eunuchs employed in the harem at the time of its greatest development must have been between 600 and 800.

The women in the harem at this time (around the year A. D. 1600) numbered 1,200. One estimate of the number of eunuchs assigned to guard the gate of the sultan's favorite was 500, though fifty would probably be nearer the truth.

As to the training of eunuchs, it was just as long and careful as the training of the janizaries (the sultan's military guards). Here is what a keen observer wrote of the black eunuchs' apprenticeship in 1604:

"The boys are watched and disciplined by the other youths of the seraglio till at a certain age they are ready for service. They are then removed thence and sent to the women and placed under others in the service of the sultana (the number one favorite), being under the command of their chief, the *kislar agha*. They have a considerable allowance, two robes of finest silk, clothes, and other things for their needs throughout the year, besides what is plentifully bestowed on them from other quarters. They bear names of flowers, such as Hyacinth, Narcissus, Rose, and Carnation; since, as they are in the service of women, they have names suitable to virginity, whiteness, and fragrance."

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The young eunuchs were also entrusted with taking and receiving messages between the sultan and his women, transacting business, visiting the men's apartments, and many other duties. But from the moment they entered it they could never leave the seraglio without special permission from the sultana, even though bidden to do something by one of the lesser wives. No

white eunuchs were allowed to visit their black brethren under any circumstances. And even the chief physician had to walk, when in the harem, between a double file of black eunuchs without seeing the sight of a woman—and the extended hand of the patient was the most he was customarily permitted to inspect.

An appreciation of the physical and mental condition of eunuchs and their varieties will unquestionably lead to the greater understanding of the harem system and of its gradual decay and fall, so largely caused by the introduction and increasing influence of this unproductive, sterile, unnatural, and altogether unwholesome member of society—the eunuch.

Everybody knows that the condition of eunuchs is not natural, but is a terrible mutilation imposed by one male upon another. The effect is seen and heard, and the reason is generally appreciated; but the methods by which the mutilation is carried out and the different degrees to which this can be done appear to be hardly known at all. This general ignorance is certainly not due to lack of interest in the subject, but to several distinct factors—the scarcity of published information, the gradual discontinuance of the custom, the secrecy which has always surrounded the infamous trade of making eunuchs, and the consequent disinclination of those connected in any way with it to discuss the subject at all.

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Most of the writers on the subject wrote under noms de plume, while, with the single exception of a book by a French doctor, there appears to be no modern work on the subject whatsoever. As is often the case, the history of the words connected with the subject affords a certain amount of information. There is, however, difference of opinion among scholars about the derivation and meaning of the best known word of all—"eunuch." It would seem that the old derivation, from the Greek words for "bed" and "keep"—the word thus meaning "he who has charge of the bed"—should still be adhered to.

The only Assyrian connection appears to be through the Hebrew *saris*, "eunuch," which is a word borrowed from the Assyrian *sa resi*, meaning "he who does not beget." There are several other words connected with emasculation that are informative, as they show that the condition was brought about by a form of barbaric surgery.

Methods seem to have been similar in all countries, the only differences being in the local means employed to approximate aseptic treatment. The mortality is not great, although exaggerated figures have been given. It is obvious, however, that the number of fatal cases among young Negroes at the mercy of unskilled "knifers" would be considerable. In fact, a large discount for "losses en route" was always allowed in the delivered price of a eunuch.

The physical and mental effects of emasculation naturally

vary according to the age at which the operation is performed. If the subject is a child not yet arrived at the age of puberty, and if proper precautions are taken, the operation was found to be not dangerous. But after puberty both physical and mental effects become a very important factor. The mind has begun to realize the promptings of nature, and consequently the full realization of the irreparable loss brings an agony of mind that is hard for us to realize. The constant attendance upon women would create in the minds of the victims a feeling of terrible resentment, coupled with a mingled feeling of revenge and despair. No wonder, then, that eunuchs have been described as ill-tempered, morose, childish, petulant,



The *kislar agha*, or chief black eunuch of the imperial seraglio, considered in later days to rank second in power to the Turkish sultan himself.

revengeful, cruel, and arrogant; and, on the other hand, as simple, credulous, harmless, fawning, fond of pleasure, and very generous in their dealings.

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This apparent contradiction of characteristics would seem to arise from the widely varying effects the operation has on different subjects. It is not only the age of the victim that has to be considered in the forming of his mental makeup, but the circumstances that led to his operation. A boy captured in a raid and sold later would never bear the terrible grudge against humanity in general, and his parents in particular, harbored by a boy who had been sold by his parents for the mere lust of gain.

The physical effects of emasculation are well known—complete lack of bodily hair, the feminine voice (deeper, however, in the black race), the gradual flabbiness of the body, often accompanied by obesity and ugly

Employed to Guard the Women

wrinkling of the skin in later life. Among other effects may be mentioned loss of memory, insomnia, and bad eyesight.

Eunuchs have no liking for alcohol, of which the smallest amount is sufficient to make them ill. They prefer cakes and sweetmeats to meat. Their favorite color is red. They like music, especially the rhythmic beat of the drum or tambourine and all central African instruments. They are neat in their habits, but are miserly and fond of accumulating wealth. They unite the small brain of the Negro with the childish imagination of the ignorant oriental. Consequently they believe the wildest stories, and once an idea has entered their minds, nothing can change it.

They adore what we call fairy stories and can listen to recitations of "The Thousand Nights and a Night" and similar collections for an indefinite period. They love children and animals, including chickens, sheep, cows, and monkeys, but most of all cats, which they keep as pets and treat with the utmost care and attention.

As regards normal feelings, it is quite incorrect to imagine that the operation removes all desires immediately. Not only is the new eunuch often attracted strongly to women, but, strange as it may seem, evokes affection in return, and in the history of the harem many marriages of eunuchs have taken place. In such cases, however, the eunuch "lives out" and is usually drafted to one of the lesser palaces in the town.

That eunuchs often nurse their grievances for years and take their revenge if opportunity offers is well known from the history of Hermotimus the Pedasian, "the most favored of all the eunuchs of Xerxes." According to Herodotus, he was captured by an enemy and sold to one Panionius, whose business was to buy good looking boys, operate on them, and sell them as eunuchs at Sardis and Ephesus for large sums.

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Hermotimus was one of these unfortunates. Long afterward he chanced upon Panionius once more and persuaded him to move to Sardis with his wife and children. Having thus got his old enemy into his power, Hermotimus upbraided him for his horrible doings and forced him to perform the same operation on his own four sons. Not being yet satisfied, he then persuaded the sons to wreak vengeance in kind on their father. Thus did Hermotimus overtake Panionius.

Of course, the sultans of Turkey generally were very careful in picking their eunuchs—especially those who were to guard their harems. White eunuchs—Georgians and Circassians—were given jobs that would never bring them into close touch with the women. But as regards the Negroes, the highest prices were paid for those who, besides being 100 per cent eunuchs, possessed the ugliest and most revolting faces, it being imagined (correctly or not) that this was a further guard against any profligacy on the part of the women.

The seraglio doctors not only inspected the eunuchs on admission but examined them every few years just to see that everything was in order.

But the days of the eunuch are over. With the passing of the harem in the Mohammedan world (save in Mecca itself) the necessity for the eunuch has disappeared, and despite all my efforts in Turkey I met only two, or possibly three, of these strange beings. I was told that these were the last of them. They had been a necessary evil where despotism and polygamy held sway, but now they are a thing of the past and already have returned in our minds to the pages of the Arabian Nights, where alone they seem rightly to belong.

NEXT WEEK: The Favorite.