

# The Inside Story of the Turkish Harem

## Sultan's Favorites Have Kingdom of Their Own

### Foreword

● A girl sits beside a heavy wooden table in a small room. She is 17 years old, with long raven-black hair and flashing dark eyes. Her eyebrows have obviously been painted to appear even blacker than they naturally are, and her tanned cheeks blush with rouge. Her nails shine in lacquered pink as her nimble fingers go about their work of grinding coffee. On the air, intermingled with the coffee fumes, is the lush odor of rose petals.

● About the girl's shoulders is draped a pale blue chemise of silk gauze. It is clasped at the waist with a gold and pearl

brooch, but hangs open above, revealing her proudly rouged breasts. Her embroidered trousers are loose and tied at the hips pajama fashion, being only partly concealed beneath her low and snugly fitting waistcoat gown.

● Such was a typical harem girl in the sultan's imperial palace of old Constantinople—and such is the leading character in today's story. For now at last Mr. Penzer brings us to the heart of his subject and we are treated to what is probably the most intimate and the most accurate picture of harem life ever written.

By N. M. PENZER

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### INSTALLMENT V.

IN 1599 AN English organ maker named Dallam, through the leniency of a friendly eunuch, was given the unheard-of privilege of peering at the imperial harem. More amazing still, Dallam lived to record his adventure in the following words:

"When I came to the wall it was very thick and grated on both sides with iron very strongly; but through the grate I did see thirty of the sultan's concubines that were playing with a ball in another court. At the first sight of them I thought they were young men, but when I saw the hair of their heads hang down on their backs, plaited together, with a tassel of small pearl hanging in the lower end, and by other plain tokens I did know them to be women, and very pretty ones indeed.

"They wore upon their heads nothing but a little cap of cloth of gold, which did but cover the crown; no bands about their necks, nor anything but fair chains of pearl and a jewel hanging on the breast and in the ears. Their coats were like a soldier's cloak, some of red satin, and some of blue, and some of other colors, and fringed with lace of a different color. They wore breeches of cotton wool as white and fine as muslin, for I could discern the skin of their thighs through it. These breeches came down to their midleg.

"Some of them wore fine cordovan buskins, and some had their legs naked, with a gold ring around the ankle, and on the foot a velvet boot four or five inches high. I stood so long looking upon them that he which had showed me all this kindness began to be very angry with me. He made a wry mouth and stamped with his foot to make me give over looking, the which I was very loath to do, for that sight did please me wondrous well."

\*In considering the harem we are not dealing with anything so simple as just a few hundred women awaiting the pleasure of the sultan under the watchful eyes of the black eunuchs. On the contrary, the harem was a complicated institution, having a definite and fixed number of officers, with every woman occupying a distinct position according to her age, status, and the point at which she had arrived in her harem education.

The harem must be regarded as a little kingdom of its own, a curious kingdom certainly, but one in which there was a ruler, the equivalent of a prime minister, a cabinet, other less important officials connected with the governing, and finally the subjects—all occupying different positions, but each being given some definite job to do, with a chance to improve her position as time went on. Let us look at the harem when it was at its height in the seventeenth century.

The ruler of the harem is not the sultan, not the first favorite, nor any of the concubines, but the sultan's mother, known as the sultan valide. The Turks recognize that a man can have many wives, that he can get rid of unwanted ones and take others at will, but that he can have

only one mother, and it is she, therefore, who occupies the unique place of honor that nothing can alter save death. To her are entrusted the most personal and private belongings of her son—his women.

The power of the sultan valide is enormous, not only in the harem but throughout the entire empire. As is only to be imagined, there is ceaseless warfare between the sultan's mother and his official favorites, called the kadins. The most ambitious woman in the harem is not she who is content to reach the high position of first kadin, but she who hopes, plots, and prays to become one day the sultan valide for then she is not merely ruler of the harem and of the seraglio palace but, if she is strong and her son weak, may even rule the kingdom as well.

No better example of the power and influence a member of the harem might acquire could be given than that of the Russian slave girl known in western Europe as Roxelana. So great was her influence over Sultan Suleiman that the question of her becoming sultan valide never arose. Bit by bit Roxelana removed all obstacles in her path. About 1541 she had persuaded the sultan to let her live with him in the seraglio instead of remaining in the old palace, although at this time she was only second kadin.

After the death of Suleiman's mother only two rivals remained—the first kadin and the grand vizier, who according to some accounts had been the original owner of Roxelana. Plots and counterplots were laid; the first kadin was displaced and practically exiled, her son was mur-



A kadin, or unmarried but legal wife of the sultan, in indoor costume.

dered in a manner that leaves little doubt as to Roxelana's complicity in the business, and Suleiman had the grand vizier executed for no apparent reason.

It had been a triumph when she was allowed to move into the seraglio with her train of slave girls and eunuchs; it was a much greater one when she became Suleiman's legal wife.

Not since 1389 had any sultan contracted a legal marriage, and this strange act of Suleiman was regarded with amazement and concern. In the reign of Selim II, so enormous was the sum set aside for the sultan's wife, being sufficient to build mosques and hospitals, that marriage was not an attractive investment. For the same reason the number of kadins was limited to four.

From his whole harem, which might consist of anything from 300 to 1,200 women, the sultan would have many favorite girls, termed ikbals, who would occasionally be honored by sharing his bed. In the event of the birth of a male child and the continued and growing affection of the sultan, a lucky ikbal might be raised to the coveted rank of a kadin. Although they were not actually married, the rank of the kadins was equivalent to that of a legal wife, and their apartments, slaves, eunuchs, property, dresses, jewelry, and salary were all proportional to the honor and importance of their new position. According to the order of her election, so would the kadin be henceforth known. Thus she might be the second kadin or third kadin, and naturally she would do all in her power to dislodge the one immediately above her—by fair means or foul.

In the case of Roxelana, however, the impossible had been achieved, for Suleiman, so far from having other kadins after

Veiled, but still revealed, this woman is gowned as were harem girls in their daily life.



the fall of his first kadin, actually married off several of his most beautiful women to cement his affection and fidelity to Roxelana.

To return to the harem personnel, if we look upon the sultan valide as ruler of the harem, the chief black eunuch or kishlar agha (captain of the girls) must be regarded as her prime minister. His duties have been described in an earlier chapter. He was in direct charge of the girls and could be largely responsible for their being noticed by the sultan; and he had a very large number of eunuchs to assist him in his duties. He was the liaison officer between the sultan valide and the girls. With the general running of the harem he was not directly concerned, however. That was relegated to the female cabinet, or privy council, as it might be called.

This was led by a lady stewardess, or lady administrator, who was usually regarded as deputy head of the harem, temporarily acting as a kind of head housekeeper and manageress. Nearly equal to her, and according to some authorities also a deputy head, was the treasurer, who was responsible not only for the handling of the running expenses of the harem, which were very high and complicated, but for the paying out of the "slipper money" (pin money) to all those entitled to receive it, and for the arrangement of pen-



The Bosphorus at dawn. The natural beauties that formed the setting for the sultan's quarters were matched inside by the intricate craftsmanship of the buildings and the physical beauty and brilliant costumes of the women.

for her throughout her career and does all she can to better her condition in whatever way possible.

Having made good progress in her own department, the girl may have the chance of entering another court which suits her better. Perhaps she has developed a flair for coffee making or keeping accounts. In which case a few carefully placed bribes may get her the necessary transfer. Perhaps, however, her promotion has been slow and years have passed before she arrives at the head of her particular court. In that case she will probably remain where she is.

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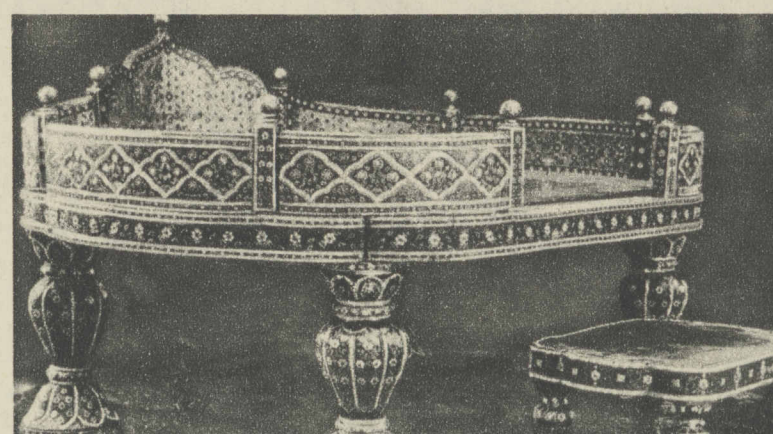
But, on the other hand, let us take the case of the girl who has started with the mistress of the robes, been transferred to the chief coffee maker, and by a lucky chance is present on the occasion of a visit of the sultan to the sultan valide.

It is quite sufficient for the sultan to glance at her approvingly or make some trivial remark about her. Any such sign of imperial favor is at once noticed and the epithet *guzdeh*, or "in the eye," is at once given

sions paid to those who left the seraglio. Other members of the cabinet were the mistress of the robes, the keeper of the baths, the keeper of the jewels, the reader of the Koran, the keeper of the storerooms, the manageress of the table service, and so on.

All these positions of trust and responsibility were occupied by women who had gradually advanced in every part of the harem training but who had been passed by as far as the chance to become a kadin was concerned. This, then, was the compensation for being "passed over." Love—at any rate male love—had been denied them, and now all they could hope for was some high position which at least would bring them wealth and power to a certain degree.

Each of the most important women had her own little chamber court, with attendants varying in number according to her rank. At the same time each had a number of pupils studying to make themselves perfect in the particular line allotted to their mistress. Thus on entering the harem at a tender age the girl would in all probability be immediately attached to one of the courts as a novice. In fact, should the sultan valide or one of the lesser officials be requiring a new slave or pupil they were at perfect liberty to buy one and train her personally. The new girl, selected from a large number, would be placed under the care of, say, the mistress of the robes. There she would serve her apprenticeship, looking upon her tutress as a mother from whom she would receive all her clothes, money, food, and jewels. The tutress is to a large extent responsible



The jeweled throne of the Shah Ismail of the early sixteenth century. It illustrates the lavishness with which the seraglio was furnished.

her. This is her first real step toward the envied position of a kadin. From this time the girl is marked. She is separated from the rest and is given an apartment and slaves to herself. Meanwhile developments are awaited, and a message to appear before the sultan may be expected any time. Should this occur, great preparations are made before she can enter the room of her lord. One by one the heads of the different departments are called in to assist. The keeper of the baths takes her off first and superintends her toilet, with massage, shampooing, perfuming, and hairdressing. The shaving of the body, dyeing of the nails, and other such details follow. She now proceeds to the keeper of the lingerie, the mistress of the robes, the head of the treasury; and so at last she is ready to appear.

Now her chance has come. Every artifice of which the feminine mind is capable is put into play. How can she tell if a male child will be born of the union? But first she must cultivate the

sultan's heart, and perhaps several nights will be hers, and anything might happen then.

It has been repeatedly affirmed that when kadins or other favored concubines enter the sultan's bedroom, which is not allowed until his majesty has already retired, they approach the foot of the bed, lift up the coverlet, and raise it to their forehead and lips. Then they creep in humbly at the foot of the bed.

This "creeping in at the foot" was obligatory in Constantinople on a man who had been married to one of the sultanas. In these marriages the unfortunate husband is entirely ruled by his royal wife and waits outside until he is summoned. He then timidly enters, kisses the coverlet, and creeps toward his wife by the same route.

As to the custom of selecting a concubine by giving or throwing a handkerchief, there is considerable evidence that it was no traveler's tale. In Turkey the handkerchief had a unique significance. It was used not only by the sultan but by everybody as a covering for any present conveyed from one person to another. Any important let-

always receives the girl in his suite within the harem, he sometimes honors her by going to her rooms, in which case he is conducted there by one of the black eunuchs and is received by the lady and her slaves with the most profound respect and obedience. In the morning he or she return to their own rooms as silently and secretly as they came.

Speaking of all these matters in 1604, one of the rare visitors to the imperial palace wrote:

"... if his majesty should require one of the girls for his pleasure or to watch them at play or hear music, he makes known his desire to the head kadin, who immediately sends for the girls who seem to her to be the most beautiful in every respect and arranges them in a line from one end of the room to the other. She then brings in the sultan, who passes before them once or twice and according to his pleasure fixes his eye on the one who attracts him most, and as he leaves tosses one of his handkerchiefs into her hand.

"The queen has her own apartment of magnificent rooms, complete domestic arrangements are immediately made for her, and the sultan allows her a sufficient income to enable her to give away and spend lavishly on anything she may require, and the whole of the seraglio recognizes her position, extending to her much honor and respect. The other women, even if they have children, are not called queen, but only sultana, for having been singled out for the sultan's pleasure. The only one made queen is she who is the mother of the heir to the throne. These sultanas, who have given themselves to the sultan's personal enjoyment, have the further prerogative of being immediately raised above the common level, having rooms and service assigned to them, and receive an honorarium of so much money a day for their needs, nor do they lack any kind of the most lovely garments, their wardrobes making a very sumptuous comparison with the rest.

"All these sultanas intrigue among themselves with much familiarity and exhibit just as much cunning to avoid indifference on the part of the sultan, for, being slaves and living in great fear of jealousy for love of his majesty, each tries to honor him so as to be more favored and loved than the others.

"The other women, who have not had the luck to be favorites of the sultan, live an empty life, passing their youth in evil thoughts among themselves, and when old serve as teachers or governesses of the young who arrive every day at the seraglio. In such bad circumstances they account it a lucky thing for them to find themselves in a position to be sent away later to

(Continued on page eleven.)

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