

Harem's Beginning Lost in Mists of History

Custom Born in Empire's Swift Rise

(Continued from page one.)
and in some instances the poor relatives were quite dazzled by the beautiful faces, the graceful manners, and the rich apparel of their kinswomen. The latter seemed all very glad, however, to get away, and as a rule they lost no time in packing their trunks and departing, sometimes after a very affectionate leave-taking of the other concubines. The number of female slaves thus liberated was 213.

"Clad in Circassian peasant dress, they are now in all probability milking cows and doing farm work in Anatolia. . . . This joyful reunion in the seraglio had its sad side, however, as more than one of the men did not find the face he sought. Some of the girls had died, some had been put to death by Abdul Hamid, and others of them, after Abdul Hamid's fall, had been taken with him to Salonica or quietly drafted into the harems of imperial princes who had taken a fancy to them.

"Moreover, a good many of the women, especially those who had already passed their first youth, were disheartened to learn that nobody came to fetch them. Apparently their relatives had died or migrated, or did not relish the prospect of bringing back into their miserable mountain huts women no longer young, who had contracted expensive tastes and forgotten the language of their childhood. . . .

"These unfortunate ladies will probably pine away the rest of their lives in company with the other ladies—remnants of the harems of the past sultans—who fill the palace and who, in the best manner of the Arabian Nights, sigh audibly at the barred and latticed windows and have on one or two occasions dropped roses and perfumed handkerchiefs before good-looking youths passing in the street below."

Such was the end of the imperial harem.

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"The harem's beginning, which was gradual, is lost in the misty history of the later middle ages. Perhaps because it involved compromises with the solemn commandments of the Koran, the Mohammedan bible, the sultans never recorded it in their history and it has remained the mystery of the ages, penetrated only by a handful of rare adventurers who at one time or another were lucky enough to glimpse a bit of the great palace grounds or peek into the harem courtyard and live to tell the tale. That is, up to the recent thorough inspection by Mr. Penzer of the now abandoned seraglio grounds, including the innermost sanctums of the harem and the sultan's bedchamber.

But the eyewitness accounts of some of these early visitors are well worth retelling, because these individuals alone have

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



The kishar agha or chief black eunuch.



(From a painting by Jean Leon Jerome, courtesy Art Institute of Chicago.)
The great white eunuch guarding the women of the harem at their bath. The reign of the eunuchs was a long one, and even in the twentieth century their power was as great as ever.

Painted direct from life a few sure brush strokes upon the rare canvas of the intimate lives of the sultans that is presently to be unfolded before you.

Nicolas De Nicolay was one of the earliest of these, having traveled from his native France to Constantinople less than a hundred years after the historic city had been captured by the Turks from the last of the East Roman emperors, Constantine Dragases, in 1453. Constantinople was by this time just settling down to a new life under the Ottoman Turks, those Asiatic barbarians who had so astonishingly fought their way into Europe and carved for themselves the new Ottoman empire, which in De Nicolay's day covered the whole Balkan region, including Hungary and Greece, to say nothing of nearly all of southwestern Asia. The Turks were comparatively new to Europe, and to western eyes they held all the glamor of the exotic east, which Marco Polo had proved really existed not so long before.

It was natural, therefore, that De Nicolay, being an artist, should journey to Constantinople in 1551 to make drawings of Turkish costumes. And, once there, that he should go to the newly built seraglio palace and make the acquaintance of a eunuch who in time was able to reveal to him certain parts of the great palace grounds in his quest for subjects. Realizing the rare privilege he had been accorded, De Nicolay jotted down his impressions in brief as follows:

"This seraglio is inclosed with strong & high walls, being in circuit about two miles, in the midst whereof upon a little hill is to be seen a fair & delectable garden, which, beginning on the middle of the mound, descendeth towards the sea. There are divers little houses & dwelling places, with a gallery, standing upon columns after the form of a monastery, round about which are about 200 chambers, & thereabout the great Turk dwelleth for the most part of the summer, for it is a place both high, of fresh air, & abounding of good waters. . . .

"Within this compass is still the seraglio of the sultana, wife to the great Turk, garnished with baths most magnificent, & near unto the same a place for young children, which are pages, being notwithstanding esteemed as slaves. They are there nourished, instructed, & exercised as well in their religion as to ride horses, to shoot, & do all other warlike exercises, even from their age of eight, nine, or ten years unto twenty, the ordinary number of these children being commonly about five or six hundred."

Of course, De Nicolay was allowed not even a glimpse of the haremlik or women's quarters of the great, rambling palace.

He did, however, gain considerable intimacy with at least one of the head eunuchs, a creature who must have delighted his artistic appetite for the exotic. As described by a later French visitor to the seraglio, Maxime Du Champ, also an artist, here is the chief white eunuch of the palace:

"He is clothed in a splendid costume, and a white turban embellished with green palms around the front. His tired manner gives one the impression that his age is nearly sixty years; he is so huge that he seems not to have a human form because the lines of his overflowing fatness are continued by his clothing. His cheeks, yellow and drooping, furl themselves into a thousand interflowing ripples. He hasn't a blade of beard; a down of childish shade thickens his lips. His gentle eye stares lazily in half opening itself. His hand, holding the flexible stems of a crystal hookah (Arabian tobacco pipe), sparkles at each finger with precious rings. Behind him, a Negro boy boils coffee on a portable hot water heater; he calls him, and his voice is shrill, coarse, and as weak as a woman's."

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Although the use of eunuchs to guard women had been customary for centuries both in the middle and the far east, the practice was unknown and unnecessary among the Turks until they had established their capital in Europe and had begun to adopt so many of the customs of the Byzantine Greeks.

The early sultans knew nothing of eunuchs, just as they knew nothing of the harem, royal seclusion, elaborate court ceremonial, or the almost exclusive employment of Christians to form a slave government. At the earliest it was not until the middle of the fifteenth century that the use of eunuchs began to be adopted. As time went on the Byzantine custom of the seclusion of majesty began to im-



A cushioned nook in the seraglio of the Grand Turk.

press itself on the conquerors, and the methods previously employed to protect that majesty were also adopted, and so gradually the harem and the employment of eunuchs came into being.

Despotism and polygamy had created the necessity for eunuchs, and the injunctions of the Koran were overlooked with surprising rapidity and casualness. It was, of course, the swift development of the Turkish empire that forced the pace. The continual victories in different parts of Bulgaria, Croatia, and Greece as well as in Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, and Persia produced a rich booty in slaves. Presents of slaves, both male and female, from conquered emirs or princes wishing to gain the sultan's favor and protection, would often include eunuchs, and once the innovation had proved a success the demand could easily be supplied.

The reign of the eunuchs was a long one, and even in this twentieth century, in the time of Abdul-Hamid II., their power was as great as ever. The idea that eunuchs are necessarily lacking in courage and intellectual vigor is not borne out by history. According to Herodotus, the great historian who lived in the fifth century B. C., eunuchs in Persia were especially prized for their fidelity and were frequently promoted to the highest offices. The capacity of eunuchs for public affairs is demonstrated by the great power they attained to in the administrative systems not only of Persia but of India, China, and especially the Roman empire during the period of its decline.

For the sake of power and wealth many an eastern youth eagerly presented himself for emasculation. Still other young men had the operation performed on themselves to avoid sexual temptation and sin.

The original home of the eunuch appears to have been Mesopotamia. The contention of Marcellinus that the first person to unsex men was Semiramis may perhaps be not so far

Few Adventurers Learned Its Secrets and Lived to Tell

from the truth after all. It is proved from extant texts that eunuchs were employed in Assyria, and their constant mention in the Old Testament (whatever meaning saris may have in each particular reference) only tends to support this assertion. Herodotus tells how the Persians emasculated the Ionians and carried them off, together with the most beautiful virgins, to their king. Thus the custom became only too well known in Greece at an early date. In the opposite direction, the practice was already well established in China, and flourished there until the fall of the great palace of Pekin.

Next to the eunuchs the seraglio physicians had the greatest opportunity to know the harem intimately. Even they, however, were restrained to an almost absurd degree, it being rarely permitted them to view more than the ailing lady's face and hands, which parts were thrust cautiously through a curtain for pulse and tongue diagnosis.

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One of the late sixteenth century physicians was an Italian named Domenico Hierosolimitano. He ranked third among the sultan's seven physicians, and his duties took him occasionally to the haremlik. Among the descriptions he wrote of life in the palace is the following:

"One enters a narrow corridor which leads to another court with a garden of various flowers; here on one side are the rooms of the Grand Turk, and when the women wait upon him they pass through high corridors by means of a key to the door which he reserves for himself alone, or his chief eunuch. . . .

"On the side where the women are in attendance there are for-

The first detailed description of the sultan's bedchamber comes from the pen of Ottaviano Bon, a Venetian bailo (consul general) stationed in the Turkish capital from 1604 to 1607. Wrote Bon:

"Through a window in the divan I saw his majesty's bedroom, which was of ordinary size, the walls, as usual, encrusted with stones—namely, the finest majolica, which displayed patterns and flowers of different colors, producing a splendid effect.

"The bed was like a Roman pavilion, with columns of fluted silver instead of wooden supports. It had crystal lions, and the hangings were of cloth of gold and green Bursa brocade without trimmings, in place of which were lacings made of pearls, showing it to be a work of great value and very well contrived. The quilts were rather more than a hand's breadth from the ground and of gold brocade, as were also the cushions. The floors both of this room and the others, with their sofas about half a cubit from the ground, were all covered with the richest Persian carpets in silk and gold, and the quilts for sitting on and the cushions to lean against were all of the finest brocades in gold and silk."

The first foreigner to describe the whole of the seraglio, including the harem, was a French manufacturer named Jean-Claude Flachet. Passing through Holland, Italy, Germany, Hungary, Wallachia, and Turkey, he arrived at his destination in 1740. Here he settled for no less than fifteen years, during the reigns of Mahmud I. and Osman III., and by diligent and unremitting labor not only traded on a considerable scale in manufactured goods of all kinds but



Sultan Abdul Hamid II. The harem system ended with his exile.

count with diagrams had leave been granted.

Having described the palace school and gardens, and kiosks in the fourth court of the grand seraglio, he wrote:

"One passes from the first garden into a second. The two-story kiosk which is in the center is a lovely place. The sultan very often goes there with the sultanas. The main inside court of the seraglio is at the end of this garden. It consists of four blocks of buildings. The sultan occupies that to the west, and the walls are all adorned with porcelain on the outside. The sultanas occupy the rest, which are all uniformly built on fine arcades. This court closely resembles the royal square in Paris; it is longer than it is broad.

"One next passes into the gallery where are situated the apartments of twelve sultanas. They are large and richly furnished. The windows have iron grills and look into the courtyard. . . . In the middle of the northern facade they have built a fore part which serves as an assembly room, as you might call it. All the women go there to pay their addresses to his highness and try and please him



The roofs of the seraglio, showing the harem buildings.

ty-four separate courts, with conveniences of baths and fountains in each, so that one does not look into the other, but he [the sultan] has access by a secret corridor by means of which each can be entered without the others being any the wiser. Communicating with the women's rooms are the suites where the Grand Turk's children—that is to say, the males—are brought up; for the girls remain with their mothers, and the boys on arriving at the age of 6 are taken from their mothers and placed in other rooms allotted to them, with the masters who teach them.

"The aforesaid rooms of the Grand Turk stretch from the side of the men's suites to that of the women's apartments—that is to say, the forty suites, each with its hall, chamber, and conveniences of baths, fountains, gardens, and aviaries, built with surprising cunning and ornamented with panels of painted flowers, but not figures, and hung with divers lovely brocades, with carpets on the floors and brocade mattresses and cushions—the bedsteads all of ivory inlaid with aloes and sandalwood and large pieces of coral, of which one was sent to Amurat from Hiemen [China]."

taught the Turks how to make and use looms, dye cotton, plate copper, do tin plating, and other similar industrial trades.

His friendship with the chief black eunuch, the kishar agha (literally, captain of the girls), was the main cause of his success. So interested did this Abyssinian become in Flachet's novelties that Flachet was created first merchant of the grand signor. He sold all manner of things to the seraglio, mechanical devices being in special demand. In fact, the bribe that led the kishar agha to conduct him over the seraglio consisted of an automaton of a man playing a drum, and others of a French girl and an oriental slave, together with some diagrams of other machines.

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As luck would have it, some mirrors sent by Louis XV. to Mahmud I. were being installed. Flachet, with the Comte de Castellane, the French ambassador to the porte, was introduced among the workmen, and so any suspicions of the other eunuchs were unaroused. In this way practically the whole of the seraglio was inspected, and Flachet was a keen observer who would have illustrated his ac-

with a thousand amusements which follow on one after the other, and to which the inexhaustible fertility of the genius of these women always imparts the air of novelty.

"On leaving the grand harem one goes down a corridor quite dark. It crosses the detached building which the eunuchs inhabit and leads directly to the prison of the princes, the sultan's sons who can aspire to the throne. This prison is like a strong citadel. A high wall is built all around it.

"The princes have fine apartments and baths in the detached buildings which surround the court. The eunuchs detailed to their service all live on the ground floor, and there is a large number of them. They spare no pains to mitigate their hard lot and to make their prison at least endurable.

"Women are given them, although it is a fact that these women can no longer bear children. They have all kinds of masters, and they even encourage them to perfect themselves in all handicrafts that are applicable to their rank. In a word, they leave nothing to wish for save freedom."

NEXT WEEK—Life in the seraglio.