

The Inside Story of the Turkish Harem

A Mixture of Luxury and Slavery

By N. M. PENZER

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INSTALLMENT III.

TWO fat octagonal towers with loopholes for cannon and tops like candle snuff-ers stand on either side of a battlemented gatehouse. An impressive guard of fifty armed gatekeepers is arrayed below to make sure that no one shall enter without proper credentials, for this is the famous central gate of the sultan's seraglio. It enters upon the carefully guarded court of the divan, where only such high functionaries as the officers of the inner service and visiting ambassadors are allowed to enter. Silence and mystery surround the central gate, and the awe with which it is regarded is not lessened by knowledge of the elaborate and lengthy court ceremonial that begins as soon as a foot has crossed the threshold, nor by the not infrequent sight of severed heads being carried out to be erected on spikes atop the outer walls.

The gate itself contains several rooms, among them the quarters of the palace executioner. Below are the dungeons in which are thrust those unfortunates who have displeased the sultan. From the small cells in one of the towers, where they are usually put at first, they are removed to the dungeons, then into the cistern below, and finally to the room of the executioner.

If they were officials of high rank their heads are spiked in a conspicuous place above the outer gateway, slowly to blacken in the sun. If their rank was below that of pasha their heads are generally exposed to public gaze in the many niches on either side of the main entrance. In either case a conical shaped scroll is affixed on the adjoining wall stating in bold characters the name of the offender and the nature of his crime "to be a warning to those who would be warned." There the scroll remains, competing with the head to see which will stand up longer against the rain and sun, unless a bereaved relative bribes the chief gatekeeper to remove it.

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Such was the aura of the entrance to the court of the divan in the days of the sultans of Turkey. An idea of what was to be seen just inside this impressive portal in the early days can be gained by reading the account of Ottaviano Bon, who won admittance in 1604. Wrote he:

"One enters another courtyard a little smaller than the first, but much more beautiful, owing to its variety of elegant fountains, avenues flanked by very tall cypresses, and the presence of certain stretches of lawn where the growing grass provides pasture for a number of gazelles which breed and are regarded with pleasure."

On the left hand side of this court stood the important divan building, which was at once executive mansion, legislative chamber, and supreme court. It consisted of a rectangular room divided by an arched partition into two nearly square chambers of equal size, each surmounted by a dome. The principal point of interest in the divan room is the little grilled window opposite the door and built high up above the grand vizier's seat.

Foreword

● Imagine 500 well formed girls and women with some 2,000 attendants, eunuchs, gardeners, millers, bakers, cooks, carpenters, bath keepers, soldiers, and others living in luxury on a hilly peninsula, all within a walled enclosure about one-third of a square mile in area. That was the imperial seraglio or royal palace of the Turkish sultans at its height.

● Of this glamorous walled city within the city of Constantinople the harem is undoubtedly the best remembered feature. Certainly it was best remembered by the sleek and sensual sovereigns in whose service it was maintained. But what of the reality of this much talked of, yet vaguely realized, realm of earthly delights? And of the world immediately surrounding it? Food, fuel, clothing, and other supplies had to be provided in large quantities. And military protection, and money, and a system of administration.

● Mr. Penzer's story, here being unfolded in weekly instalments, will present the harem in its true perspective as an institution with laws, customs, and a political hierarchy of its own existing within the larger realm of the complete seraglio, which in turn had its laws, ironbound tradition, and governmental administration.

● Today Mr. Penzer goes one stage deeper than before into the secret recesses of the sultan's private world. He enters the second court or the court of the divan, which was the seat of government not only of the seraglio and its harem but of the entire Ottoman empire.

It was the unflinching practice of the early sultans to attend the divan meetings personally, but Suleiman discontinued it and built this little window, into which he could creep unobserved without the council's knowing if he were there or not. In this way a certain check was kept on the proceedings, which always had to take place as if in the actual presence of the sultan. At the same time the breaking of the old tradition was a mistake, and historians have traced the beginning of the decline of the Ottoman power to this very act.

That the efficiency of the grilled window still holds I can personally guarantee, for it so chanced that as I sat in it one day looking down on the room below, a guide entered with several tourists and immediately began to explain to them its history and purport. And as their eyes were all turned toward it they little guessed that it was occupied as of old, and at that moment playing the part for which it was originally designed.

The usual divan council meeting was not unlike a session in an American courtroom, for it had a judicial purpose and the grand vizier was the principal judge. Any plaintiff was free to attend and state his case. The decisions of the judges, however, had to be ratified later by the sultan. As to costume, of course, the pashas, grandees, the grand chancellor, the ushers, secretaries, notaries, and others present all wore their most elaborate robes and plumes.

At midday dinner was served in de luxe picnic style, the stewards covering every one's lap with napkins and passing around huge wooden platters containing the usual fare of mutton, guinea fowl, pigeons, goose, lamb, chickens, soup made of rice, vegetables, and an assortment of pastries and sherbet as dessert, the whole being eaten with great



The first court of the seraglio, from an early nineteenth century engraving by A.-L. Melling.



The sword dance by a harem entertainer provides amusement for a pasha high in the favor of a sultan.

alacrity. In the afternoon the judicial meeting continued.

In the other parts of the court of the divan are the privy stables, an arms museum, the halberdiers' quarters, and the kitchens. In the sultan's personal stables about thirty horses were kept for his use. The harness room adjoining impressed Bon in 1604 so much that he wrote that "there are saddles, bridles, pectorals, and cruppers set with jewels of every kind with much taste and cunning and in large numbers and they amaze every one who sees them because they surpass the bounds of imagination."

The halberdiers formed a corps of servants of the outer service of the seraglio, but their duties brought them into such close contact with both the selamlık (men's quarters) and the harem that they were quartered very near to the harem. They were responsible for much of the manual labor of the palace, such as wood cutting and general portage. They also served as a kind of bodyguard to members of the harem when changing quarters.

The corps was divided into two sections: those who served the selamlık and those whose duties were confined to the harem. Some of the former were called *yaklı* (with collars) and some *yakasız* (without collars), according to which subsection they belonged. Those connected with the harem bore the curious name of Zulufi Baltajilers, from *zuluf*, a curl or tress, because two false curls hung down from their tall hats, in order to hinder them from viewing the women when taking the monthly supply of wood into the harem. Similar "chastity curls" were worn by the sword bearer and the chief musician and several other members of the seraglio.

The kitchens form by far the

largest separate unit in the whole of the seraglio—unless you should count the realm of the harem as a unit. The whole quarters consist not only of ten large double kitchens arranged in line one after the other overlooking the Marmora, but include suites of rooms for the chief kitchen functionaries, two mosques, baths, and storerooms, offices, and pantries, and quarters for the cooks, food porters, confectioners, scullions, wood cutters, ice collectors, water carriers, etc.

There are also the remains of a school of cookery, musicians' rooms, a tinning shop, ablution fountains, and dormitories. Many smaller rooms, the use of which has been forgotten, were very possibly used as divans or coffee-rooms for the various sections of the kitchen community. Each section probably had its own coffee-room.

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The assigned functions of the ten kitchens are very interesting, for they may be a reliable indication of the order of social rank of all members of the seraglio. The first kitchen was to cook for the sultan himself. The others, in order, prepared food for (2) the sultan's mother, sometimes called the queen, (3) the sultanas, meaning the kadins or favorites of the sultan, (4) the chief white eunuch, (5) the members of the divan, (6) the sultan's pages, (7) the humbler members of the seraglio, (8) the other women, (9) the less important members of the divan, and (10) the kitchen staff.

Today each kitchen is divided into two parts, the inner of which contained the fire on a low stone hearth in the center of the room, the smoke passing up to a dome pierced by a long chimney. A visitor in 1534 listed the kitchen personnel as follows:

"The chief cook, with fifty cooks under him. The chief confectioner, with thirty companions. The chief taster or chief of the cupboards; morning and evening he brings with his own hand the dish of the sultan, and he has under him a hundred assistants. (He is paid twice the salary of the chief cook.) The steward of the kitchen, who has a secretary. One hundred apprentice janizaries, who transport the wood of the palace on carts. Ten sakkas, who carry water on horseback in leather sacks."

According to Bon, "From

Egypt come large quantities of dates, plums, and prunes, all of which are placed in the care of the servers and cooks, being used in the cooking—both roast and boiled. The honeys, which are consumed in enormous amounts, because they are used in all food as well as in the sherbets for the poorer folks, come from Wallachia, Transylvania, and Rumania; as well as presents made to the sultan by the Moldavian dukes. But for the sultan's kitchen a stock is laid in from Candia which is of greater purity and delicacy."



Entrances to the quarters of the halberdiers, servants of the outer service of the seraglio (on left), and of the black eunuchs (on right).

Of all the innumerable sugary confections so dear to the Ottoman palate, the many varieties of sherbets probably hold first place. The near east, incidentally, is believed to be the original home of sherbet, ice water, and probably ice cream as well.

The seraglio was supplied with great ice pits where snow was stored, being brought by sea all the way from Mount Olympus. On procession days the showmen wore turbans sometimes made entirely out of frozen snow, and they dragged tremendous loads of snow on wagons to show the multitude.

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The next gate one comes to, after passing through the court of divan, is the gate of felicity, within the body of which the white eunuchs live. At this gate, which had "a fine portico flanked by sixteen columns of porphyry," the personal part of the palace began. The few who were privileged to enter had to kiss the threshold as they did

so. But this gate was always regarded as the closed gate, sacred to majesty, beyond which nothing was known. That it led to the throne room and the harem was all the public could surmise.

The quarters of the white eunuchs were situated in such a position as to command a view of both the court of the divan and the third court inside the gate of felicity. The duties of the white eunuchs in the seraglio were chiefly concerned with the five chambers of pages, which formed such an important part of the inner service of the palace. Just as it was the duty of the black eunuchs to control all matters connected with the harem, so it was the duty of the white eunuchs to look after the selamlık and its activities.

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In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there were four head eunuchs, while a fifth was added subsequently. The first of these was the kapi agha or chief white eunuch, who was head of the inner service, which naturally meant that he was the personal confidant of the sultan and the head of the palace school. He was also gatekeeper-in-chief, head of the infirmary, and general master of ceremonies of the seraglio.

He controlled all messages, petitions, and state documents addressed to the sultan, and alone was allowed to speak to the sultan in person—though in later years many of these privi-

Ottoman power was at its height, and Hungarian, Slavonian, and German prisoners of both sexes were pouring into the capital. The number of white eunuchs made at this time, however, seems to have been very small, more care being taken to recruit the Turkish legions with men capable of bearing arms. Owing to the fact that emasculation was forbidden in the Koran (Mohammedan Bible), it is usually stated that the operation was performed outside.

From the early seventeenth century description by Bon, it would seem that in some cases the operation was performed in the seraglio itself. Wrote Bon: "... They choose some of the renegade boys, who are given as presents to the sultan, but rarely against their will, because the master of ceremonies says that they would incur great danger of death. Although aware of this, the youths are tempted by the certainty of becoming in time men of great consequence if they live."

Another supply of slaves was procured from Armenia, Georgia, and Circassia—first by right of conquest, and subsequently by peaceful negotiations, particularly in the case of Circassia, a traffic which had been quite unknown in the case of the transportation of negroes. The cargoes were mixed, and it was not long before the beauty of the Georgian women became proverbial, and a thriving trade soon sprang into being, the merchandise being shipped in boats across the treacherous Black sea. When the Georgian supply was temporarily checked by the Russian advance that from Caucasasia increased, and small boats packed with men and women for the markets of the Levant made their way to Trebizond, the port of entry.

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As far as the Circassian women were concerned, they often went entirely of their own free will, being anxious to exchange a peasant life for the gamble of becoming a pasha's wife, or maybe even the concubine of the sultan himself. But as regards the men, the number that became eunuchs was still small, the reason being that whereas any amount of black eunuchs could be used to look after the harem, the number required to keep the court pages in order was limited.

When a white eunuch was required he would be found and duly delivered, but by far the greater trade was in women, not only to supply the slave markets but to provide material for enthusiastic amateurs, who, after training the girls, would sell them later to advantage.

In spite of all efforts to stop the slave trade, and the actual passing of a decree by the Turkish government itself abolishing slavery among the Circassians, the trade continued unabated as before, only not quite so openly. It was only some terrific national upheaval, coupled with lessening of the demand, that could end a system that was part and parcel of the social and religious life of the community.

Such an upheaval has occurred, and today a curious Turkey presents itself to us, a Turkey that is looking west perhaps, but a Turkey that has lost much of its old charm and beauty.

NEXT WEEK: The Eunuchs.



Beauties of the harem were guarded by a gigantic eunuch when traveling in a royal barge.