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Edited by Zeyneb Hanoum and Grace Ellison
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A Turkish Woman's European Impressions

Zeyneb Hanoum (who died c. 1923) and her sister Melek fled Turkey in 1906, at a time when women's freedom was severely restricted. This book, first published in 1913, is a collection of letters written by Zeyneb to her friend, feminist journalist Grace Ellison. As well as discussing the political situation in Turkey, Hanoum compares the life of Turkish women with their European counterparts and presents a more balanced view of real harem life. Witty and forthright, the author shares her opinions on strange Western phenomena such as tennis, snobbery and the poor quality of English food. She also offers views on the suffragette movement and muses on the freedoms enjoyed by women in the West. The author's outsider status provides fascinating insights into European culture and such diverse experiences as tea at the House of Commons and bullfighting. This remains an entertaining and touching travelogue from a unique viewpoint.

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ZEYNEB HANOUM

EDITED BY GRACE ELLISON



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108050470

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2012

This edition first published 1913

This digitally printed version 2012

ISBN 978-1-108-05047-0 Paperback

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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A TURKISH WOMAN'S
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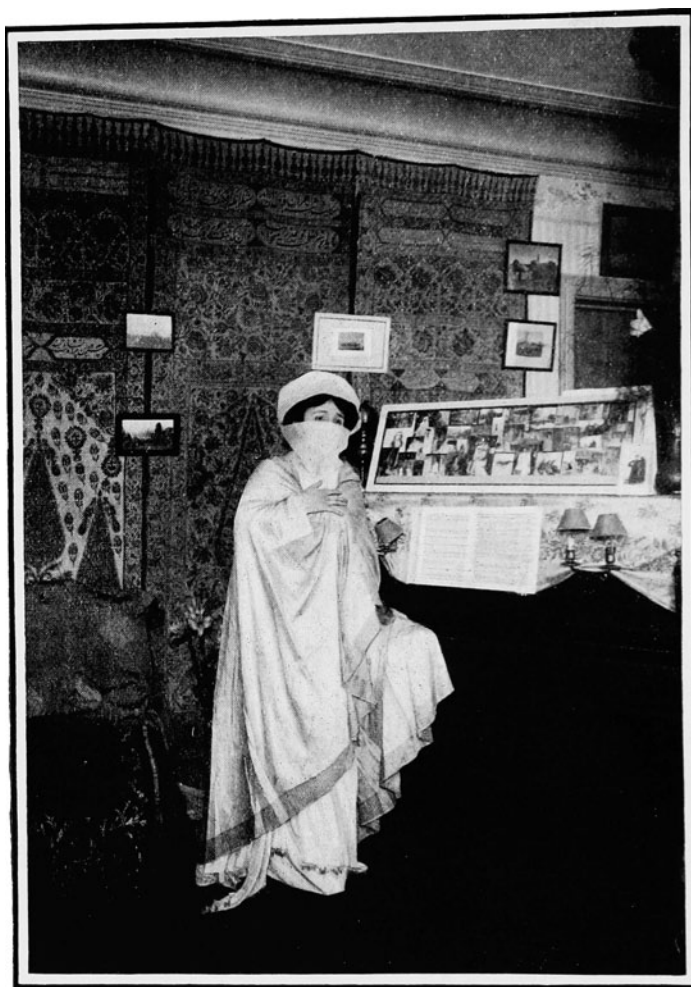
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ZEYNEB IN HER PARIS DRAWING-ROOM

She is wearing the Yashmak and Feradjé, or cloak.

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A TURKISH WOMAN'S EUROPEAN IMPRESSIONS

BY

ZEYNEB HANOUM

(HEROINE OF PIERRE LOTI'S NOVEL
"LES DÉSENCHANTÉES")

EDITED & WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

GRACE ELLISON

WITH 23 ILLUSTRATIONS

FROM PHOTOGRAPHS & A DRAWING BY

AUGUSTE RODIN

LONDON

SEELEY, SERVICE & CO. LTD.

38 GREAT RUSSELL STREET

1913

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IN the preface of his famous novel, *Les Désenchantées*, M. Pierre Loti writes: "This novel is pure fiction; those who take the trouble to find real names for Zeyneb, Melek, or André will be wasting their energy, for they never existed."

These words were written to protect the two women, Zeyneb and Melek, who were mainly responsible for the information contained in that book, from the possibility of having to endure the terror of the Hamidian régime as a consequence of their indiscretion. This precaution was unnecessary, however, seeing that the two heroines, understanding the impossibility of escaping the Hamidian vigilance, had fled to Europe, at great peril to their lives, before even the novel appeared.

Although it is not unusual to find Turkish women who can speak fluently two or three European languages (and this was very striking to me when I stayed in a Turkish harem), and although M. Loti has in his novel taken the

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precaution to let Melek die, yet it would still have been an easy task to discover the identity of the two heroines of his book.

Granddaughters of a Frenchman who for *les beaux yeux* of a Circassian became a Turk and embraced Mahometanism, they had been signalled out from amongst the enlightened women who are a danger to the State, and were carefully watched.

For a long time many cultured Turkish women had met to discuss what could be done for the betterment of their social status; and when it was finally decided to make an appeal to the sympathy of the world in the form of a novel, who better than Pierre Loti, with his magic pen and keen appreciation of Turkish life, could be found to plead the cause of the women of what he calls his "second fatherland"?

In one of my letters written to Zeyneb from Constantinople, I hinted that the Young Turks met in a disused cistern to discuss the Revolution which led Europe to expect great things of them. The women, too, met in strange places to plot and plan—they were full of energetic intentions, but, with the Turkish woman's difficulty of bringing thought into action, they did little

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more than plot and plan, and but for Zeyneb and Melek, *Les Désenchantées* would never have been written.

At the conclusion of his preface, M. Loti says :
“ What is true in my story is the culture allowed to Turkish women and the suffering which must necessarily follow. This suffering, which to my foreign eyes appeared perhaps more intense, is also giving anxiety to my dear friends the Turks themselves, and they would like to alleviate it. The remedy for this evil I do not claim to have discovered, since the greatest thinkers of the East are still diligently working to find it.”

Like M. Loti I, too, own my inability to come any nearer a solution of this problem. I, who through the veil have studied the aimless, unhealthy existences of these pampered women, am nevertheless convinced that the civilisation of Western Europe for Turkish women is a case of exchanging the frying-pan for the fire. Zeyneb in her letters to me, written between 1906–1912, shows that, if her disenchantment with her harem existence was bitter, she could never appreciate our Western civilisation.

Turkish women are clamouring for a more solid education and freedom. They would cast aside the hated veil; progress demands they

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should—but do they know for what they are asking ?

“Be warned by us, you Turkish women,” I said to them, painting the consequences of our freedom in its blackest colours, “and do not pull up your anchor till you can safely steer your ship. My own countrymen have become too callous to the bitter struggles of women ; civilisation was never meant to be run on these lines, therefore hold fast to the protection of your harems till you can stand alone.”

Since my return to London, I have sometimes spoken on Turkish life, and have been asked those very naïve questions which wounded the pride of Zeyneb Hanoum. When I said I had actually stayed in an harem, I could see the male portion of my audience, as it were, passing round the wink. “You must not put the word ‘harem’ on the title of your lecture,” said the secretary of a certain society. “Many who might come to hear you would stay away for fear of hearing improper revelations, and others would come hoping to hear those revelations and go away disappointed.”

In one of her letters to me, Zeyneb complains that the right kind of governess is not sent to Constantinople. The wonder to me is, when

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one hears what a harem is supposed to be, that European women have the courage to go there at all.

The word harem comes from the Arabic "Maharem," which means "sacred or forbidden," and no Oriental word has been more misunderstood. It does not mean a collection of wives; it is simply applied to those rooms in a Turkish house exclusively reserved for the use of the women. Only a blood relation may come there to visit the lady of the house, and in many cases even cousins are not admitted. There is as much sense in asking an Englishman if he has a boudoir as in asking a Turk if he has a harem; and to think that when I stayed in Turkey, our afternoon's impropriety consisted of looking through the latticed windows! The first Bey who passed was to be for me, the second for Fathma, and the third for Selma; this was one of our favourite games in the harem. One day I remember in the country we waited an hour for my Bey to pass, and after all he was not a Bey, but a fat old man carrying water.

The time has not yet come for the Turkish woman to vindicate her right to freedom; it cannot come by a mere change of law, and it is a cruelty on the part of Europeans to encourage

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them to adopt Western habits which are a part of a general system derived from a totally different process of evolution.

In the development of modern Turkey, the Turkish woman has already played a great part, and she has a great part still to play in the creation of a new civilisation; but present experience has shown that no servile imitation of the West will redeem Turkey from the evils of centuries of patriarchal servitude.

By a strange irony of fate, it was at Fontainebleau that I first made the acquaintance of Pierre Loti's heroines. To me every inch of Fontainebleau was instinct with memories of happiness and liberty. It was here that Francis I. practised a magnificence which dazzled Europe; here, too, is the wonderful wide forest of trees which are still there to listen to the same old story. . . . From a Turkish harem to Fontainebleau. What a change indeed!

The two sisters were sitting on the verandah of their villa when I arrived. Zeyneb had been at death's door; she looked as if she were there still.

"Why did you not come to lunch?" asked Melek.

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“ I was not invited,” I answered.

“ Well, you might have come all the same.”

“ Is that the custom in Turkey ? ”

“ Why, of course, when you are invited to lunch you can come to breakfast instead, or the meal after, or not at all. Whenever our guests arrive, it is we who are under obligations to them for coming.”

“ What a comforting civilisation ; I am sure I should love to be in Turkey.”

I wanted to ask indiscreet questions.

“ Have you large trees in Turkey with hollows big enough to seat two persons ? ” I began.

Melek saw through the trick at once.

“ Ah ! ” she answered, “ now you are treading on dangerous ground ; next time you come to see us we shall speak about these things. In the meanwhile learn that the charming side of life to which you have referred, and about which we have read so much in English novels, does not exist for us Turkish women. Nothing in our life can be compared to yours, and in a short time you will see this. We have no right to vary ever so little the programme arranged for us by the customs of our country ; an adventure of any kind generally ends in disaster. As you may know, we women never see our

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husbands till we are married, and an unhappy marriage is none the less awful to bear when it is the work of some one else.”

“Do tell me more,” I persisted.

“The marriage of a Turkish woman is an intensely interesting subject to anyone but a Turkish woman. . . .”

.

I left my new friends with reluctance, but after that visit began the correspondence which forms the subject matter of this book.

GRACE ELLISON.