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AN ENGLISHWOMAN IN A TURKISH HAREM

CHAPTER I

BACK TO THE HAREM

IT is a landscape of unending and beautiful sadness which surrounds the Konak where I am now living. In my home away yonder I had imagined that where the sun shines there must be laughter and merriment, yet here, face to face with reality, the sun, the bright blue sky, and clear atmosphere have steeped everything around —the mosques, the minarets, and mournful cypress trees, which stretch towards heaven like a prayer, with that inexplicable sadness which is the basis of Oriental life.

How could I have expected to find laughter and merriment in a landscape like this? Here happiness even is expressed in some form of sadness; the people's songs of rejoicing are like funeral hymns; the sweetest poetry is sad beyond our Western comprehension; the tales the old slave tells us as we sit cross-legged round the

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big mangol are of sadness so great that I often wonder whence they come, and yet, paradox of paradoxes, I have come back to Stamboul to laugh, for I have never laughed anywhere as I have in this land of extremes and contradictions and surprises.

. . . . . .

And now, after five years, here I am back again enjoying once more the calm and peace of an Eastern home, and the interesting society of my dear friend Fâtima (I change the name). To the Western ear, to be staying in a Turkish harem sounds alarming, and not a little—yes, let us confess it—improper. When, before I left my own country, I had the imprudence to tell a newspaper correspondent that I was longing to get back to the quiet harem existence, I was accused of "advocating polygamy," for to the uninitiated the word "harem" means a collection of wives, legitimate or otherwise, and even the initiated prefers to pretend he knows no other meaning.

Worn out with what we in the West call pleasures of society, the fatigue of writing against time, the rush and bustle of our big Western capitals, the hideous and continual noise of the traffic, which, like a great roaring wave, seems gradually to deaden one's understanding; how good it is to be here!

The wonderful silence! Sometimes it is almost terrifying! And at nights when I rise and peep

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through the lattice windows and see the beautiful moon bathing with its silver magnificence the silent, sleeping city and the calm, quiet Marmora beyond, it is difficult to believe that there are living souls in these dimly lighted streets, and the Bekjih's tap, tap, tapping on the cobbled stones sounds, in the stillness, like some spirit rapping from another world.

Yet much as I am drinking in the beauty of my new surroundings, they do not in the least force me to write. In this wonderful garden of God, for here one feels so keenly a divine presence in every living thing, ideas surge through the brain; every nerve, every sense tingles with the beauty around; one becomes part and parcel of its grandeur, but alas! the thoughts vanish before they even come to any precision. Encircled by such Nature, how can one write? "You in your Western cities," once said to me a Dervishe of the contemplative order, "have you time or place or opportunity for contemplation?" No doubt he was right, yet, like all those Turks who are privileged to make their choice, we are dwelling on a height, and, like the Dervishe, we have time, place, and opportunity for contemplation. But do we ever get beyond contemplation?

The diary of my existence as a Turkish woman, which in England I imagined could be written in a very short while, lies day after day in the form of a pencil and exercise book, untouched,

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on the little mother-of-pearl table in the most comfortable corner of my large bedroom. "To-morrow," I say, like a true Turkish woman, and alas! in Turkey it takes a few to-morrows to beget "some day"; "some day" is soon changed into "never," and who knows whether the best of my Turkish impressions will not be given "their local habitation and name" in a room of some Continental hotel?

Now I understand how weeks and months, years even, may pass without receiving news from Turkish friends; now I understand that lack of what we English call "common courtesy." We have misjudged the Turks. A pen in the harem! The unnecessary intrusion! The reforming fever which has swept over the land of Islam ever since the Constitution has not yet taught the Turkish women the use of a pen as we understand it. When I reproached my friend and hostess with not having written one letter, "Why should I write," she asked; "what have I to say? You know exactly how every moment of my life is being spent. You know my affection for you, and when two friends are really sure of one another's sympathy, each can feel the thoughts the other is thinking. . . ." And so we took up the threads of the conversation where we had left them five years ago.

Fâtima did not know I was coming to Constantinople. She was not dead, of that I was sure, so I should find her, no matter into what

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part of Turkey she might have wandered. But the news of my arrival reached my friend almost as soon as I had found her address. She came at once to see me at the hotel. A Turkish woman visiting me at an hotel! Was it possible? Five years ago what would not have been her punishment for such reckless *licence*? The customs of the country do not yet, however, allow Turkish women to visit hotels, and in taking every step forward she has to run the risk of offending the ignorant and fanatical mob.

Fâtima did not come in by the front entrance. Quite recently a restaurant for "ladies only" has been opened by the same management as the hotel where I stayed and is, to some extent, a rendez-vous for Turkish women. It is their first step towards a "fashionable" club, and to me, the newcomer, another big step towards freedom. Let those Western critics, who have taken such a deliberate stand against the present government and declared "the new order of things worse than the old," take into consideration such details as the opening of a restaurant for Turkish women. It is part of a great scheme of reform, and everything is going on in proportion. In 1908 more than two men sitting at a café together were "suspect" and reported at headquarters; in 1913 Turkish *women* meet in a restaurant and discuss political subjects—certainly this is not the Turkey I expected to see. . . .

Having some work to finish that day, I had

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given orders that I would see no one, and consequently when Fâtima asked for me in the restaurant she was told that I was ill. I was in my room writing, and at first hardly heeded a gentle knock at my door. Then came a faint repetition of the first knock, and a few minutes after followed yet another and another tap. At last I rose and opened the door to see who was there. A moment's pause, then a little black-robed, thickly veiled figure threw herself in my arms and without saying a word, without even raising her veil, just clung and clung to me. It was Fâtima, and this was our meeting after five years without having seen or even heard of one another.

"Little Fâtima," I asked, when at last our long embrace had finished, "how did you get here?"

"I slipped through the side door and came up in the lift," she answered, and she nearly laughed her hair down at the thought of her own daring. Five years ago the zenith of Fâtima's longing was to be taken up in a hotel lift. I had begged her father to let her satisfy her curiosity—he was powerful enough to do so—but he did not say "No" and he did not say "Yes" either, and she went on wondering and longing and wondering, and now, when she least expected it, her ambition had been gratified.

It was arranged that I should go to Fâtima that very afternoon, the carriage would be sent to fetch me, and the same old coachman would drive

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me from the noise, vulgarity, and "patchwork" morality of that Pera which to me was as obnoxious as Stamboul was delightful.

"I shall be counting the minutes till your arrival," said Fâtima, as she rose to go, and all of a sudden for the first time she realized that she had not only to go back the way she came, but face the crowd. How delightfully Turkish! Counting the cost of the wares when the bill is in your hand—such a contrast to our British prudence!

"But tell me, Fâtima," I said, as together we boldly walked down the staircase and out at the front door, "how did you like your first journey in a lift?"

"That you were alone and ill in an hotel," she answered, "was of more importance than anything else. I never even thought about it."

. . . . .

The sun was shining brightly that afternoon—shining as it only shines in the East. All the long way from Pera to my new home it had darted its way through the carriage windows, showing so distinctly the thick coating of dust which had spread itself so comfortably on my black serge gown, and transfiguring the large white buttons of the carriage seat into sparkling diamond stars. At every corner I recognized old nooks—old wisteria-covered houses, my favourite mosques and fountains, the same slowly moving crowd, the same beggars almost, and I was going back to the Fâtima who had grown from a girl to a

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woman—Fâtima who had so persistently resisted the European civilization at her very door, if it in any way prevented her remaining faithful to the traditions of her own civilization and religion.

. . . . .

But at last we are there. Fâtima has come to the door to meet me and hugs me into the big salon. There are the same tiny cigarettes, the same coffee cups, the same endless rows of bon-bon boxes filled with the delicious candies of the East, the same liqueurs, the same array of cakes, and we walk and talk as though miles and years had never separated us.

But the sun is now sinking to rest. It is our dinner-hour, the candles are being lighted, the darlingest little baby girl toddles in to bid her mother good-night and make the acquaintance of her new "aunt." Kissing my hand, she raises it to her forehead with the grace of a little Empress. Dear little Perihan with the beautiful, wide-awake, brown eyes! Will your destiny be like that of the great Eastern Princess whose name you bear?

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CHAPTER II

"TIME'S FOLDED WINGS"

BUT to return to the burden of letter-writing. Another Turkish friend, a lady who has stayed in England, considers one of the most disagreeable features of our civilization is our continual answering of letters. "Unnecessary letters," she called them, "and I pitied my poor hostess," she explained, "wasting the greater part of her morning choosing where she would or would not eat and asking friends to eat with her." Here our friends come uninvited, they take what we at home call "pot luck" with delightful and refreshing unceremoniousness.

But the greatest obstacle to one's writing, setting aside the atmosphere, is the lack of solitude. Here there is, except for the honoured guest, the solitude of the multitude and the silence of familiarity, but solitude, as we understand it in the West, *i.e.* one's own self within one's own room, and the door locked, never. And I doubt very much as I write these lines whether solitude and its near relative, celibacy,

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will ever be admitted or even understood in these Eastern homes.

Several times, however, when the thought of dear friends in my home away yonder has pricked my conscience I have escaped to my room to write. But my maid for the moment, Cadhem Haïr Calfat (Calfat means slave), an elegant negress, follows me to see what she can do for me. I am seated on the sofa —she uses the word "esbab," and I understand the word "esbab" means "dress"—I shake my head. No, I will not change my dress. I hear "sou" (water). I shake my head again. I washed a short while ago. "Satch" (hair). No, my hair is quite in order. I pass my hand over my forehead, and move my fingers, to make her understand I want to write. She thinks I am ill, and runs to fetch my hostess, who hastens to find out what is wrong. She, too, fails to understand why I go to my bedroom to write in solitude when I could write at a big desk in the salon with the other ladies to keep me company.

But what a devoted creature is my chocolate-coloured attendant! With what patience she tries to make me understand! Not a stitch of clothing will she allow me to put on by myself, and only when I am safely tucked up under my mosquito net does she leave me alone. And what would she say now if by any chance the idea should enter her faithful woolly head to come and see whether I am all right? Here I am, outside my

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