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An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem

Grace Ellison (d. 1935) was a journalist and suffragette with a fascination for Turkish culture. This book, first published in 1915, is a collection of accounts originally written for the *Daily Telegraph* about her stay in the harem of a Turkish nobleman. Keen to dispel the sensationalist Western view of the harem, Ellison paints an intimate portrait of the luxurious but secluded life of women in their segregated portion of the household. Subjects covered include fashion, social events, polygamy and the bonds between family members. As well as describing life within the harem, the author provides an impassioned critical commentary on the lives and treatment of women in Turkey, attending a suffragette meeting and discussing the role of religion and nationalism in women's lives. Finishing as the First World War begins, this is a captivating snapshot of Turkish society in transition from the Ottoman era to becoming a modern republic.

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An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem

Grace Ellison
Introduction by
Edward Granville Browne

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AN ENGLISHWOMAN IN A TURKISH HAREM

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

(*In collaboration with* MELEK HANOUM)

"ABDUL HAMID'S DAUGHTER"

(*In collaboration with* ZEYNEB HANOUM)

"A TURKISH WOMAN'S EUROPEAN IMPRESSIONS"

THE AUTHOR IN TURKISH COSTUME

AN ENGLISHWOMAN IN A TURKISH HAREM

BY

GRACE ELLISON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

EDWARD G. BROWNE, M.A., F.B.A., F.R.C.P.

WITH THIRTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS

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I DEDICATE
THESE LETTERS TO ALL THOSE
WHO MADE MY VISIT
SO INTERESTING AND HAPPY,
BUT PARTICULARLY TO MY FRIEND
AND HOSTESS.

PREFACE

THESE letters do not claim to be a psychological study of Turkish character, nor are they a political or historical treatise. They are only an Englishwoman's impressions of Turkish harem life, written during a very happy and interesting visit amongst Turkish friends. Should I not have said in these letters what my Turkish sisters expected me to say; should I not have understood their civilization as they hoped I would understand it; I feel sure they will forgive one who they know has always been, and will always be their sincere friend. To correct the errors, prejudice, and hatred which have become almost part of the British national "attitude" towards Turkey is not an easy task. If these letters have been able in ever so small a way to spread some of the enthusiasm and love I feel for a nation which Europe has so severely censured, they will at least have justified the reason of their existence.

My thanks are due to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* for allowing me to reproduce those letters which have appeared in the columns of that paper.

GRACE ELLISON

ROUEN, 1915

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INTRODUCTION

AS one who for nearly forty years has been a friend and admirer of the Turks and a student of their language and literature, it is a satisfaction to me, especially in the dark days through which Turkey has passed and is passing, to find a fresh opportunity of testifying to my belief in the virtues of that much-maligned and ill-used race. I have, therefore, willingly acceded to the request of the authoress of this work that I should add to it, now that it is finished, a few words of introduction, though such introduction, as it seems to me, is hardly needed. Miss Ellison enjoyed an opportunity of seeing an aspect of Turkish life which few English women and no English men have been privileged to study at first hand, and, as her book abundantly shows, she has made good use of her opportunity. It will not be her fault if she fails to "correct the errors, prejudice and hatred which have become almost part of the British national attitude towards Turkey," and "to spread some of the enthusiasm and love" she feels "for a nation which Europe has so severely censured."

Before the Revolution of 1908 Turkish family life and the qualities of the Turkish woman were, in all save the rarest cases, sealed books even to those Europeans who mixed freely with Turks and spoke Turkish with fluency; and though since that period a few Turkish ladies, notably the talented authoress, Hálida Hanoum (to whom Miss Ellison repeatedly refers in the course of these pages),[1] have visited England, and even pursued their studies with remarkable success in English women's colleges, they are still sufficiently unknown and surrounded with mystery to give to this present book a real interest and value. On one occasion, some four years ago, when I was at Constantinople, I was invited to meet a group of Turkish ladies who were anxious to make the acquaintance of an Englishman who had studied their language and literature, edited the most comprehensive and sympathetic history of their poetry,[2] and was known to them as a sincere friend of their country and their religion. I was much struck by their eagerness and intelli-

[1] Pp. 17, 66, 69, 77, 107.

[2] The late Mr. E. J. W. Gibb's *History of Ottoman Poetry*. Mr. Gibb died on December 5, 1901, little more than a year after the publication of the first volume of this great work. The remaining five volumes, of which the last (vol. vi) contained the Turkish originals of the poems translated in vols. i–v, were edited by myself, at the request of his widow and parents, from the carefully written and well-arranged manuscript materials which were found amongst his papers. A seventh volume, dealing with the most modern period, is in course of preparation.

gence, as well as by the distinction of their manners, and I am glad to find the impression left on my mind by this single occasion entirely confirmed by Miss Ellison's much more extended experience. Knowing how absurd and baseless are many of the opinions about the Turks and Islam entertained in Europe (so that, to take one instance only, people who ought to know better constantly re-assert the oft-repeated calumny that in the Mohammedan faith the existence of a soul is denied to women), I was prepared to find Turkish ladies much more intelligent and better educated than is generally supposed; but the reality greatly exceeded my expectations. Of their profound patriotism Miss Ellison gives (on pp. 85–87) a moving example, and Mr. Morgan Shuster, at pp. 188–9 of his great book, *The Strangling of Persia*, has shown that in this quality the Persian women do not fall short of their Turkish sisters.

Nothing has so greatly retarded the evolution of the Muslim nations as the backwardness of their women, seeing that in the formation of the children's characters it is nearly always the mother who plays the chief part. Polygamy, as Miss Ellison points out, is so much rarer than is generally supposed in Europe, save in the wealthiest classes and especially in the royal household, that its evils have probably been exaggerated; but, for the reasons set forth on

p. 96 of this book, happy and suitable marriages are rarer in the East than in Europe. The changes in this respect which are now taking place, and with which this book largely deals, are not the least of the blessings conferred by the Revolution of 1908, and though it is at present the fashion in the English press to disparage that revolution, which was at first hailed with so much apparent enthusiasm, I cannot understand how any one who knew Turkey both before and after it can deny or ignore the vast improvement which it has effected not only in the happiness but in the moral and intellectual condition of the people. In our own country the contemplation of a Liberalism which takes Tsardom as its ideal, a Conservatism which coquets with lawlessness and makes two such reactionary measures as Conscription and Protection, the chief "constructive features" of its programme, a Cabinet which pays less and less heed to Parliament, a Parliament which grows ever less and less in touch with public opinion, and a Press which tends increasingly to make the selection rather than the collection of news its main object, has produced a political pessimism, the like of which few living men can remember, which makes it difficult for us to believe in the reality of any political enthusiasm, or to understand what emancipation means to a people who have just emerged from centuries of despotism. The bright

hopes born in Turkey in 1908 and in Persia two years earlier have, indeed, been sorely dimmed, when not entirely extinguished, less through the faults or shortcomings of the patriotic elements in these countries than through the Machiavellian cynicism and materialistic greed of the Great Powers of Europe, who least of all desired any real reform in the lands which they had already marked down for their spoliation. Yet even should Turkey and Persia unhappily perish and cease to be counted amongst the free and independent nations of the world, the historians of the future will pay the tribute of admiration withheld by the politicians and journalists of to-day to their last splendid struggles for freedom, independence, and reform. For truly says one of the Arabian poets :

Kam máta qawmᵘⁿ wa má mátat makárimu-hum,
Wa 'ásha qawmᵘⁿ wa hum fi'n-nási amwátu !

"Many a people's virtues survive when themselves are sped,
And many a people linger who are counted by men as dead !"

It cannot, of course, be denied that the Turkish reformers (much more, in my opinion, than the Persians) made several frightful mistakes, the worst of which was the vain and disastrous attempt to Turkify or Ottomanize the various non-Turkish elements of the Ottoman Empire, a matter in which their policy contrasted very unfavourably with that pursued by the late Sultan

'Abd-ul-Hamíd. This grievous error, like many lesser ones, was largely due, in my opinion, to the French influences which played so large a part, both in the political and the literary field, in the evolution of the "New Turks" (*Yeñi Turkler*), or, as they are commonly though absurdly styled (now even by themselves) "Young Turks." The French are, indeed, more chauvinistic, more intolerant of languages, customs and ideas other than their own, in a word more "insular," than the English; and from the time of Kemál and Shinásí, the founders of the "Young Turkish" school, until that of Ahmed Rizá Bey, Dr. Názim, 'Alí Kemál, and others who took a prominent part in recent events, French ideas have dominated the Turkish reformers. So, just as the French discourage the use of the Breton language in Brittany, and endeavour to impose their own tongue on the inhabitants of that Celtic province, the "Young Turks" endeavoured to impose their language on the Arabs and Armenians, and their alphabet on the Albanians, while at the same time, with a strange inconsistency, they were ruining the Turkish language by hasty and ill-considered attempts to "reform" its spelling and to modify or even entirely change the Arabic characters in which, like all other Muhammadan languages, it is written.

I agree so entirely with nearly everything that

Miss Ellison says as to the true democracy [1] and hospitality [2] of the Turks, their kindness to the poor, their sincerity and unceremoniousness, the humane character of the "slavery," with the toleration of which they have been reproached, and the like, that it seems ungracious to dissent from a statement which she makes on pp. 104–5 as to the New School of Turkish poetry. She quotes an opinion as to the value of this modern poetry expressed by my late friend, Mr. E. J. W. Gibb (than whom in all that concerns Turkish literature no greater authority can be adduced), for which I also appear to be made responsible, as also, perhaps, for the preceding implication that the Turks often excelled their earlier Persian exemplars. This, I feel bound to state, is not my view. Whatever comparisons may be instituted between the Turks and Persians, and in whatever points the former may be deemed superior to the latter, in literary skill and poetic talent there can, in my opinion, be no comparison whatever. Turkish poetry, whether old or new, is at best seldom more than pretty and graceful, while often the verses of even comparatively unknown Persian poets (let alone such masters of the art as Jalálu'd Dín Rúmí, Sa'dí, Háfiz and Jámí) touch the sublime. The production of fine poetry may not be the highest aim of man, or the object for which he was created, but, what-

[1] Pp. 21, 45, 54. [2] P. 22. [3] P. 52.

ever this distinction may be worth, some of the finest poetry in the world has been produced by the Persians, and no one, I think, however great an admirer of the Turks he may be, could make this assertion about them.

In what concerns the languages and literatures of Western and Central Asia, I must, I fear, admit that I am what my learned and versatile Turkish friend, Dr. Rizá Tevfiq, sometime Deputy of Adrianople in the Ottoman Parliament, and commonly known in Turkey as "*Feylesúf Rizá*" ("Rizá the Philosopher"), calls Mu'allim Nájí, the last great champion of the old or classical style in Turkey, "*un réactionnaire décidé*," and it is with certain tendencies of the "Young Turks" in this domain of philology and letters that I find myself least in sympathy. I have already alluded to certain innovations in spelling which appear to me deplorable, and to several still more deplorable attempts to modify or abolish that beautiful Arabian character which is one of the strongest bonds uniting all Muhammadan nations; and I must add a few words of disapproval of that fantastic movement, briefly referred to on pp. 67–8 of this book, known as "The New Turanian" (*Yeñi Túrán*). Against the attempts of this school to revive the use of obsolescent Turkish words and to displace in their favour the equivalent, and at present much more familiar, Persian and Arabic vocables, I

have nothing to say; there is no more reason why a Turk should not endeavour to persuade his countrymen to call God "*Tañri*" instead of "*Alláh*," or fire "*üd*" instead of "*átesh*," than there is why an Englishman should not strive to oust from his language the words "Preface" and "Introduction" in favour of "Foreword," or even "photograph" in favour of "light-bild" (as some few have done), provided always that he is not so archaic and Anglo-Saxon as to be totally unintelligible. My objection to the "Young Turanian" School is their hatred of Arabic and Persian culture and desire to cut themselves altogether adrift from them, and their grotesque ideal not merely of a Pan-Turkish but of a Turanian world-empire, which should exclude Arabs, Persians, and other non-Turanian Muhammadan elements, but should on the other hand include not only Tartars and Mongols, but even Bulgarians. To such strange lengths does the distorted Nationalism of these "New Turanians" extend that they blame their own great Sultan Báyezíd, "the Thunder-bolt," because, not recognizing his "Turanian overlord," he strove to arrest the devastating advance of Tamerlane the Tartar, and perished in the attempt. To me the aims of this school, so far as I understand them, appear little less insane than those of Marinetti and the Italian Futurists. Far truer, saner and more reasonable is the

Pan-Islamic ideal of Sayyid Jamálu'd-Dín al-Afghání, whose body rests, after the storm and stress through which it passed, in the cemetery of Nishán-Tásh in Constantinople.

These, however, are comparatively small matters, the inevitable exuberances of a great National Awakening. However we may appraise the "Committee of Union and Progress" or the "Liberals," Enver Pasha, Tal'at, Jávíd and Ahmed Rizá on the one hand, or Kyámil Pasha, Dámád Feríd Pasha and Isma'íl Kemál on the other, let us render all honour to the noble and often nameless and fameless Turkish patriots, both men and women, who by their lives and deaths have during the last eight years striven so gallantly to save and free their country; and, when we think of their mistakes, let us remember what the Turkish poet says:—

"*Yár-siz qálir kimesné 'ayb-siz yár isteyan!*"

"Friendless surely he remaineth who demands a faultless friend!"

EDWARD G. BROWNE

CAMBRIDGE, *May 5, 1914.*

AN ENGLISHWOMAN IN A TURKISH HAREM