

## CHAPTER IX

### HAREM LIFE IN JERUSALEM AND MY VISIT TO THE MOSQUE OF OMAR DURING THE SACRED FEAST OF NEBÉ MOUSSA

**I**T was strange after my stay amongst the free women of Turkey to be back in a harem again. The harem with all its ridiculous childish etiquette, the one sex always running away from the other, the impossibility of the Pasha's coming when there are lady guests, and the badly run harem and selamlık.

Those who would know the value of the Ghazi's reform should go to Palestine. There the women, ready to be free, are still subjected to the tyranny of the Ulema and harem etiquette ; they have no position in the State.

It was Easter Sunday, the Roman and Anglican Easter, and the Orthodox Palm Sunday. Unable to walk, I watched from the balcony of the hotel, the Arabs assembling in the square, whence with boisterous music and wild dancing they were starting on their pilgrimage to Nebé Moussa, or the tomb of Moses.

Although the Bible distinctly tells us no one must know where Moses was buried (Deut. III. 4-6), "No man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day," the great Seladin claims that God sent an angel to tell him the secret and to command pious Moslems to make a pilgrimage to this tomb during the Christian Easter. But there was also a political explanation to the message. The great Seladin, realizing the number of Christians (Romans and Orthodox) assembled in Jerusalem for Easter, feared they might rise and attempt to reconquer Jerusalem. In which case the

Moslems must be prepared to resist. So the feast and pilgrimage of the Nebé Moussa, starting on the Roman Easter Sunday and ending on the Orthodox Sunday, was instituted, and during that sacred time no Christian may enter the mosque of Omar—though Arabs go to the Holy Sepulchre. Early in the morning the Arabs began to assemble. And as the Christians with the patriarch's unpretentious procession returned from their Easter celebrations, they were lost in the mob of shouting Arabs, with their clashing timbrels and cymbals, banging tambourines and shrill whistles. English officers on horseback rode amongst the Arabs, whilst Jews in caftans, curls and long velvet and fur mantles, on their way to the Passover, threaded their way in and out of the procession as they never dared to do before the era of the British.

Here were three great religions represented in the square, each tightly wrapped up in its fanaticism, each had come to worship God and each prayed for the destruction of his brother's heresy, and the English officers were there to keep order. Judging by the noise in the square, Easter belongs to the Arabs. How they dance! Day and night for the whole of the festival they never cease, and when overcome with fatigue they can dance no more, someone else has to take their place. And in so doing they are obeying their Psalmist David, who says, "Praise God with song and dance." And so, clad in the gaudy colours of the East with scarf and head-dresses of every shade from orange and violet to blue and green and red, they go through all the exotic dances of the village fair. Jumping, hopping, turning, twisting, and performing all kinds of curious contortions with a fellow-dancer on their shoulders, in short all the feats of the acrobats combined with those of the juggler, and using—too freely for the comfort of the spectators—an unpleasant-looking sword.

As the procession forms, women sit on the wall idly

looking on nursing their children, their faces heavily veiled. The sun is glaring on them both, though they do not seem to feel it. Christian women and foreigners also look on. The hotel windows are packed with spectators and the crowd in the streets is so dense it is impossible to pass.

It can be no easy task to preside over this "village fair"; to know exactly how far an excited Arab may be allowed to use his sword for religious purposes, and if, as has been the case, a passing Jew has spat on the Moslem flag, and the Moslems have turned their swords against him, quite a firm action is necessary or a religious riot—the most bloody of all—will ensue. To keep order is the task of the British officer and he does it without gestures or ostentation, calm but firm. Without in any way exaggerating the merits of the British, but only giving honour where honour is due, one finds it difficult to imagine Italians controlling a dangerous fanatical mob with the same just, calm and quiet energy. I wanted to take part in the Christian Easter; I witnessed instead one of the strangest of religious gatherings; a spectacle that was interesting and unique, which can be seen nowhere else in the world.

The tomb of Moses, in appearance just like any ordinary high Moslem Turbé, is covered with a black cloth heavily embroidered with gold, and at each end are large turbans. It is situated about forty minutes' motor-ride from Jericho. The route which the pilgrims take is one of those steep, hairpin roads up and down which one motors wondering whether one's last hour has come. The men travel on foot or on mules and donkeys, whilst the women and children are all huddled together in carts which crawl all along the narrow route and seriously block the traffic.

On Easter Monday we motored to the tomb of Moses, in the adjoining enclosure of which was a seething mass of dancing men and veiled women. The women either stay

in their tents with their children or stand watching the men dance. For the dancing never ceases ; on and on, day and night. . . .

We—my companion and I—had a letter of introduction to the Grand Mufti from my host, Moussa Kiazim Pasha, head of the Arab Delegation to London and a member of the prophet's family ; "Husseinné" is a title of which he is proud and which unlocks most ecclesiastical doors for him. The Grand Mufti had been requested by the Pasha to welcome us to the lunch for men only, to which all the clergy and the notables were invited to honour the feast of the great law-giver Moses.

When our car arrived four huge Arabs pushed a way for me through the seething mass of men and at the same time protected me from the curious, fanatical crowd ; the tomb of Moses not being in their estimation the place for a Christian woman. And all the while great flies, almost the size of beans, settled on one's neck or hands, or anywhere else they had a chance ; one dare not in a country or in a crowd like this think of microbes, or one would be their victim at once. Two more Syrians carried me up a rickety staircase which groaned under our combined weight into the presence of the Grand Mufti, who sat cross-legged on a low sofa, surrounded by the principal Ulemas and notables of Palestine who had gathered together to be his guests. He was a good-looking man—comparatively young—and fair, and whilst my escort was exchanging compliments with the Grand Mufti for me and for himself, sherbet and lemonade were served.

I spoke with enthusiasm of my trip to Turkey ; of Mustapha Kemal Pasha and all he had done for Turkey ; and above all of the free Turkish women whom I had visited in their homes. Everyone listened with interest, even when I was touching on so profane a subject as the Konia ball.

Yet I was not invited to lunch, and what was much more serious, the clerical escort for which the Pasha had asked to take me to the Omar mosque was completely ignored. When my companion deliberately asked the question, "Is she to have an escort?" the Mufti would have nothing whatsoever to do with such a proposition.

With the help of the four Arabs we pushed our way back again the way we had come. Being a woman, I was allowed to look at the tomb of Moses through a window; only men are privileged to enter and pray by what in all probability is not the tomb of Moses at all. Further on we passed the courtyard where the food was being prepared. How utterly detestable it was. A strong odour of garlic and burning coffee mixed with hot oil! Huge sheep frizzling round the open fires, scantily clad, greasy scullions carrying the food in their hands, and on and over all a host of irritating, poisonous flies. How happy I was not to have to eat that lunch.

Once safe within the car, on our way to Jericho I asked my companion why we had not been asked to lunch. He laughed, "You might as well have gone into the presence of God and praised the devil, as to speak with enthusiasm of Mustapha Kemal Pasha as you did to the Grand Mufti!" Nevertheless I determined to go to the mosque. Something else, since the Grand Mufti had done nothing, would have to be arranged.

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Back again in the harem the Pasha's daughter decided I should wear a veil and go to the mosque with her; but how was that possible? Supposing someone were to speak to me? Supposing through ignorance I should be guilty of some irreverence? I had not sufficiently studied my part—walk, gestures, the right poise of my head—and

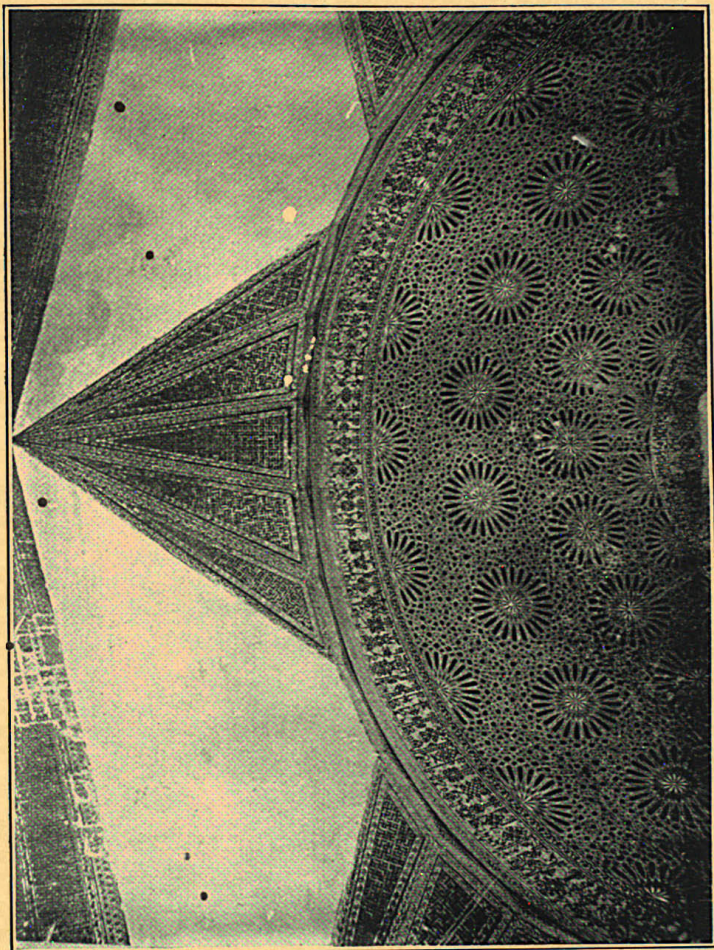
last but not least, how could I with an injured knee prostrate myself in Moslem prayer? We decided a way must be found for me to go in a hat.

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We left the harem that afternoon—four ladies—myself, a slave, and two eunuchs. As guest, I was given the assistance of a eunuch on either side, and a slave followed with the carpets and my boots. Only in the courtyard could the boots be replaced; in the mosque itself and in the sacred places most people walked barefooted. After a little while I too was almost barefooted, for the stones wore my silk stockings into large holes, and by the time I put my boots on again there was little stocking foot left. As soon as we arrived at the entrance of the mosque a crowd of excited Moslems arrived, attracted by the sight of my hat. Fortunately, however, the green-turbaned ecclesiastic to whom a letter had been addressed came forward to protect us, and he and a fellow Cheik or Mufti took their place at the head of our procession, calling as we walked along to satisfy the curious crowd, “English Moslem—guest of the Pasha Husseinné.” In my mind’s eye now I often see that procession. The two ecclesiastics, the Englishwoman and two eunuchs, followed by four ladies and a slave, and the mob following as we visited holy place after holy place.

We had to go to the women’s part of the mosque, and from there could admire the simple, magnificent construction which is built round the rock where Isaac was to have been sacrificed. As well as being an important Old Testament story, the story of Isaac (with Ishmael substituted for Isaac), is one of the favourite stories of Islam.

In so many of our Christian churches, even for example the Church of Gethsemane, built on the stone where Our Saviour prayed, the sacred spot itself is dwarfed into



INSCRIPTIONS AND ORNAMENTS IN THE INTERIOR OF THE MEDRESSE (KORATAI)

PRICELESS OLD DESIGN IN TURQUOISE AND GOLD

The Head of the museum copied this for me as a design for a dress.

nsignificance before the great importance given to the church. In the mosque of Omar right in the centre stands the immense rock of Sacrifice in all its solemn majesty, and the exquisite mosque, Arab art at its very best, is the frame, but only the frame, to the immortal allegory.

I was grateful to the attendants for their help over the rough stones, and my already swollen knee and ankle, walking in the heat without shoes, made it almost impossible for me to put them on again. My escort, waiting in the car outside, was glad to see me safe and sound. It was a dangerous experiment but I had seen the mosque. Had the fanatical mob in its wrath torn me limb from limb, I should only have had myself to blame.

In the old days in Turkey Makboulé and I used to go to the mosque of Eyoub both heavily veiled. Although I knew "my part," although, from the moment we left our shoes outside and crossed the sacred threshold I copied all my friend's movements and became deaf and dumb in case anyone should speak to me, all the same one took one's life in one's hands. What short work the fanatical mob, especially the women outside, would have made of me, a Christian who had dared to visit the sacred tomb and mosque of Eyoub.

Another day when we were visiting Eyoub, my veil blew back and my rebellious locks were exposed to the view of all. "*A la franque*," cried the mob, "showing her hair like a foreigner." Makboulé indignantly answered them. They began to stone us, and although we got quickly into the carriage and drove away, the back of the carriage was badly damaged.

But those days are over. Mustapha Kemal Pasha has ended the reign of fanaticism in Turkey; in Jerusalem it still reigns supreme.

In this holy city, sacred to Latins, Greeks, Moslems and Jews alike, a Christian would murder a Jew were he to



take the path that leads to the Holy Sepulchre and nothing can be said. Roman and Greek Christians, unable to compromise, have to leave the guardianship of the Holy Tomb to Turks; and Arabs are ready to tear a Christian limb from limb if she crosses the threshold of the sacred mosque of Omar during the feast of Nebé Moussa. Up against the fanaticism of Jerusalem we remembered the Ghazi's words: "Religion that increases fanaticism between nations is a canker that must be destroyed." How sincerely one wishes that someone could destroy this unholy fanaticism that is eating out the heart of Jerusalem.

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Once more back in the harem, my friends pretended they had misunderstood the message, that a gentleman was waiting to take me to Bethlehem. He could not come to the harem to fetch me, so we talked and smoked and talked again. All the ladies were young—very young in years, but with the poise of middle-aged women. There is nothing so ageing as having nothing to do, and a horizon of visits to and from women, cigarettes, gossip, and coffee, is not very inspiring.

What dull, aimless lives they lead. Like the Turks in the past their great distraction was talking gossip, and revelling in their favourite topic of conversation—love—of which they knew little. My hostess was married at fourteen, was a widow at eighteen, and now at twenty-two, considers life over. When I suggested she should marry again, she seemed shocked at the idea. "I'm much too old," she said, and in spirit she was.

I began to tell them of the free women of Turkey and all they were doing. They listened intently until all of a sudden one of them began to cry bitterly. She was a Turkish woman married to an Arab, and as she listened to the story of what Turkish women had become, she realized

what she had lost by leaving her country. Another lady, guest of my hostess, was indignant and decided on rebellion. "Are we not as ready for freedom as the Turks?" she exclaimed. "And yet here we remain a century behind our sisters who used to be much less advanced than we."

During my stay in Palestine my thoughts were so often with Makboulé. I had shared her harem existence and the happiness of her freedom. I remembered the thick veil she wore when first I met her, and saw her again in my mind's eye as she recently walked triumphantly across the ballroom with her arms bare. "A day will come," she said, "when our Ghazi will be venerated throughout the East. And what he has done for us will serve for all the women of the East."