

A French Girl in the Harem

Aimée Duboc de Riverie

The Reign of Abdulhamid I
(1788-1789)

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It was the Harem Suite in the Topkapı Palace. Narrow courtyards, dark corridors and windowless waiting rooms with high ceilings lead into an empty room. Twilight had fallen. The discernable silhouette of a woman could be seen seated on a low sofa. Smoking a long pipe from a small brazier with dying embers, she was none other than the majordomo of the Harem, Despina Hatun. At first glance, she appeared to be of indeterminate age. Though her plumpness gave her a rather unshapely figure, the impressive manner in which she pinned her hair up in a bun, combined with a jacket of burgundy shot with silver threads covered up her flaws and gave her an aura of magnificence.

A very attractive blond-haired, blue-eyed girl of nubile years entered the room behind the Palace Chief Eunuch. With his long red shirt and white silk caftan lined with black fur and his mallet-like hands, the towering eunuch looked like the genie that popped out of Aladdin's magic lamp. Compared to the Palace Chief Eunuch, the maiden dressed in European garb standing beside him looked like a fragile vase. The gloominess of the room failed to cover up her blond lockets of hair.

The Palace Chief Eunuch shoved the girl towards Despina Hatun and said, "I brought you a new girl, Despina Hatun. She is a gift to the Palace from the Governor of Algeria. They say her name is Aimée. She is French. It looks as though you are going to have your hands full with this one for a while."

Crestfallen and frightened, Aimée retreated to a dim corner in the room and cowered, unable to find the courage to lift her head and observe her surroundings. The Palace Chief Eunuch soon exited the room, leaving the girl with the formidable majordomo. Despina Hatun looked the girl over from head to toe. The young maiden felt she was being crushed under the heavy scrutiny of

this strange, but intriguing woman. Suddenly, the blond girl straightened up, took a few brave steps, and planted herself in front of this overly inquisitive woman. Not one to be easily intimidated, the woman leapt to her feet and barked, "I want to see the Head of the Female Servants, Suzidil Kalfa, at once!"

The Head of the Female Servants, Suzidil entered the room without a sound and looked around quite furtively. She relaxed once her eyes fell upon Aimée, and immediately comprehended the reason she had been so hastily summoned. Before Suzidil knew it, Despina Hatun began to rapidly fire off a series of commands:

"Suzidil Kalfa, I want you to tell her that from this day forward, she will be under my command. I will be responsible for her until she is ready for Palace life. Tell her to follow me while I show her where she will sleep and live from this day forward. I'm also ordering you to teach this girl our language as soon as possible!"

Suzidil Kalfa turned to Aimée and said, "Bonjour, Mademoiselle." Aimée's heart filled with happiness she hadn't felt in many days. "Someone knows my language," she thought to herself. She was absorbing everything Suzidil said with great eagerness.

Aimée was so overcome with pleasure that she didn't pay any attention to the places and rooms she passed as she followed closely at the heels of Despina Hatun. Once she was left to herself in the dormitory, she saw that the room opened out into a miserable courtyard surrounded by walls. There were columns which rose up to the domed ceiling of the room and stained glass windows with their steel bars made Aimée's heart skip a beat or two. She was filled with apprehension, which made her a bit nauseous. She collapsed in a heap on her sleeping pallet, not knowing what to do.

Before much time passed, she heard the sound of approaching footsteps and voices. Suddenly, the room was teeming with many

young, beautiful girls. They were dressed very smartly with brightly-colored garments, and expensive, sparkling jewelry. Aimée heard the sound of an unfamiliar musical instrument in the distance. What followed next occurred with the speed of a dream. These curious and contemptuous women slithered and slunk around Aimée, and began examining her as if she were an insect under a magnifying glass. They scrutinized her complexion, her clothing and hair, chuckling and clucking over her without regard to Aimée. The denizens of the Harem dragged Aimée out to the baths, removing her European clothes and throwing them into the hearth to burn as they went. Later, while bathing her, and accompanied by much hooting and hollering, they could hear the not-so-far-off voice of Despina Hatun, "Girls, give her such a rubbing and scrubbing down that not so much as a single speck of French dust remains on her!"

2

The Harem dormitory was full of girls. Aimée looked stunning in her new Turkish clothing. She was wearing a snug-fitting velvet costume with gold, silver and tiny pearls embroidered onto the fabric. Around her waist was a type of shawl supporting a pair of plain silk baggy trousers, and the borderless ornament in her hair was wrapped tightly with a light tulle. Despina Hatun sat down and began brushing her hair while Aimée held a mirror for her. She was still under Despina Hatun's guidance and protection. Many other girls in the room were busy with their chores; one of them gathered up the sleeping mattresses, another was getting dressed, one swept the floor while yet another girl sewed on an embroidery frame. Somewhere nearby, the screeching voices of two girls arguing are heard.

"I swear to you, I didn't steal your mirror!"

"You're a liar! You stole it. And besides, why are you hiding three boxes of Turkish delight under your mattress?"

Despina Hatun, who couldn't put up with this silly argument any longer, suddenly started shouting at the girls, "Be quiet! I'm telling you all to shut up!"

Everyone was quiet at once.

She then turned to Aimée and said, "My girl, you have already learned our language. Speak Turkish so they all can hear you, those sloths. Why don't you tell us how a sweet young girl like you became a slave? You might be more at ease here if you tell us everything that has happened to you from the start, so go ahead, tell us all about it, Aimée!"

At first, Aimée muttered something, like a child trying to remember a particular word. Then, once she regained her confidence, she began to speak without a French accent. "We were on a ship

that was taking us from Martinique Island to France. It had capsized in the Gulf of Leon, off the coast of Marseille. I was on my way to a convent in Paris to continue my education. Another ship came along and saved us all from drowning, but that one was in turn captured by pirates. It seemed as though it was ships that were determining my fate. After I was captured, the pirates sold me to the Governor of Algeria.”

The young girl’s voice began to tremble. There was both sadness and anger in her quaking tone. “This gentleman was a wise old man, and he dispatched me here with all the care of a valuable present.”

The residents of the Harem stopped what they were doing and listened to her diligently and without interrupting, including Despina Hatun, who was lounging carelessly on the sofa puffing away on her pipe. When she saw that Aimée had finished her story, she motioned with her hand for the girls to take a seat. Then, she explained in an almost tender voice, “Aimée, I appreciate all the progress you’ve made during the few months you have been here with us. You’ve learned our language. You’re quite intelligent. I enjoy the way you speak, your courage and your eloquence. Look, my girl, to rebel against the system here would be absolutely futile. You’re a clever girl and it would only be in your best interest to accept this way of life as your destiny and adapt to everything that goes on here. The more quickly you accept your fate, the better off you’ll be, not feeling as much pain and sadness. I’m going to help you. First, we have to find you a beautiful name. Yes. Yes! I think I know what it should be. Let’s call you ‘Nakşidil’! It means, ‘The Most Beautiful’ and ‘Ornamented Heart.’ Girls! Attend me! From this day forward, ‘Aimée’ will not exist! ‘Nakşidil’ has taken her place!”

Almost immediately, the girls gathered in close around Nakşidil and repeated her new name over and over again, louder

and louder. The sound rose up into the domed ceiling and echoed in the Harem. Aimée knew she was caught up in some foreign ritual and could not help thinking that perhaps other parts of her life, besides her name, were going to change as well.

Sometime later, Despina was alone with Nakşidil and attempted to give her some advice, “Oh little one, the path leading to higher ground is long and fraught with obstacles. Many girls get summoned but very few are actually selected here. I’ll tell you once more. You need to bury your past, just turn your back on it. There is no more Aimée and no more France! You no longer have a family outside these walls! We in the Harem are now your family, your sisters. You are Nakşidil! Only the Harem Council decides which of the girls in the Harem is to be presented to the Sultan.”

Aimée, henceforth to be known as Nakşidil, was a bit stunned by what she was hearing. “This is all fine and good, but what about love? Does it not count for anything here? Where does love fit into the scheme of things?”

This time it was Despina Hatun’s turn to be surprised, for she had never even asked herself this question before, let alone heard it from one of her charges. She had always believed that such a question was considered inappropriate in this environment. Nakşidil’s question opened up old wounds. Despina Hatun could not immediately think of a response to this query. Nakşidil took advantage of the extended silence and for the first time opened up her heart quite willingly to Despina. “What is this? No love, no freedom, no decisions! You are just grooming these poor souls as pieces of sweetmeat. What are you preparing me for with your tender caresses and sweetness? Is it that you want me to become a concubine?”

This was the first time Despina Hatun didn’t reprimand Nakşidil’s insolence. Her own silence surprised even herself. “You are forgetting the potential for power here. Just remember the

women who have gone before us, who shaped and destroyed history. I will tell you a story so you will understand.”

Despina continued, “The most famous of these women was the legendary and beautiful Roxelana, otherwise known as Hürrem Sultan. She was the terror of all Europe, and used her beauty and wiles to keep Süleyman the Magnificent eating from the palm of her hand. As a matter of fact, she even managed to become officially married to him. This was the only instance of a marriage in the history of the Harem.” The color in Despina Hatun’s face rose. She became more animated as she continued the history lesson for Nakşidil. “And what about Kösem Sultan? Kösem was a beautiful Greek girl who also had exceptional talents for courtship and a lust for ambition. This made her one of the most influential Dowager Sultans when her son Murat IV took the crown.”

The tendons in Despina Hatun’s neck went taut and her face pinched together. “As for all the unfortunate girls who are not given the opportunity to catch the attention of the Sultan... if they are not forced to marry a fat, old feeble Pasha, they become a servant to one of the mischievous, higher-ranking women living in the Palace or they are expelled from Paradise. And by that, I mean, turned out of the Harem. This means they’re sent off to the grimy, crumbling Old Palace, at the bottom of the old section of the city to spend the rest of their miserable lives with spinsters like themselves. The mere mention of this depressing situation scares the wits out of ambitious maidens as well as old women satiated with fame and wealth.”

Nakşidil’s skin bristled and her eyes were filled with fear for the first time since she arrived at the Palace. “Despina Hatun, while you give me the appearance of trying to be the Harem’s voluntary petter, it feels as if you want to frighten me to death. Why is it you feel the need to tell me all the most sinister sides to

this place? Why do you want to scare me so much? I feel as if I am being punished already, and I haven't done anything wrong. I'm having nightmares filled with murder and horrible things. I wish, even for a single moment, to breathe clean air, to embrace the freedom I once had, and to be able to escape to the moments when I am alone."

Then, Nakşidil impulsively hugged Despina Hatun's neck and began to sob. Despina held onto the slip of a girl and let her weep into her bosom. Nakşidil's tears softened the fear that welled up inside Despina's heart and gave her a strange feeling of calm. She knew there was something special in Nakşidil's future.