MY TWO WEEKS IN A HAREM

by Mrs. Jack Gouraud

Every Day Is Like the Other With These Chattels of the Maharajah's---Eating, Sleeping, Smoking, Bathing, Perfuming, Quarrelling Their Time Away, Says the American Woman Who Spent a Fortnight Behind the Lattice.

Mrs. Jackson Gouraud.

(Mrs. Jackson Gouraud was Aimee Crocker, the California heiress. She now divides her time between her house at No. 46 West Fifty-sixth street, New York, and her apartments in the Immeuble de Rapport, in the Rue Marechal Harispe, Paris. She has just published a book of stories of life in India, the material for which she obtained when she was there several years ago. In the following article, written by her especially for this paper, she tells for the first time of her extraordinary experience in the harem of a Maharajah, or ruling prince.)

By Aimee Crocker Gouraud.

FIRST let me explain in detail the formation of a harem. Those who have never given the matter thought picture a harem as a collection of lovely women quarrelling over the favor of their lord and master. This is the popular but unreliable belief. In reality a harem numbers so many old and ugly women that the collection would cause the manager of a Broadway musical show to think he had nightmare. And as for quarreling, scores of the women never exchange a word with their master. Nor does this fact keep them awake nights.

The harem is literally the Maharajah's family. A polygamist he may be, but often this is a matter of inheritance rather than choice. His harem is willed to him by his father precisely as his title, his estates and his jewels are. And the saddest of all, the new-made prince cannot weed out the undesirable women of this inheritance. No, he must take them "as is," and support them in idleness and extravagance along with the pretty ones. He may acquire new women if he will, but he can't shake the old ones.

A Princess of Annam.

You will notice that I have not spoken of them as wives. This is because female relatives are provided for within the walls of the harem. A man's mother, grandmother, aunt, any woman dependent upon him, is bunched in with his "wives," served by the same eunuchs, forced to live under the same stern rules, shown the same respect.

Three hundred women constituted the harem in which I studied Oriental life. There were grandmothers, mothers and young girls. There were hideously ugly women and radiantly beautiful ones. They simply formed part of the possessions which gave this particular prince prestige. To scores of them he had never vouchsafed a word or a glance. His favorite wife, to whom he was devoted was a Circassian girl of rare beauty. Her skin was the most wonderful white I have ever seen. Her lips were the scarlet which cosmetics can never give. Her eyes were black and smouldering. Her hair was a perfect Titian shade. But she was neither hated nor envied by the other women. They seemed devoid of emotions of this sort.

A Princess of Baroda.

To understand their viewpoint you must know that most of them are little more than slaves. In the old days, when the princes of India fought among themselves, women represented spoils of war. A leader of a victorious force brought from the pillaged principality the most beautiful women his looting army could find. These he offered as trophies of victory to his ruler, and generally they were accepted by the Maharajah precisely as if they were so many jewels, so much gold, so much treasure of any sort. The gold was sent to the treasury, the jewels to the vaults of the palace, the women to the harem.

To-day, with the English rule established in India, there is no warfare between the different principalities, but women for the harem are acquired in an equally unromantic fashion. In numbers they simply represent the importance of their master. Individually they are pitiable slaves, kept in luxury, perhaps, but with no hope, no future before them.

They have no education or social life. They are devoid of ambition. They never travel save as the Maharajah moves his harem from one place to another.

The Maharajah led two distinct lives. Neither of these brought him in contact with the women of his harem. As a native prince, he lived in a luxurious suite, with his favorite wife in attendance. As the vassal of King Edward, Emperor of India, he maintained what might be termed a small court, in which he entertained visitors of all sorts, men and women of title, English and foreign army officers, diplomats, travellers of note, and many Americans interested in developing industrial transportation or banking facilities in his country.

As the native prince he was the dreamer, the sybarite, the student of Oriental lore and traditions. As the representative of his British ruler, he was the polished man of the world, the diplomat, the student of politics and statesmanship. And always, everywhere, he was the sauve courtier, the latent lover. The East Indians are the most accomplished love-makers in the world. They make of it an act in which English, French and American men might well take lessons.

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The Nawab Muntaz Jurg of Hyderabad, With His Ten Wives and Five Children. This Is the First Portrait in Which the Prince Allowed the Faces of His Women-Folk to Appear.

Part of the Maharajah's palace may be filled with English and American guests. The sound of music and feasting may rise. Oriental players and magicians and dancers may entertain. But the women of the harem see nothing of this. They live a life apart.

The palace in which I found myself was surrounded by exquisite grounds, but the women of the harem were not permitted to set foot in the gardens save between the hours of 2 and 4 A. M., when guests were not abroad. Even then, the women stepped forth from their chambers clad as for travelling or shopping, even their mouths veiled.

Every day was like unto its predecessor. Tea was served to us at 5 in the morning, when life in the harem seemed to stir slightly. Early rising is not due to energy, but to the intense heat later on, which drives the Orientals back to shelter. Breakfast comes a little later, and all told, six meals are served daily.

The event of the morning is the bath. It occupies about an hour and a half and is a ceremony, a rite. The care of her body—that is the one pleasure fully appreciated by the woman of the harem. And she appreciates it, not because by faithful observance of the rite she will find favor in the eyes of her lord and master, but simply because the bath is a never-failing thrill, the rubbing and perfuming and painting of her flesh afford her physical satisfaction.

A Married Hindoo Woman.

The bath proper is a huge pool of tepid water, with a fountain playing in the centre. In and out of the water the women slip lazily, lovingly. It would take another Bulwer Lytton to describe these baths and the emotions which they seem to excite in the women of the harem. Personally it often appealed to me as the solid comfort of a beautiful, sleek cat licking its gleaming coat!

From the bath to the hands of a masseuse. In the Occident we do not know the meaning of the word massage. An Oriental masseuse inherits her gift—and improves it by every trick she can devise. Massage in the Orient is not painful—it is an exquisite luxury, a touch not of iron but of velvet, an experience to dream of—when you can no longer enjoy it! The rubbing is done with oils, perfumed with sandalwood, attar of roses, jasmine and other heavy, languorous odors. The hair is literally drenched in such perfumes. Just as the Occidental woman makes up her face before appearing on the stage, at the theatre, or any evening function where artificial light will prove trying to the complexion, so does the Oriental woman make up her entire body. Every vein, for instance, is picked out with blue pigment and the bosom is beautifully tinted.

Finally over all this are draped her robes of exquisite veiling and transparent silks, wonderfully embroidered, and at last jewels are added. These are heavy and badly set. Always there is a single gem pasted between the eyes on the forehead. This is chosen to bring out the color of the eyes, precisely as an American woman chooses a color in fabrics. A nose ring is adjusted, huge ear-rings follow, then innumerable chains, bracelets, rings, &c.

After the toilet, what?

There is none to see the beautiful result save other women who do not care! There is no place to go. So what did we do?

Eat!

When nothing else offers in a harem, eat.

And then be sure you do not exercise. Lie on a perfumed couch, with heavy sweets and liquors at your elbow, cigarettes at hand, a volume of Zola near by; scores and scores of phlegmatic, silent women lie all around you.

Do you wonder we slept from twelve to two? It was that or think and go mad. Then another meal, and if the afternoon cooled off, a trip to the shops.

But even this was uninteresting. Into a cart we were tucked and the blinds drawn tight. A watchful eunuch ran on either side.

Let a blind be dropped by a crafty finger and the crack of a whip followed.

Thinking perhaps I might be regarded as different from the rest, I dropped a blind, and had my fingers well snapped for my temerity.

Before us ran a herald to warn the shopkeeper that ladies from the harem of the Maharajah approached. Instantly the shop was cleared of more plebeian shoppers. Our carts were stopped at rear doors and we entered, to find the choicest wares of the merchant spread before us. No poking around for bargains, however! No delights of wandering from shop to shop. Just obsequious shopkeepers, bringing out what it was well for the ladies of the harem to see.

On special occasions musicians, magicians or dancers gave performances in the garden of the palace. Then we were permitted to stand behind a marvellously constructed lattice and watch the proceedings. It was in this fashion that I saw the cobra dance which I describe in my book.

The favorite pastime of the harem inmate is playing with jewels. Hour after hour I watched those women lying on couches holding jade bowls filled with unmounted, uncut stones—rubies, emeralds, pearls, opals, topazes, sapphires—all the lights of earth and heaven, slipping, slipping through their hands. They did not speak. Their heavy, sluggish eyes betrayed no sensation. Their bodies were inert. Just the gems flowing between their fingers. This was the only motion I could see.

But the woman of the harem really owns no gems. They are part and parcel of the harem. She cannot give them away. On the other hand, her master owns beautiful jewels in his own right and gives them away as souvenirs to his guests.

The settings of Oriental harem jewels do not compare with those we see in other countries. The metal work is heavy, ugly and unfinished. But the woman of the harem yields to the mysticism of gems as no beauty-loving American woman ever does.

Eating, sleeping, smoking, bathing, drinking liquors, inhaling heavy perfumes, never exercising! That is the life of the Oriental woman. And make no mistake. She is not changing. Missionaries and suffragettes, travellers and teachers cannot penetrate the harem in India. It will take not years, but centuries, to unlock those doors which defied even the power of the late Queen Victoria.

I endured the life of these women for four days. Then revolt rose strong within me. I had made a vow to live a fortnight in a harem. I intended to keep it. So I continued to sleep (what little I could with the heavy perfume of the women fairly choking me), bathe, eat and shop with my bore-some companions, but at dinner time I fled to the salon of the Maharajah and dined with his other guests. That much respite I had to secure from surroundings that in much less than the prescribed two weeks would certainly have driven me mad. And yet these women do not go mad. They live and dream and quarrel.

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Entrance to Harem of an East Indian Palace.