

LIFE IN A HAREM.

HERE is an Arabian Nights tale. It is not one of the famous thousand and one told by the first lady of the harem, the beautiful Scheherzade, to beguile her royal spouse from his announced intention of chopping her head from her lovely shoulders, but is quite new, quite modern and altogether fascinating. Like Scheherzade's it is told by a first lady of the harem, and it deals with her life in Persia. It is a romance that mixes up proxy England and the sensuous East in the most delightful fashion, for the heroine of it was a London shop girl before she became one of the four wives, and later one of the four widows, of a Persian nobleman.

Seven years ago Miss Frances Blackman was a stall girl at the Crystal Palace, and sold ivory bric-a-brac to whomsoever would buy. She was a rather pretty girl, and at the time of the Shah's visit to England captivated the fancy of a dark skinned nobleman in the potentate's party.

This man proved to be Abdullah Hussein Khan, a cousin of the Shah, and a man of great wealth and influence in his own country. Stopping one day at the stalls he was greatly attracted by Miss Blackman and bought some trifles from her. He returned the next day and bought some more.

When he appeared the third day Miss Blackman perceived that it was she, and not her wares, that attracted the dark skinned stranger, and thereupon the romance began. History is silent upon the details of the courtship, but it is known that he gave her many costly gifts of exquisite Eastern workmanship, and eventually proposed, was accepted, and married her. The ceremony was celebrated in a Roman Catholic church in the beginning of 1890.

Abdullah Hussein Khan was from the beginning exceedingly fond of his pretty English bride. He obtained permission to remain in England when the Shah went home, and hired a handsome flat at Hyde Park Mansions, where he lived in supreme happiness for nearly two years. He had told his wife of his rank and his wealth, but he had not mentioned the fact that he already had three other wives at home.

HAD TO TELL HER.

But in 1892 there came a command from the Shah to return home. Abdullah had by this time decided to make England his home. He was a man of cultivation and had found European civilisation much to his taste.

But, under penalty of forfeiting his estates, he was obliged to obey the Shah's orders, and when he reached Teheran he had to tell his English bride that she was only No. 4. One can imagine the scene, the tears, the protestations and all the rest. But there was nothing for the young wife to do but to submit, and she had the satisfaction of being the preferred wife, the first lady of the harem.

When it was known to the English at Teheran that one of their countrywomen was in the harem there was considerable excitement, and many English ladies visited her. She became at once popular in court circles, and the Shah gave her the name of Beebe Khanum, signifying 'the lady of ladies.' But favour and popularity cost her trials and dangers, as will be seen.

A few months ago Abdullah suddenly died, much to his wife's grief. His eldest son, jealous because his father had settled so much property upon Beebee's little son, seized the house and sealed the doors. Beebee broke the seals, and was arrested, and three attempts were made to poison her, the last so nearly successful that an English doctor barely succeeded in saving her life. Through the intervention of the British Legation she finally obtained her property and sailed for London, where she has just arrived with her boy.

This little boy, Allah Nasrit, or the 'Gift of God,' has exchanged the baggy satin trousers and loose silken coat, set off with diamond buttons, of his own country, for the sailor costume of a British tar. He is a handsome, clever boy, and at the age of four already displays the autocracy enjoyed by his sex in Persia.

'He much needs the discipline of an English school,' says his mother, 'for in Persia his word was law. Being co-heir with an only brother, he was lord of the village in which we lived, and every village child was his slave. When brought in to amuse him, if his bows were not sufficiently reverential and conduct irreproachable, he issued instructions, and the small offenders were promptly beaten, for Persian boys are taught tyranny from the cradle.'

A YOUTHFUL AUTOCRAT.

'When bored, a band, with the inevitable dancing monkey, was brought in for his sole delectation. He has been only two weeks in London, and it is impossible yet to make him understand that piano-organ and street musicians are not under his absolute authority. He perpetually orders them, in native Persian, to remain playing so long as he is pleased to be pleased, and exhibits the utmost disgust when they move on regardless of his lordly commands.'

'Sometimes I am glad he cannot speak English, for in Persia he was taught to class Europeans with monkeys, and he has no hesitation in addressing them as such if they offend his prejudices. Fortunately his language is so pretty that the opprobrious title frequently passes for a term of endearment.'

Nasrit is a devout Mussulman, and was intensely horrified to find the familiar terms on which dogs, so abhorred by Mohammedans, are admitted to English households. The friendly nose of a dog thrust into his hand was the signal for a flood of tears and vehement insistence on a triple scrubbing of the member so defiled. The love of animals inherent in boy nature has changed the spirit of Nasrit's prejudices, and he now scampers prettily about a lawn with a sympathetic English bulldog as friend and confidante.

At dinner he looks askance at a half glass of water, insisting, Persian fashion, that it shall be filled to the brim as ocular proof that the glass has not been touched by other lips. After drinking claret he washes out his mouth three times, this precaution alone enabling a devout Mussulman to partake of alcohol. Sitting cross-

legged at the table contentedly eating his cutlets, his bright eyes wandered incessantly round the room, noting novelties, and between times he asked eternal questions as to the habits of the 'English monkeys'—his fellow guests!

So that Allah Nasrit Khan is a most interesting little person to invite to dinner!

After the period of widowhood prescribed by the Mussulman faith, conveniently limited to four months and ten days, had expired, several Persian noblemen made Beebee offers of marriage, for it is now regarded somewhat as a mark of fashion to marry an English wife.

'But my experiences of a Persian harem were so unhappy as to remove every wish to prolong them,' she says. 'Everybody is astonished that my child and I left Persia alive, for it is a country of intrigue, plot, and sudden death. But Sir Mortimer Durand, whose kindness I can never forget, sent daily from the Legation to my house, and I constantly reminded my surroundings that I was an English citizen. Notwithstanding this, three attempts were made after my husband's death to poison our food, and but for the protection of the British Minister we should certainly not be in England to-day.'

Asked as to her daily life, Beebee said:—
'Although much was terribly unhappy, there were some pleasures. My husband built me a pretty English-looking house, and we sent Home for seeds and plants, and grew English flowers most successfully. The climate is lovely, and I frequently rode out on horseback, closely veiled.'

'The demeanour of Persian men toward women is very insulting, and though in our walks abroad we were preceded by a soldier and guarded by four black servants, we had very unpleasant experiences. So we preferred to drive or go on horseback. Sometimes we ventured on expeditions to shops and other public places proscribed by Persian etiquette, and on such occasions disguised ourselves in servants' clothes and saw the sights of the town without detection. Persian women,' she added mischievously, 'manage to get some amusement from the outer world without the permission of husbands. Thus we visited the public baths and mixed with many interesting and forbidden phases of life.'

'Are Persian women very beautiful?'

'The veil gives an impression of supreme loveliness. In reality the faces are most disappointing, and figures square and ungraceful. The ideal of beauty in Persia is to have dark eyes—blue or gray eyes are rarely seen—and black eyebrows, painted so as to meet across the forehead. If the hair is naturally light, etiquette demands that it shall be dyed black, this being done at the baths. A bath in Persia lasts from early morning till late at night, the hair alone being washed seven times with soap and water. Fair-haired children, even, must have their locks stained black. Persia is the land of paint, powder and dyes, and magnificent dress. A favourite dress trimming consists of a bordering many inches deep of real pearls, set in our beds and the cushions on which we lounged were heavily beaded and adorned with pearls of price. When I went to Persia my gowns attracted interesting attention, the ladies being particularly amused at the number of seams in my bodices.'

'Look,' they said, 'Beebee had so little stuff she was obliged to join and patch her dress.'

'But they soon understood that these seams caused the gown to fit and show off the figure, and the Shah's sister was so pleased with the innovation that she introduced the many-seamed bodice at court, so that I can claim the distinction of setting the style to fashionable Persia.'

'The Persian does not take kindly to artificial waists. I remember trying to initiate a stout woman into a corset. Before I had properly drawn the cords she gasped, turned black in the face, and begged release from "torture."'

Asked as to the education of Persian women, Beebee said:—

'Many princesses can neither read nor write, and find life terribly dull. They sat for hours listening to my descriptions of the freedom and happy lives of English women. And many of them long for liberty and education. Their dances, conversation, and habits are very unedifying, and they badly need the discipline of schools. When told of the respect accorded by Englishmen to their wives they sighed, and said, "Ah, how nice to marry an Englishman," for these poor ladies receive very cruel treatment from angry husbands, who punish them by twisting their long hair so tightly round their arms that the women scream with pain. For trifling offences they are beaten or otherwise humiliated. Only wives with money and influence can obtain a divorce from neglectful or cruel husbands, and divorcees are free to marry again.'

'Harem life is very monotonous. Bands of professional women dancers are employed to enliven weary hours, but their dances and those of the ladies are most objectionable. One man musician was allowed to play for us—because he was stone blind! Harem ladies must see no other man but a husband, grandfather or uncle, because marriage with these latter is impossible. It is a prerogative of the Shah that every woman in the kingdom must unveil before him, and any woman he takes a fancy to forthwith belongs to him—be she the wife of the most powerful nobleman in the country. I knew every one of the Shah's one hundred and sixty wives, as I constantly visited his harem.'

'Persian women dress their hair in dozens of tiny plaits, and on very grand occasions these are unplaited and the hair combed to stand out in a hideous thick friz round the head. My sister and I delighted the Shah's sister and several princesses by teaching their black maids to dress hair in English fashion. Nearly all the servants are Arabian slaves, but it is becoming very difficult to buy them. My boy's nurse was an Arab whom we bought for 400 francs, and we had absolute power over her.'

'It is common enough to have slaves beheaded for trifling offences, and most people made their children behave nicely by whipping the nurses for the misdoings of the children. Consequently the nurses inculcate good manners and force the children to bow

the regulation three times whenever they see their mothers.'

'Persian mothers of the better class take very little interest in their children, whose black nurses have entire charge and responsibility. Property in Persia is divided equally among sons, while each girl takes a half share only for her dot, out of which, when married, she buys her dresses and luxuries. This accounts for the distinction of dress among harem women, the richness of this depending on the amount of the dowry.'

'But remember, Nasrit,' she said, 'you are English now, and civilized little boys here do not smoke cigarettes.'

Whereupon Nasrit demanded to be taken back to 'his own country.'

LIVING RIVALS OF VICTORIA.

THE lady famed in story who was present at the ball on the eve of Waterloo, and is still living (says *London Amusee*), hale and hearty, at the truly noble age of 93, is Lady Louise Tighe. She has a perfect memory, and remembers the incidents of the ball; the figure of Wellington; the bugle sound which called the men to arms. It was at her father's house, the Duke of Richmond's, in Brussels, that the historic ball took place. In 1825 she was married to the Colonel, William Tighe. He died in 1878, but the dear old lady, one of England's noblest links with the past, still lives on and writes a most beautiful, delicate hand, as if she were still a girl of 19, instead of 90.

The woman who has probably had most political influence during the past fifty years next to the Queen is undoubtedly Mrs Gladstone. Catherine Glynné was the daughter of Sir Stephen Glynné, the owner of the Hawarden and other large estates, and of his wife, Mary Braybrooke. The late Sir Stephen Glynné was her brother, and Lady Littleton was her sister. Thus it is through his wife that Mr Gladstone came into possession of the famous Hawarden Castle, in Flintshire, now well-known all over the world as his residence. The marriage took place on July 25th, 1839, about six months before that of Her Majesty. She is now considerably over eighty years of age.

The most remarkable member of the aristocracy is probably the aged Duchess of Cleveland, famous of her own individuality, and still more famous in the person of her celebrated son, Lord Rosebery. Though the Duchess is well over eighty years of age, she is more juvenile in some things than many women fifty years younger. Her Grace always dresses in white whenever it is at all possible, and she has a perfect passion for travelling. Half her life is spent on the Continent, or at the Cape; in fact, she has lately gone there again on a voyage. She perfectly revels in knocking about the world. She was married three years after the Queen to Archibald, Lord Dalmeny, and so became the mother of Lord Rosebery, and on the death of her husband she married a second time, thus becoming Duchess of Cleveland by her marriage to George, the fourth and last Duke. He died a few years ago. Her Grace was a daughter of Philip Henry, fourth Earl Stanhope.

Is there any one in London (or out of it) who has not heard the name of Angelina, Baroness Burdett-Coutts? This noble woman was born on April 25th, 1814, five years before the Queen, and was the daughter of Sir Francis Burdett. On the death of her grandfather's widow, Harriett, Duchess of St. Albans (who had in early life graced the stage), Miss Burdett succeeded to the vast fortune of the Coutts family, and took that name in addition to her own. It would be impossible to tell one-tenth of what she has done and given, not only to the London poor, but for England. Every good society, every charitable scheme, every devoted cause had in her its certain helper with her purse, work, and, until lately, voice. The Baroness has given up to a quarter of a million at once in furtherance of schemes for aiding the London poor. The Queen created her a Baroness in her own right in 1871, and in 1881 she married W. L. Ashmead-Bartlett, who took the surname of Coutts. She still goes on at 83 years of age with her noble work of relieving the needy, and London's wish is 'Long may she yet live!'

CHINESE AND THE FIRE DRILL.

ON a certain man-of-war on the Pacific station a few years ago (says *St. Nicholas*), the officers had Chinese servants, and although they could scarcely speak a word of English, they were quick to learn what was shown them, and soon did like clockwork the fire drill with buckets. One day there was a real fire. Volumes of smoke poured up from the fore hold, and it took several streams of water nearly an hour to put out the flames. When the fire was under control, some one thought of the Chinese, and behold! there they were, ranged in line in pishu sight of the smoking hatchway, rapidly passing their buckets along, but emptying them over the ship's side as they had been taught to do.

TRUE TO LIFE.

AN Italian paper, *Il Corriere*, recalls a practical joke that appeals to our sympathy as well as to our sense of humour. A painter had been commissioned to paint the image of a saint on the refectory wall of a convent.

The price stipulated was very low, but it was agreed that the painter should have his meals provided at the expense of the convent until the work was finished. But the only food supplied to the poor artist was bread, onions and water.

The day for unveiling the fresco at length arrived. The friars stood round the artist, the curtain was removed. It has no doubt a very fine picture, but the saint had his back turned toward the spectators.

'What does this mean?' shouted the indignant prior.
'Padre, I was compelled to paint the picture as you see it, for the saint could not bear the smell of onions.'