

DINING WITH THE SULTANA

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762)

1718

I was led into a large room, with a sofa the whole length of it, adorned with white marble pillars like a ruelle, covered with pale-blue figured velvet on a silver ground, with cushions of the same, where I was desired to repose till the Sultana appeared, who had contrived this manner of reception to avoid rising up at my entrance, though she made me an inclination of her head when I rose up to her. I was very glad to observe a lady that had been distinguished by the favor of an emperor, to whom beauties were every day presented from all parts of the world. But she did not seem to me to have ever been half so beautiful as the fair Fatima I saw at Adrianople; though she had the remains of a fine face, more decayed by sorrow than by time. But her dress was something so surprisingly rich, I cannot forbear describing it to you. She wore a vest called donalma, and which differs from a caftan by longer sleeves, and folding over at the bottom. It was of purple cloth, straight to her shape, and thick-set, on each side, down to her feet, and round the sleeves, with pearls of the best water, of the same size as their buttons commonly are. You must not suppose I mean as large as those of my Lord —, but about the bigness of a pea; and to these buttons large loops of diamonds, in the form of those gold loops so common upon birthday coats. This habit was tied at the waist with two large tassels of smaller pearl, and round the arms embroidered with large diamonds: her shift fastened at the bottom with a great diamond, shaped like a lozenge; her girdle as broad as the broadest English ribbon, entirely covered with diamonds. Round her neck she wore three chains, which reached to her knees: one of large pearl, at the bottom of which hung a fine colored emerald, as big as a turkey-egg; another, consisting of two hundred emeralds, close joined together of the most lively green, perfectly matched, every one as large as a half-crown piece, and as thick as three crown pieces; and another of small emeralds, perfectly round. But her earrings eclipsed all the rest. They were two diamonds, shaped exactly like pears, as large as a big hazelnut. Round her talpoche she had four strings of pearl, the whitest and most perfect in the world, at least enough to make four necklaces, every one as large as the Duchess of Marlborough's, and of the same size, fastened with two roses, consisting of a large ruby for the middle stone, and round them twenty drops of clean diamonds to each. Beside this, her headdress was covered with bodkins of emeralds and diamonds. She wore large diamond bracelets, and had five rings on her fingers, all single diamonds, (except Mr. Pitt's) the largest I ever saw in my life. It is for jewelers to compute the value of these things; but, according to the common estimation of jewels in our part of the world, her whole dress must be worth above a hundred thousand pounds sterling. This I am very sure of, that no European queen has half the quantity; and the Empress' jewels, though very fine, would look very mean near hers.

She gave me a dinner of fifty dishes of meat, which (after their fashion) were placed on the table, but one at a time, and thus extremely tedious. But the magnificence of her table answered very well to that of her dress. The knives were of gold, the hafts set with diamonds but the piece of luxury that gripped my eyes was the tablecloth and napkins, which were all tiffany, embroidered with silks and gold, in the finest manner, in natural flowers. It was with the utmost regret that I made use of these costly napkins, as finely wrought as the finest handkerchiefs that ever came out of this country. You may be sure that they were entirely spoiled before dinner was over. The sherbet (which is the liquor they drink at meals) was served in china bowls; but the covers and salvers were massy gold. After dinner, water was brought in a gold basin, and towels of the same kind as the napkins, which I very unwillingly wiped my hands upon; and coffee was served in china, with gold sou-coupes.

The Sultana seemed in very good humor, and talked to me with the utmost civility. I did not omit this opportunity of learning all that I possibly could of the seraglio, which is so entirely unknown among us. She never mentioned her husband without tears in her eyes, yet she seemed very fond of the discourse. "My past happiness," said she, "appears a dream to me. Yet I cannot forget that I was beloved by the greatest and most lovely of mankind. I was chosen from all the rest, to make all his campaigns with him; I would not survive him, if I was not passionately fond of my daughter. Yet all my tenderness for her was hardly enough to make me preserve my life. When I lost him, I passed a whole twelvemonth without seeing the light. Time has softened my despair; yet I now pass some days every week in tears, devoted to the memory of my husband."

There was no affectation in these words. It was easy to see she was in a deep melancholy, though her good humor made her willing to divert me. She asked me to walk in her garden, and one of her slaves immediately brought her a pellice of rich brocade lined with sables. I waited on her into the garden, which had nothing in it remarkable but the fountains; and from thence she showed me all her apartments. In her bed chamber her toilet was displayed, consisting of two looking-glasses, the frames covered with pearls, and her night talpoche set with bodkins of jewels, and near it three vests of fine sables, every one of which is, at least, worth a thousand dollars (two hundred pounds

English money). I don't doubt these rich habits were purposely placed in sight, but they seemed negligently thrown on the sofa. When I took my leave of her, I was complimented with perfumes, as at the grand vizier's, and presented with a very fine embroidered handkerchief. Her slaves were to the number of thirty, besides ten little ones, the eldest not above seven years old. These were the most beautiful girls I ever saw, all richly dressed; and I observed that the Sultana took a great deal of pleasure in these lovely children, which is a vast expense; for there is not a handsome girl of that age to be bought under a hundred pounds sterling. They wore little garlands of flowers, and their own hair, braided, which was all their headdress; but their habits all of gold stuffs. These served her coffee, kneeling; brought water when she washed, etc. It is a great part of the business of the older slaves to take care of these girls, to teach them to embroider and serve them as carefully as if they were children of the family.

Eva March Tappan, ed. *The World's Story: A History of the World in Story, Song, and Art* (1914), VI:511–515.