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Section 2

Dear Abby

Rose City Calendar

Page 2

Page 2

Pleasures, Pains Of Harem Women's Secret Lives Revealed



ALEVE LYLE CROUTIER WRITES ABOUT HAREM LIFE
Fascination About The Harem Lifestyle Still Exists, Author Says

SAN FRANCISCO (UPI) — The pleasures and pains of harem life, a society of veiled women kept secret from outsiders by a succession of sultans and pashas, is a story of romance, intrigue and terror right out of the Arabian tale, "One Thousand and One Nights."

Few Westerners have ever been allowed a glimpse inside the polygamous patriarchal society that existed for centuries in the Orient and Middle East and where women, sold in slave markets and presented as gifts, led a precarious existence.

One Turkish sultan, Mehmed the Conqueror, increased that his favorite harem beauty would convert to the Islamic faith, profess to her his love, pulled out his scimitar and sliced off her head. Another, Ibrahim, nicknamed the "mad sultan," threw a temper tantrum and had his entire harem of some 100 women stuffed into bags by sunbeams — the castrated, black male bodyguards — and dumped into the sea; to be replaced by a new group.

The 17th century sultan, Murad, passed a law prohibiting drinking and smoking throughout the Ottoman Empire and then, in a drunken stupor, would wander around searching for violators, who were promptly executed. Corpses hung at every street corner.

Fascination with the harem lifestyle still exists, says Aleve Lyle Croutier, who grew up in a Turkish house where her grandmother lived in the section where the harem resided. Down the street lived a ranch and she recalls the communal baths used by the women.

In fashion, says Ms. Croutier, the styles of harem life have been showing up recently in New York and Paris, along with some of the Middle East music and books on the subject.

In reality, says Ms. Croutier, the harem era is a study in how women who danced and entertained for the court elite were able to adjust to the circumstances of their fate and make the best of it.

"In terms of power, it is fascinating to think these women who were slaves became the power behind the scenes — virtually a reign of women — that lasted for centuries," said Ms. Croutier, who has spent 10 years of research on the subject, resulting in the book, "Harem: The World Behind the Veil" (published by Abbeville Press).

Ms. Croutier focuses on the mysterious Topkapli Palace in Istanbul, and others readers to the harem of the kadims — the sultan's "legal" wives — as well as the slave markets where concubines and eunuchs were purchased. The book is richly illustrated with the works, mostly imaginative, of Renoir, Delacroix, Ingres and other European artists.

Ms. Croutier, who left Turkey at age 18, presently lives in Forest Knolls, Calif., and has worked as an independent film producer and screenplay writer ("Tell Me A Riddle"). She is editor-in-chief of Mercury House publishing company in San Francisco and developed the book, "Harem," largely from research material she gathered while writing a script on the subject

with a Guggenheim Fellowship award.

Male artists and writers of the 18th and 19th century, said Ms. Croutier, painted and wrote about the Oriental harems out of imagination and fantasy.

"None of the men had ever been in a harem," she said, for such trespass resulted in death.

The translation of Scheherazade's scintillating One Thousand and One Nights in 17th brought to the West a sense of the exotic and erotic, mostly in the imaginations of men, she said. The story is about a sultan, jilted by true love, who chose a different harem woman each night, who would then be killed at daybreak. The cycle was broken by one concubine, who told tales that so intrigued the sultan that he had her return, night after night, until finally his anger dissolved and he allowed her to live.

At Istanbul's Topkapli Palace, some 2,000 women were kept — the largest harem in existence — and modern tours of the spacious "Grand Harem" where sultans kept their wives hidden from the world from 1640 to the early 1900s, reveals only remnants of 400 years of lives and culture, says Ms. Croutier.

"All that remains now of the thousands of women who lived in these rooms, in fantastic luxury and isolation, are their empty boudoirs, their echoing marble baths, and countless impenetrable mysteries."

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Declining Invitations Calls For Expression Of Regret

DEAR MISS MANNERS — Our problem is how to get out of accepting an invitation for a special occasion when the event is out of town at a summer residence.

We know quite a few people who own summer cottages, and if an anniversary or birthday comes up, arrangements are made to have a party there rather than in town. We also have a summer residence, which we use once in a while, but we now enjoy spending more time at home.

I'm a tempore to refuse an invitation on the grounds that we do not wish to travel? We would enjoy attending if it weren't made so inconvenient. We have found that there is usually not enough room to put up all the people overnight, and we had to pay the extra expense of a hotel room.

Should people not arrange these occasions at the convenience of their guests rather than because of their own desire to be at their summer residence and still celebrate these occasions?

GENTLE READER — Miss Manners is happy to oblige you, but she requests, in return, that you withdraw that intrusive side-swipe at people whose only crime is to invite you to share a special occasion at their vacation house.

You make it sound as if they have been sitting around saying, "It's too much of a bother to get ourselves out of here — why don't we make the guests undertake the effort of traveling? They've got nothing better to do anyway."

What they are more likely to have been thinking is: "Wouldn't it be fun to have everyone up here? They're stuck in town, in all that heat, when they could be enjoying themselves up here with us. Besides, that way we could see them for a weekend, instead of just a few hours."

Those who do not agree need only decline the invitations. Being out of town is a standard excuse for not attending events in your hometown, and the reverse works, too.

One does not, however, make announcements about not wishing to travel, as if it were an imposition. Being "unable to leave town" is the softer way of putting it. Even "I'm sorry, but we'll be at our summer place then" will do. Just remember that declining invitations always calls for expressing regret rather than venting pettiness.

DEAR MISS MANNERS — I am of the correct procedure.

GENTLE READER — There seems to be a bit of hysteria here. One magnificent gesture, directed toward six ladies at once, does not create an unbearable social debt. By suggesting that the ladies cook for him, or invite him out individually, you are only confirming that you and the others do not want to change the rules of the group so that anyone else would be obliged to duplicate this generosity. But surely you could keep inviting this nice gentleman back, with the good-natured understanding that he would be the group's guest.

On second thought, perhaps Miss Manners didn't quite grasp everything. This is, after all, a singles group. If any of the ladies wishes to take it upon herself to invite this gentleman out as a gesture of reciprocation for the group, she needn't be discouraged.

Feeling incorrect? Address your etiquette questions (in black or blue-ink on white writing paper) to Miss Manners, in care of this newspaper. The quilt shortage prevents Miss Manners from answering questions other than through this column.

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