

THE SKETCH BOOK

THE BOOK BAZAAR OF STAMBOUL

By Eveline Scott

I SUPPOSE, O modern inhabitant of the New World, with your Brentanos and Duttons and McClurgs, that you would deem our Book Bazaar of old Stamboul a very shabby and out of date affair indeed. You would have difficulty in finding it, to begin with, and there would be nothing smart or efficient about it, nor would you have any assistance in choosing your book, either from attractive poster or beguiling salesman. But it has charms you know, real Old World charms, notwithstanding its dust and poverty, its seemingly indifferent booksellers, and the hopelessly ancient literature it offers to the passer by. And I will wager that no true lover of books, new or old, can pass through it without a contraction of joy in the region of his heart; he must perforce stop and look and peer, for he will feel, instinctively, that here he may unearth a secret or may dig up a long lost tome for which all his life he has been looking. In short, romance lingers in every corner of the Book Bazaar, and those of us who live in Constantinople never grow tired of its subtle enchantment.

There are two ways of reaching it. You start from the bridge that spans the Golden Horn and walk through narrow streets up a hill until you reach the vine clad entrance of the Grand Bazaar. You plunge into its dim interior and by keeping in as straight a line as you can, always mounting, you will eventually come to the western

exit and step out again into the sunshine. Turn then to your right and you will find yourself in a small alley (you could hardly dignify it by the name of street) that winds for fifty yards or so, and empties itself through a stone archway into the courtyard of the mosque of Bayazid, which towers above it. You have arrived.

You may reach it by a longer route. When you leave the bridge, you can take the broad cobbled road that passes by St. Sophia and the Hippodrome until you come to the great open square of the War Office. You will find the mosque of Bayazid in the right corner, standing white against a blue sky. You go through its cloistered court, and glance in passing at the quaint marble fountain where mosque pigeons and devout believers alike drink side by side. When you have emerged and have walked under the great plane tree, you find yourself at the end of the alley that is called the Book Bazaar.

Thus it is wedged in between the great mosque on the one hand and the Grand Bazaar on the other, with the makers of seals near by and the shoe shops a little farther on. It is deliciously secluded. When you step into it, you are out of the world at once. It is quiet and subdued and business is always slack. You can hardly call the little booths that line each side, shops. They are glorified shop windows, with protruding ledges on which you can seat yourself to look over the books. Inside there is just room left, between the piles of books stacked on the floor, for a man to lie down, or to sit cross legged or squat comfortably

on his heels to eat a dish of beans cooked in oil, and served in a pewter vessel. Around the shop, to give it color, hang Arabic inscriptions in black and gold and blue and silver, set in frames. These look down upon the believer in his white turban waiting for your custom and upon you, the western infidel, seated on his jutting floor, with your feet upon the cobblestones of the street. And they say:

Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds!
The Compassionate, the Merciful!
King on the Day of Reckoning!

and

Truth is come and falsehood is vanished.
Verily falsehood is a thing that vanisheth.

You glance over his books and he smiles a benign and hopeful smile. What is so delightful as a white bearded old Turk, especially if he wears a turban round his fez and a bright colored shirt and sells books? He will point to his pile of foreign publications—how dusty and travel worn and altogether shabby they are—and your eye catches the strangest assortment of volumes, poor, neglected, indifferent books that nobody ever loved. There are German readers, relics of the war, when every school in Constantinople was well stocked with them; funny French dissertations on “*L’Art de Faire le Vin*” and “*La Vie Intime d’Edouard VII*”, with the quaintest old fashioned photographs of Victoria and Albert and their numerous progeny in every conceivable costume from the age of one month to eighty years or so; and “*La Chimie des Parfums*”. You will see, in English, Fifth and Sixth and Royal Readers, old Tauchnitzes, and occasionally a forgotten favorite of Locke’s or Eden Phillpotts. You glance at the paper bound Turkish pamphlets and

wonder what they are all about. They are poorly printed for the most part, on cheap paper, and their illustrations are crude and hazy affairs.

All the street is interested in your visit. The other booksellers (there is never more than one man to a booth) watch you wherever you stop. The street is so narrow that you can easily hold a conversation with the man across the way. His roof nearly touches the roof of the booth opposite him. Nearly, but not quite. You look up and there between the roofs is the loveliest strip of turquoise sky you could ever wish to see. If you crane your neck, you catch sight of one of the slim minarets of Bayazid, against the blue sky. On the little terrace near its top the muezzin calls to prayer and the bookseller, if he is a holy man—and many of them are—will take off his shoes, turn his face to Mecca, and prostrate himself then and there, surrounded by his books. Customers can wait but God cannot.

There is one shop that is more than a booth, which I very much like to visit. Outside its little glass windows is a shelf of worn volumes, so dusty that one almost fears to take them up. Inside is an intelligent black bearded Turk with a sympathetic manner. He saw that day, when I first discovered him, that I was looking for more than discarded readers. And so, after my companion and I had been in his shop fully ten minutes, he decided that we might be appreciative of his real treasures. So he went behind his little counter and took out of a gaudy ramshackle tin trunk the most beautiful things, as if it had been the coffer of a djinn. There were old, old Korans, illuminated in gold and blue and magenta, done in solitude by who knows what pious student of theology in his shady cloister. There were lac-

quered covers with intricate designs upon them of birds and leaves and scrolls, which once upon a time had served their day to hold together some holy document. There were illuminated texts in Arabic and Persian and Turkish, quite modern but all hand work, offered to us for a song. The bookseller nodded knowingly, when our eyes opened with delight at his display. "Ah, very beautiful, are they not?" he asked with pride and stroked them as if they were children. This Koran, for instance—look at the dainty illumination, and the gold work—did we know how long it took to make one page like the frontispiece (which, being Turkish, displayed itself on the *back* page of the book)? And these microscopic texts—that tiny border which looked like a geometrical pattern was really—look closer—tiny, tiny Arabic writing running around the whole page. A book, you see, encircled with sacred words. . . .

There was one slender book of Turkish poetry, in a rather battered cover which folded over the outer edge like an envelope, upon which my heart was set. The first page (at the back) was illuminated in blue and gold. It was modern but very finely done and looked as though the artist had loved his work and had perhaps said over to himself the verses of the poet as he drew. It seemed a detail that I could not read a word of it. It was the kind of book one wanted to possess, and finding it, like that, in a tin trunk, seemed like destiny. And so I bought it and here it is, in my western sitting room, feeling very out of place, I fear, between "The Letters of William James" and the "Poems" of Rupert Brooke. Some day perhaps I shall know enough Turkish to spell out its intricate verses. In the meanwhile I like to look at it.

Once my companion and I made another discovery. We found an excellent copy of Lane-Poole's "Story of Turkey" in a conspicuous position at the top of a pile of second hand volumes. We took it up the instant we saw it and did not notice that that particular bookseller was stretched upon his tiny floor space, fast asleep. He had taken off his shoes and his bright socks made a splash of color in the sunshine. His fez was still on and his hands were crossed upon his girdle, and his mouth was slightly open. We had been standing there some moments before he opened his eyes, slowly and reluctantly. He got up half dazed and very disgruntled at our interrupting him and refused to give us the book for less than twice its value. We named our price and walked off, expecting him to call us back, as is the custom of the country; but he let us go. We glanced back to see him settling himself for another forty winks, well satisfied with his decision and our departure.

I was reading the other day, in a book from the Atlantic Press, about book selling and advertising. It said that people who have bookshops should advertise if they want to sell their wares. They should make their windows attractive and lure and guide and admonish the young and uncertain reader, and show him the path he should take—graft upon him, so to speak, a love of good books. All very sound perhaps and very good business. But let me whisper in your ear, O gentle reader, that I am so much of an Old World conservative that I shy at the idea of advertising. Too much advertising, too many signposts, are the curse of the western world. In the west, you can't miss anything; the advertisers see to that. You can't get lost and you can't go wrong. Every-

thing is too plainly marked. The finest and costliest wares are displayed in the most conspicuous places for the least appreciative to inspect and handle. There is nothing left for you to discover. All the streets are straight with never an alluring curve around which may be waiting who knows what magic satisfactions.

But things are otherwise in Turkey. Precious wares are kept back for those who show their interest and appreciation. The best is shown last. Beautiful things appear in the least likely places. Out of the dust and shabbiness of years, you may pick up the treasure you have been seeking. You are allowed the joy of vigorous search, the triumph of real discovery. "Perhaps next time I visit the Book Bazaar", you think, "I shall find a priceless Greek manuscript hidden in a disused Koran; perhaps I shall fall upon an old volume of travels written by an obscure English rover of the seventeenth century." In Turkey, you never can tell, you know!

And so, though it pays to advertise, I am glad that they haven't found it out yet in the Book Bazaar of old Stamboul.