

In the Twilight of the Turkish Empire

The Amazing Experiences of a Captured British Officer

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V--THE BLACK HOLE OF CONSTANTINOPLE PRISON IN THE WORLD THE MOST DREADFUL

One day the Turkish Commandant of a prison camp in Asia Minor asked for the names of British officers who belonged to distinguished families.

"What on earth for?" was the general speculation. Now for months the captives had mingled a forthcoming exchange of prisoners between Great Britain and Turkey. What could the request mean, argued the optimists, but that the Turkish political bosses wanted the return of some of their friends who were interned in Egypt, and were giving in exchange prisoners of distinguished families?

This comfortable theory was widely accepted, and knowing how the Turks bow down before rank, all began searching their memories for titles or famous relatives and ancestors. Those who could produce no real names claimed to be cousins, nephews, sons-in-law or great-grandsons of such startling people as the Duke of Plaza Toro, Baron Beamstead and the Lord-Lieutenant of Lincolshire.

The Commandant chose a small band of claimants and sent them to Constantinople. Joyful in the belief that they were en route to England, home and beauties they shook hands with the lesser aristocrats and accepted congratulations.

A few days later they found themselves in an unclean dungeon of the Turkish Ministry of War prison. There they remained for several weeks, weakening and sickening under disgusting conditions and the lack of exercise. Owing to false reports that Turkish officers in Egypt were being badly treated Enver Pasha had decided to punish a number of Britishers by way of reprisal, and the military authorities chose for the purpose men of "distinguished family."

Finally one of the straggled officers caught typhus in the prison and died as a direct result of medical neglect. Thereupon the Turks began to get frightened, and sent the rest of the aristocrats and near-aristocrats to proper internment camps.

Among the tyrannies and tortures that made the last days of Turkey's dominion over Christian peoples equal in terror to any period during her centuries of savage misrule, none were more terrible than the prison life in the Ministry of War. For sheer horror parts of this "Black Hole of Constantinople," as it became known, could match the Bastille at its worst, or the Stone House at Omdurman in the days of the Mahdi. Last year it was without doubt the most dreadful prison in the world.

I first glimpsed the disgusting conditions of Turkish prisons when (as already described), I shared, with an Arab charged as a spy, a cell in the criminal jail at Nazareth. Afterward, in Damascus and elsewhere, I met Armenians, Greeks, Arabs and Jews, as well as many Turkish officers, who were confined for months in tiny rooms, without having been given the semblance of a trial. Sometimes they received from the authorities enough food to keep them alive, and sometimes they did not—in which case they either died or depended on private means or the help of friends.

If their crimes were comparatively minor ones—such as theft, desertion or the murder of somebody without influence—those who had money could probably bribe their way to release. But if they were "in" for political offences not even bakaseth could free them, for the Young Turk politicians, whose domination depended on violence, took no chances with those openly hostile to them. Political prisoners, indeed, might consider themselves lucky not to have been executed off-hand.

When I First Heard of Dungeons. It was when I reached the concentration camp at Afion-Kara-Hissar, in Asia Minor, that I first heard of the Ministry of War dungeons. Many British officers at Afion had lived in the better quarters of the prison (these "better quarters" being infamously worse than any jail in western Europe), and several had suffered ill-treatment in the worse quarters.

For example, Lieutenant-Commander Stoker, R.N., of Submarine E-15 (caught in the Dardanelles, while trying to re-enter the Sea of Marmora, where it had already carried out a number of very daring raids) had undergone two periods of punishment in the Black Hole of Constantinople. The first was when, with Lieutenant Fitzgerald, R.N., he was shut in a damp underground cell, as reprisal for the falsely-reported ill-treatment of Turkish prisoners. After about a fortnight the two British officers were released from the filthy dungeon as a result of strong protests by Mr. Morgenthau, American Ambassador to Turkey.

In this connection I take the opportunity of mentioning the magnificent work of Mr. Morgenthau, Mr. Elkus (who succeeded him as Ambassador), and the staff of the United States Embassy in Constantinople. These gentlemen, by protests to the Turkish Government and by the distribution of money, clothes and other necessities, saved the lives of many British prisoners in Turkey.

Lieutenant-Commander Stoker's second experience of the Ministry of War was far worse than the first. With Lieutenant-Commander Cochrane, R.N.—also a submarine commander—the two were sent there, as a punishment, after an unsuccessful attempt at escape.

The pair, with another British officer, had slipped away from Afion-Kara-Hissar and made for the Mediterranean coast. After walking over two hundred miles and living through the most extraordinary adventures with brigands and Turkish villagers, they came within sight of the sea. They planned to leave the country by commandeering one of the small craft which they saw from afar, in a creek.

Then, almost at their journey's end, they were retaken, owing in the first place to a goat which they had seen, and which they had eaten, and in the second place to the fact that the public of the village bazaar, they bought a goat from a shepherd whom they met on a hillside. In this deal they made a serious mistake. The price was one Turkish pound which they paid in gold instead of in silver. Roused from his habitual stupidity by the unusual sight of a gold

coin, the peasant showed it to a gendarme. Details of the buyers' appearance and location, as given by the shepherd, led finally to their recapture, soon after they had killed the goat for food.

Having been taken to Constantinople they were flung into one of the worst dungeons in the Ministry of War prison. They would be kept there indefinitely, said the military authorities, unless they gave parole to attempt another escape. As British officers they very naturally refused; and they remained in the dreadful cell for nearly ten months, growing ever thinner and weaker, until special sanction for the required parole was sent to them, through the American Embassy, by the British Admiralty.

When they returned to Afion-Kara-Hissar, they were in shocking condition, and it is probable that a few more weeks in the Black Hole would have killed them.

Two years later Lieutenant-Commander Cochrane and Stoker were moved to Yozard, an even more inaccessible town than Afion-Kara-Hissar. In 1918 Cochrane, with several other officers, made another bid for freedom, and this time succeeded. He escaped from Turkey at about the same period I did.

As a rule newly-captured officers were sent first of all to the Ministry of War prison, so that they might be hardy for interrogation. Although three aviators were once forgotten in the prison for three months, most of the recently-taken people only remained for about a fortnight before being transferred to an internment better than those of political offenders or of officers who had tried to escape. Yet even they sickened from the total lack of exercise, and suffered from the vermin that infested the whole of the prison. One night two Britishers, unable to sleep because of the bugs, got up and slew several hundred of the little red brutes that the lower class Turk accepts as a matter of course.

"They Do No Harm." Useless to complain of the vermin when the Prison Governor paid a visit of inspection.

"Bugs?" was the invariable reply, with an affection of surprise. "Bugs at the Ministry? You must be mistaken. I never heard of such a thing."

Whereupon the prisoners would complain of sleepless nights, and as a proof would dig out some of the disgusting insects from their daytime hiding places.

"Well, well," the Turk would say, "they do no harm. Often they are useful in drawing bad blood from a man's body. Since you dislike them the room shall be disinfected tomorrow."

See you soon in the Ministry of War? Fulton and Stone were unlucky enough to be dragged to that very prison a few weeks later; but Captain White and I did not meet them there.

Yeats-Brown Goes To The Black Hole. Captain Yeats-Brown, also, was eventually captured and sent into the Black Hole at a time when White and I were hiding in Constantinople. His new imprisonment did not last long, for one night he and Paul succeeded in escaping once again, this time from the fortress itself. They remained at liberty in the city, doing valuable propaganda work for the Allies, until the armistice was signed.

While in the Black Hole Captain Yeats-Brown supplemented his own bitterly-acquired knowledge of the prison conditions from poor wretches in even worse case than himself. The British and other Entente subjects formed only a small percentage of the prisoners. His fellow-captives included all sorts and conditions of people from a Turkish prince to some of the lowest criminals on earth.

Among them was an Egyptian Mohammedan notable. With another Egyptian he had come to Cairo (with permission from the British, although without official standing) to discuss certain questions affecting the Mohammedan world. Arrived in Constantinople the Egyptian Arabs conferred with the Turkish Grand Vizier upon Pan-Islamism and other religious matters. They found the Young Turks' point of view to be irreconcilable with their own and the divergency of opinion was too wide for any compromise. Thereupon, with the greatest apparent cordiality, they took leave of the Grand Vizier, before returning to Cairo.

But they never returned to Cairo. They were seized, handcuffed and taken to the Ministry of War. For four days they never left an underground cell, where they received no food. It was quite dark. It was verminous, that goes without saying, for so part of the Black Hole was never verminous. It was also very damp. One of the Egyptians grew ill and died within a few days, of course without medical attention. The news of this death either appeased Talaat Pasha's wrath or frightened him, so that the two remaining Egyptians were taken upstairs, given back some of their luggage, and put in one of the best rooms of the prison, which he shared with a Turkish prince and a prison spy. It was while he was in these circumstances that Captain Yeats-Brown met him.

The Prince, with the eunuch who waited upon him, provided an interesting study. An injudicious use of his revolver, whereby in a palace brawl one of the imperial apartments was damaged and an elderly colonel killed was the cause of his incarceration. He certainly made the most of prison life. Certain privileges were his, including week-ends from the Ministry, so that his punishment was little more than a rest cure. The sentries always stood at attention when he passed.

Almost the same deference was extended to his eunuch, for eunuchs in Turkey may rise to great positions. The keeper of the Imperial Harem, in fact, ranks, after the Sheikh-ul-Islam, as the highest dignitary of the realm. No eunuch, therefore, is negligible since any of their limited number may rise to this rank. The little Lord Chamberlain in posse who attended the Prince was himself used.

A Visit to the Prison. A fire would be the cleanest thing that could happen to the Ministry of War prison at Constantinople. Not all the perfumes of Arabia, not all the disinfectants of the world, could rid the place of its vermin or scour it of its taint of disease and death. Come with me on a visit to this inferno of the damned, as it was less than a year ago.

We go downstairs into the darkness. A sentry leads us along the corridor to an iron portal, just like that of which Dante wrote: "Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate" ("Abandon all hope, ye who enter here"). We are in a long, low room, airless, ill-lit, filthy with tomato skins and bits of bread. Well-fed rats scurry among the garbage. Ill-fed prisoners, mostly Greeks and Armenians, pace the room forlornly, scratching themselves and gnawing dry crusts. These are the lucky prisoners who have no chains riveted onto their wrists and ankles. Some have been waiting trial for six months or more. Few complain of the delay, for their "trial" will take place in the Hall of Justice, and their punishment will probably follow in these dark little cells close by their present quarters.

These cells have neither light nor ventilation, except through a trap in the door. This opens into the main room just described, which is itself below ground-level. They are six feet long by four wide. In solitude and obscurity, fetter by wrist and ankle to shackles that weigh a hundredweight, human beings live there for months and even years, if death does not release them.

These wretched men are ravenous and verminous, but they have not altogether lost hope and self-respect. One Greek, accused of espionage, lived under such conditions for eleven months. He was a rich man in the outside world, and the authorities had allowed his friends to provide three dollars a month to supplement his prisoners fare of bread and water. At that time three dollars was just sufficient to buy one simple square meal in Constantinople. But this Greek did not complain.

"The war will be over soon," he said to Captain Yeats-Brown, who had given him a cigarette. "My God, how good tobacco tastes! And how long are you in for, my friend? But be careful—the sentries must not see you speaking to me."

"Yes, the chains were bad at first," he continued when the sentry's back was turned. "But one gets used to everything in time. And I have had time enough. I was a prisoner for eighteen months upstairs, before I came down here. That was lucky."

Why were you put in chains and sent down here?" a note out of prison. If I had had money I could have bribed them, but as it is—unto him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath!"

And he spread his hands in cheerful resignation to a fate which except for the prospect of peace, would have been worse than death. All the prisoners lived on hope—and lo! When he first arrived, they all crowded eagerly around Captain Yeats-Brown, clamoring for news and cigarettes. The news he could give them was good; but they had been so often disappointed that they undoubtedly preferred the more tangible cigarette. Everything that one could not actually hold onto was looted in less than no time. Morals there were none; and, poor devils! who could blame them, living down there, where they got no news, no tobacco, and scarcely any food, and where from the outside nothing could be heard but the cries of beaten men and the dull sounds of bastinado on flesh?

The days in the lower part of the prison were terribly dull, but not so dull as the solitary confinement to which Captain Yeats-Brown was transferred. From the company of those cheerful scoundrels, he was suddenly removed to the upstairs regions and lived in the "luxury" of which the Greek had spoken. There he existed for a month without exercise, and allowed to speak to no one. The only occupant of this new more boschide himself, were the little things which crawled and hopped. These proved in the long run, to be amenable to Keating's, of which the Prince's eunuch smuggled in a supply.

Intriguing from time to time with the Prince and his attendant, gossiping furtively to the Egyptian nobility when sentries had been bribed into acquiescence, and eluding the machinations of the prison spy were his sole distractions.

For the rest, things were desperately dull. Captain Yeats-Brown, like others of us who suffered solitary confinement, played for hours at a time with a bit of string, and invented all sorts of games with matches. Thinking was to be avoided at all costs, for too much of it in solitary confinement is a danger to sanity. The greatest difficulty especially at night, is to stop one's brain from racing. In this respect the vermin were useful, for they proved a gentle mental and physical exercise.

From my own experience at Nazareth, and from the experiences of other officers, I am serious of opinion that solitary confinement, with or without books or writing materials, is one of the worst tortures a civilized man can be made to endure. It doesn't sound so bad, but try it for just a week! Left alone and with nothing to distract his brain, the lonely prisoner can do little but think and think and think; and all his thoughts are bitter. And if one has recently seen dreadful sights—such as the torture of the old Armenian woman by Captain Yeats-Brown—one lives of necessity in a state of mental nightmare.

Hope of escape or release, and of ultimate punishment of the heads responsible for the horrors of the Black Hole of Constantinople, were all that made the dreadful life worth living. Have the heads responsible for the

torture of the Armenian woman, and for many hundreds of similar brutalities, been punished? Probably not, for when they saw that the game was up of the gang that dominated Turkey stayed to face the consequences of their violence. Enver Pasha is hiding somewhere in the Caucasus. Djevad Bey has also disappeared. As for the lesser brutes who were the actual torturers, acting under orders, most of them scurried away and donned civilian clothes. Many, I should imagine, are now peaceful citizens of Constantinople, obtaining food from the Allied Relief Commission.

But, in Heaven's name, let us see to it, once and for all, that the Turk shall never again be in a position to commit such horrors.

Cunning, cruel, savage, and with no culture of his own, he knows no control except fear. For more than a century he has thrown dust in the eyes of civilized Europe, playing off one country against another, and taking full advantage of whatever international formula happened to be the order of the day. He is totally unfit to govern even himself. He massacres hundreds of thousands of his Christian subjects—as in the days of Abdul Hamid, the Red Sultan—faced with the universal horror of other nations, he then becomes afraid, and promises to reform. He submits to some mild form of international control, and for a time he does reform; but only because the alternative is national extinction. Then, when he thinks he can throw off all international control he breaks out with redoubled violence; as happened during the war, when the enlightened "Committee of Union and Progress" ordered the massacre of nearly a million Armenians, and instigated the tortures of the Black Hole of Constantinople—tortures which were duplicated in every jail all over Turkey.

Even now the present Sultan and his advisers are playing the old, old game of throwing dust in the eyes of Westerners. They are the sheep, they claim, while the wicked Young Turk politicians are the goats—just as in 1908 the Young Turks were the sheep and Abdul Hamid's party the goats. Inspired by fear they are even hanging and imprisoning members of the regime that ended with the armistice, as a sop to the world-wide demand for justice.

Secure in the fact that Washington is five thousand miles distant from Constantinople, they are playing on American idealism in their plea for another chance as an independent empire. Give them another chance and soon or later their desperate instincts, inborn cruelty and uneducated savagery will return to the surface, and there will be a recurrence of the Black Hole of Constantinople as one example of many.

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What a beautiful world this would be if flowers only grew to resemble their pictures in the seed catalogue. The chronic borrower hopes that he'll not meet any of his creditors in heaven. A sure sign that you don't know much is to think that you know it all.

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TO-DAY IN HISTORY



Fifty-six years ago today, July 26, 1863, General Morgan, the "Confederate Guerilla," was captured by Colonel Shackelford. Find two of the raiders. Answer to yesterday's puzzle. Right side down, eye at left shoulder.

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