

SEEING THE WORLD.

SAN SOPHIA.

In 1923 I was earning my bread and butter in the near East, and in April of that year; on my way to Constantinople, the steamer called at Kilia—twelve hours ashore and the loan of a car—four of us motored in that car over old battle ground, first we went through a camp passing Brompton Road, Hyde Park Corner, Clapham Junction, and a shed 12 ft. by 12 ft., labelled "Whiteley's Stores." We climbed steadily until we were 600 feet above sea level, part of the way there was no road, which was a degree better than the track they called a road. Over the top of the hill we went, descending to the coast again we dropped down to Anzac Bay, which is dotted all over with little graveyards, each surrounded with a low, broad, white stone wall, raised opposite the entrance to 7 or 8 feet high; on this higher part is carved a cross and under the cross the words "Their names shall live for evermore." I was told there were 70,000 of our men buried in these little graveyards. I gathered some anemones, blue, red, purple, mauve, pink and white, they grow all over the place even among the barbed-wire entanglements, and other ugly relics of the War. After visiting the graveyards we climbed another hill, the lower part of which was like the Sychnant Pass in North Wales, but as we climbed higher the scenery grew wilder, at the top, 700 feet above the sea level it was like the higher parts of Westmorland, cuckoos were calling, larks singing, anemones and gorse in bloom everywhere, and away in the distance snow-capped Samothrace. On our way back to Kilia we passed through Maidros, which had been shelled during the War, the greater part of it was in ruins.

Next morning we anchored off Constantinople. I had often read that Constantinople should be approached from the sea and not by the Orient Express, and it certainly should; from the sea at sunrise it has an unearthly beauty, at sunset it looks as though it were made of mother-o-pearl, with a setting of sapphires, but when you land, well, it is picturesque, and wherever a tree or flower can grow, it does grow and flourishes, but cannot hide the ruinous condition of one of the most interesting cities in the world.

To everyone I think the Church of San Sophia is the most interesting building in Constantinople. Founded by Constantine, built by his son, the first church was burnt down. Justinian built the present one, it was dedicated 537 A.D., when Justinian entered the Church for the first service, he exclaimed "I have surpassed thee, O Solomon!" It must have been very beautiful then, the lower part of the walls are marble and above the marble are mosaics and paintings, the latter are now covered with whitewash, the floor is also marble, eight of the columns are of dark red porphyry, quarried in Egypt and once formed part of the Temple of the Sun at Baalbek, they were carried to Rome to adorn a Temple there and later were given to Justinian for San Sophia. Four columns are of dark green marble from Ephesus, and one I was told came from the ruins of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, and the sick folk to this day touch it to heal themselves of their diseases. So many different coloured marbles were used that with the mosaics caused one old writer to state "That it seemed to him that he was in a valley filled to the sky-line with beautiful flowers, and the sky was pure gold." There is a story told of one of the Czars of Russia, who wishing to find a form of service suitable for his great Kingdom sent men to the different countries of Europe, they came to Constantinople and after attending Mass in San Sophia said "What need have we to go farther, surely nowhere out of heaven is there so much grandeur, beauty, and riches," so they returned to their master and told him of this wonderful Church, and that is why Russia joined the Greek Orthodox Church.

In 1453 Mohammed II conquered the city. San Sophia was packed with Christians who were sure that no one could hurt them in that sacred place. The conquering soldiers rushed to the Church to take the great stores of gold, silver, and precious stones. They divided between them the men, women, and children, and killed those that were not wanted. I was told that a priest who was celebrating Mass took the Host to save it from the invaders, a wall opened to receive him and closed again after him. When San Sophia is again a Christian Temple he will return and finish the celebration. I was told this by Greeks and Turks, the latter saying "the Greeks believe this," I said to one Turk "Do you believe it?" "It may be so," he said, "I know not."

At noon on the day of the massacre Mohammed the Conqueror entered the Church, ordered one of the Court Ulemas to ascend the pulpit and recite a prayer. The Conqueror prostrated himself on the marble table that had been the Altar and gave thanks for his victory. From that day until now it has been a Mosque and no Greek is allowed to enter it. All the Mosques in or near Constantinople are copies, more or less modified, of San Sophia.

My first visit to San Sophia was on the Night of Power, we tried in vain to get passes for this service but none was issued. The Warships of the Allies were in the Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmora, and Turkey's Fleet was bottled up in the Golden Horn, small wonder they would not issue passes to Christians. In spite of this eight of us went into Constantinople, got two cars at the station, and gave orders to go to San Sophia, then the trouble began, our chauffeur was a Turk and knew nothing of the Saints, fortunately one of our party could speak Turkish fluently, his chauffeur told ours to follow, easier said than done, as the streets were a nearly solid mass of humanity, and it was with the greatest difficulty we could move at all, and we soon lost sight of the other car, I knew in which direction the Mosque lay, I also knew a little Arabic, and after some time we joined our friends, who were looking very sad—no one admitted but the faithful—and no train home until 2 a.m. Then our Turkish-speaking friend remembered there was a side entrance, perhaps there would be no guard there, so down steep cobbly roads we went and found the side door guarded by a dozen officers, our friend talked, the guard talked, and talked, at long last he said "Come on," we bowed and smiled at the guard who smiled and bowed in return; as soon as we were safely inside W—— said "You ladies may get out of this alive, but I don't expect we men will, for Christians are just as welcome here as a bull in a milliner's shop, so please tell my wife I was talking of her just before I disappeared." I promised I would if I did not disappear too. Our way in was about eight feet wide, badly paved with huge stones, the gradient being about one in ten, we went round in a wide spiral and at last come to a great gallery that goes round three sides of the Mosque at the base of the drum that holds the dome, here we were asked to tread lightly as the gallery was condemned as unsafe twenty years ago, so walking lightly we went to the edge then looked down through a blaze of light, men were coming in at every door with their shoes in their hands; it was a cold night and each man had to wash in running water, his face and neck, hands and arms to the elbow, feet and legs to the knees, there are fountains in the courtyard of every Mosque for this purpose. In San Sophia there are two beautiful ones inside and a very large one in the courtyard. When the service began there were about 10,000 men kneeling, then a man with a beautiful voice who stood near where the Altar had once stood, said "Allah is great" and every man in that great Mosque rose as one man. At different parts of the service they stand, bow, kneel, sit on their heels, or touch the floor with their foreheads, and as they rose or knelt the noise of their bodies moving was like a distant roll of thunder. The service

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)