

A TOWN WITHOUT A WOMAN.

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THE only town in the world without a woman is the curious little capital of Athos, that beautiful peninsula of white marble which runs out into the sea for a distance of forty miles on the coast of Macedonia.

This lovely promontory has two companion peninsulas which form the three picturesque feet of Calcedice, that section of Macedonia so famous in classic ages. It was across the base of the Athonite peninsula that Xerxes cut his canal.

There is not in all Europe a more wonderful spot than Athos. This "Mountain of the Monks" has for centuries been the Holy Land of the great Greek Church. Only a few English travellers have from time to time visited the peninsula, which must be reached by sea either from Contessa or Salonica. Not a woman ever sees any part of this locality except as it can be viewed from the ocean in passing along the Ægean; for the presence of the weaker sex is absolutely prohibited in Athos. The rocky range of hills forming the grand promontory runs right along the forty miles from the low ridge connecting Athos with the mainland of Chalcidice, and the height increases steadily all the way until Mount Athos properly so-called soars up in a magnificent cone and reaches an altitude of very nearly seven thousand feet. At the base the width of the promontory is only half a mile, and here are still plainly visible the traces of the famous old canal. But the peninsula widens out until in some places it is quite four miles across.

No less than twenty splendid monasteries are perched and scattered in the recesses of this sublime headland or on the craggy and

sometimes apparently inaccessible cliffs of the coast. And here dwell under the conditions of separation from a far-off world the devotees of an extraordinary system of asceticism, quietism, and superstition which is in itself one of the most interesting studies in the development of the monastic life of the East.

On this shore, and on the rocky sides of these hills no woman has for ages been allowed to set foot. The metropolis of the district is the little town called Caryes. Here are all the essential features of civilised life. The streets contain bustling little shops, and there is a bazaar thronged with eager customers. Muleteers drive in and out the town, coppersmiths ply their tools, fruiterers pile up their

wares, boatmen lounge about, the monks from various monasteries pass to and fro on messages concerning the Holy Synod. But, as travellers visiting Athos never fail to remark, there is one charm entirely lacking. No form or face is seen of mother, wife, sister, daughter, lover or infant. Many a lively boy may be seen helping the merchants of the wealthy monks, or driving the goats and mules; but the merry laughter of maidens and the musical songs of Greek or Turkish ladies can never be heard in the streets of Caryes or anywhere in all the Athonite peninsula.

Here in Caryes is a little Turkish garrison, with officers, soldiers, and secular functionaries. But not one of these Ottomans can locate his harem anywhere in this celibate land. All must live a bachelor life.

There are in the twenty romantic convents of the "Mountain of the Monks" about six thousand devotees. Some of these establishments are exceedingly wealthy, having great estates in Roumania, Servia, Bulgaria, and Russia. The largest monasteries have hundreds of servants. Many of the convents are seats of skilled industry, and some of the monks are splendid musicians, others are excellent artists, and hundreds of the hermits are profound students.

It is extraordinary that the exclusion of the female sex should be so rigorously enforced in connection with a system which at the same time inculcates the most profound reverence for the Virgin Mary. Strange to say, it is by the Virgin herself that the perpetual banishment of her own sex from Athos is believed by the superstitious monks to have been decreed. In the beautiful monastery of Vatopedi, one of the richest of the Athonite establishments, is one of those "miraculous icons" so precious in the eyes of priests and worshippers of the Russo-Greek Church. The story implicitly credited is that this picture of the Virgin one day called to the Empress Pulcheria as she was going to her devotions in the great church, saying, "What do you, a woman, here? Depart from this church, for women's feet shall no more tread this floor!"

Now, it was this pious Empress Pulcheria who had so richly beautified the church which she loved so well in the monastery at Vatopedi. And yet she was constrained to obey this hard injunction. Never more did she

pray on that sacred floor, and never again did she see those lovely columns with which her munificence had adorned the church. And from that hour no woman or female animal has been permitted to set foot on the shores of the Holy Mountain. If the rigid rule against sex could be so applied, not a bird otherwise than of the masculine gender would be allowed to alight on twig or rock of the fair promontory which is so glorious a mountain-garden in the Eastern sea, that birds, angels, and women might seem to be its most fitting tenants.

Visitors, so long as they are of the male sex, are treated at all the Athonite monasteries with the most generous hospitality. But if a fowl appears on the table of the *hegoumenos*, or abbot of one of these great monasteries when entertaining his guests, it is sure to be a rooster, for a hen must not enter this sacred land, either alive or dead.

The fact is that throughout the Greek Church the position allotted to woman is one of great inferiority. When looking at pictures and relics in various cathedrals in Russia I have noticed that ladies were not allowed to approach the altar and to ascend the steps of the Iconostasis and to examine the sacred relics. They must remain outside the *bema*, but sometimes the gentlemen of the party might as a great favour take some relic to show to the poor ladies.

These monks from the Holy Mountain will astonish any visitor from the West by many a singular custom, especially in relation to diet. In the shops and bazaars of Caryes may be seen one of the commonest articles of diet at Athos, the devil-fish, hanging up for sale. But the traveller who has been accustomed to such a commodity as stewed octopus, finds it difficult to reconcile himself to the prospect of devil-fish for breakfast or supper. This tough reptile, caught in abundance on the coast of Athos, requires severe handling to deal with his peculiar qualities before putting him into the cooking-pot. To make him in any wise tender he must be lifted up on high and dashed down with all possible force on a paving stone, and this flagellating process must be repeated at least forty times. The monks, however, are perversely fond of cooking everything they eat in rancid oil, and therefore it may be imagined what is the nature of some of the viands put before the guest. Large black snails are particularly esteemed. Glyko, a delicate Turkish sweetmeat, served with coffee, is much more acceptable.

Beautiful Athos! Lifting up its glorious summit into the cloudless azure above the sapphire sea in which it bathes its granite feet, it is often visible from the Asiatic coast eighty miles distant. Many a tourist, steaming along the Ægean, looks with wondering eyes at the far-off crest, and little thinks of the world of marvels hidden in that rocky fastness, shut out as it is from the turmoil and ambition of the modern world. Pilgrims from many regions come and go, but for many a year Athos will be spared the fate which has overtaken many another lovely and secluded spot. The promontory hallowed for more than a thousand years to the hearts of the millions who worship according to the teachings of the Orthodox Eastern Church is not as yet in danger of being overrun as a playground of miscellaneous holiday-seekers; but the few who can diverge from the beaten tracks of travel will be richly repaid by a visit to this enchanting realm.