

THE CROSS-ROADS OF EMPIRE

RIVALLED alone by Athens, Rome and Jerusalem in its influence upon the course of human affairs, Constantinople stands once more at the cross-roads of Empire holding locked within her grim fortifications the key to the destiny of nations.

Few of the world's oldest cities can claim equal fame with Constantinople in the pages of history. Founded by Constantine the Great in A.D. 330 to repel the persistent attacks of the barbarians upon the resplendent but decadent Empire bequeathed by the Cæsars, for more than eleven centuries the city remained the political and military capital of the Roman Empire in the East.

Never was site for capital more skilfully chosen. Thrown across the southern extremity of the Bosphorus, eastward the city looks into Asia; westward over the Sea of Marmora and through the thirty-five miles of the Dardanelles, it looks into Europe. Placed, therefore, at a point commanding the thoroughfare between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, by its very geographical position, Constantinople was fated from its earliest history to assume commercial and political supremacy in the near east. For the least a city as situated can claim as its legitimate sphere of influence is the vast domain stretching from the Adriatic to the Persian Gulf and from the Danube to the Eastern Mediterranean.

The site, moreover, constituted and has always proved to be, a natural and almost impregnable citadel difficult both of approach and investment. Hostile forces, advancing through Asia Minor, have their march arrested by the moat of the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmora and the Dardanelles. The narrow channels, both to the north and the south of the city, can be rendered next to impassable by fleets approaching from either direction, while on the landward side the line of defence is so short that it can be held against large numbers by a comparatively small force. In short, nature has done her best by the configuration of land and sea about Constantinople to enable human skill and courage to establish there a splendid and stable throne of a great Empire.

Full well did Constantinople fulfil its founder's purpose. Placed at the gateway between Europe and Asia, through eleven centuries

successive tidal waves of invasion from both east and west broke helpless against the walls of the Eastern capital. But upon May 29, 1453, the city was carried in the westward rush of the Turks, and for nearly four centuries Constantinople has remained the capital of the Ottoman Empire in Europe.

In the Constantinople of to-day the Old meets the New; the Occident links arms with the Orient; the Past comes face to face with the Present. Though its polyglot population presents a singular conglomeration of different races, various nationalities, divers languages, distinctive costumes and conflicting faiths, it would be difficult indeed to overestimate the commercial, religious and political importance of the city.

Commanding as it does the trade-route between Eastern Europe and Western Asia, all down the centuries men and ships from all the seven seas have gravitated into Constantinople as if drawn by a lodestone. Though the commerce of the capital of the Turks is unfavorably affected by political events which have converted provinces of the once powerful Turkish Empire into autonomous states, Constantinople is still the clearing-house for the import and export of raw produce, grains, drugs, wool, silk and ores from the vast European and Asiatic hinterlands. It is a notable fact that most of the commercial activities of the city are in the hands of Armenians, Greeks and other foreigners, the Turks having but little to do with trade on a large scale.

The population of Constantinople is singularly cosmopolitan. Guided by hope of commercial gain or political advantage, men of every nationality under the sun have settled in Constantinople, creating a city not of one nation but of many, and hardly more of one than of another.

As in population, so in religion. Though adherents of the Mohammedan faith predominate, the city numbers among its inhabitants large settlements of Armenians, Greek and Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians. For centuries Constantinople has ranked as a Holy City. As the seat for eleven hundred years of the chief prelate of Eastern Christendom, the city was characterized by a strong theological temperament. Full of churches