

Reconstruction in Turkey

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Illustrated by

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RECONSTRUCTION *in* TURKEY *By* Stephen Leacock

ILLUSTRATED BY
C. W. JEFFERYS



... Some of the most skilled labor in Turkey.

In a recent issue of this magazine I described my visit to Berlin as it is under the Bolsheviks. On the very day following the events there related, I was surprised and delighted to receive a telegram which read "Come on to Constantinople and write us up too." From the signature I saw that the message was from my old friend, Abdul Aziz the Sultan.

I had visited him—as of course my readers will instantly recollect—during the height of the war, and the circumstances of my departure had been such that I should have scarcely ventured to repeat my visit without this express invitation. But on receipt of it, I set out at once by rail for Constantinople.

I was delighted to find that under the new order of things in going from Berlin to Constantinople it was no longer necessary to travel through the barbarous and brutal populations of Germany, Austria and Hungary. The way now runs, though I believe the actual railroad is the same, through the Thuringian Republic, Czecho-Slovakia and Magyaria. It was a source of deep satisfaction to see the scowling and hostile countenances of Germans, Austrians and Hungarians replaced by the cheerful and honest faces of the Thuringians, the Czecho-Slovaks and the Magyarians. Moreover I was assured on all sides that if these faces are not perfectly satisfactory, they will be altered in any way required.

It was very pleasant, too, to find myself once again in the flagstoned halls of the Yildiz Kiosk, the Sultan's palace. My little friend, Abdul Aziz, rose at once from his cushioned divan under a lemon tree and came shuffling in his big slippers to meet me, a smile of welcome on his face. He seemed, to my surprise, radiant with happiness. The disasters attributed by the Allied press to his unhappy country appeared to sit lightly on the little man.

"How is everything going in Turkey?" I asked as we sat down side by side on the cushions.

"Splendid," said Abdul. "I suppose you've heard that we're bankrupt?"

"Bankrupt!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," continued the Sultan, rubbing his hands together with positive enjoyment, "we can't pay a cent: isn't it great? Have some champagne?"

He clapped his hands together and a turbaned attendant appeared with wine on a tray which he served into long-necked glasses.

"I'd rather have tea," I said.

"No, no, don't take tea," he protested. "We've practically cut out afternoon tea here. It's part of our Turkish thrift movement. We're taking champagne instead. Tell me, have you a Thrift Movement like that where you come from—Canada, I think it is, isn't it?"

"Yes," I answered, "we have one just like that."

"This war finance is glorious stuff, isn't it?" continued the Sultan. "How much do you think we owe?"

"I haven't an idea," I said.

"Wait a minute," said Abdul.

He touched a bell and at the sound of it there came shuffling into the room my venerable old acquaintance, Toomuch Koffi, the Royal Secretary. But to my surprise he no longer wore his patriarchal beard, his flowing robe and his girdle. He was clean shaven and close cropped and dressed in a short jacket like an American bell boy.

“You remember Toomuch, I think,” said Abdul. “I’ve reconstructed him a little, as you see.”

“The Peace of Allah be upon thine head,” said Toomuch Koffi to the Sultan, commencing a deep salaam; “what wish sits behind thy forehead that thou shouldst ring the bell for this humble creature of clay to come into the sunlight of thy presence? Tell me, Oh Lord, if perchance—”

“Here, here,” interrupted the Sultan impatiently, “cut all that stuff out, please. That ancient courtesy business won’t do, not if this country is to reconstruct itself and come abreast of the great modern democracies. Say to me simply ‘What’s the trouble?’”

Toomuch bowed, and Abdul continued. “Look in your tablets and see how much our public debt amounts to in American dollars.”

The Secretary drew forth his tablets, and bowed his head a moment in some perplexity over the figures that were scribbled on them. “Multiplication,” I heard him murmur, “is an act of the grace of heaven; let me invoke a blessing on five, the perfect number, whereby the Pound Turkish is distributed into the American dollar.”

He remained for a few moments with his eyes turned, as if in supplication, towards the vaulted ceiling.

“Have you got it?” asked Abdul.

“Yes.”

“And what do we owe, adding it all together?”

“Forty billion dollars,” said Toomuch.

“Isn’t that wonderful!” exclaimed Abdul, with delight radiating over his countenance. “Who would have thought that before the war! Forty billion dollars! Aren’t we the financiers? Aren’t we the bulwark of monetary power? Can you touch that in Canada?”

“No,” I said, “we can’t. We don’t owe two billion yet.”

“Oh, never mind, never mind,” said the little man in a consoling tone. “You are only a young country yet. You’ll do better later on. And in any case I am sure you are just as proud of your one billion as we are of our forty.”

“Oh, yes,” I said, “we certainly are.”



“I’ve reconstructed him a little, you see.”

“Come, come, that’s something anyway. You’re on the right track, and you must not be discouraged if you’re not up to the Turkish standard yet. You must remember, as I told you before, that Turkey leads the world in all ideas of government and finance. Take the present situation. Here we are, bankrupt—pass me the champagne, Toomuch, and sit down with us—the very first nation of the lot. It’s a great feather in the cap of our financiers. It gives us a splendid start for the new era of reconstruction that we are beginning on. As you perhaps have heard we are all hugely busy about it. You notice my books and papers, do you not?” the Sultan added very proudly, waving his hand towards a great pile of blue books, pamphlets and documents that were heaped upon the floor beside him.

“Why! I never knew before that you ever read anything!” I exclaimed in amazement.

“Never did. But everything’s changed now, isn’t it, Toomuch? I sit and work here for hours every morning. It’s become a delight to me. After all,” said Abdul, lighting a big cigar and sticking up his feet on his pile of papers with an air of the deepest comfort, “what is there like work? So stimulating, so satisfying. I sit here working away, just like this, most of the day. There’s nothing like it.”

“What are you working at?” I asked.

“Reconstruction,” said the little man, puffing a big cloud from his cigar, “reconstruction.”

“What kind of reconstruction?”

All kinds—financial, industrial, political, social. It’s great stuff. By the way,” he continued with great animation, “would you like to be my Minister of Labor? No? Well, I’m sorry. I half hoped you would. We’re having no luck with them. The last one was thrown into the Bosphorus on Monday. Here’s the report on it—no, that’s the one on the shooting of the Minister of Religion—ah! here it is—Report on the Drowning of the Minister of Labor. Let me read you a bit of this: I call this one of the best reports, of its kind, that has come in.”

“No, no,” I said, “don’t bother to read it. Just tell me who did it and why.”

“Workingmen,” said the Sultan, very cheerfully, “a delegation. They withheld their reasons.”

“So you are having labor troubles here too?” I asked.

“Labor troubles!” exclaimed the little Sultan, rolling up his eyes. “I should say so. The whole of Turkey is bubbling with labor unrest like the rosewater in a narghile. Look at your tablets, Toomuch, and tell me what new strikes there have been this morning.”

The aged Secretary fumbled with his notes and began to murmur—“Truly will I try, with the aid of Allah—”

“Now, now,” said Abdul warningly, “that won’t do. Say simply ‘Sure.’ Now tell me.”

The Secretary looked at a little list and read: “The strikes of to-day comprise—the wigmakers, the dog fanciers, the conjurers, the snake charmers, and the soothsayers.”

“You hear that,” said Abdul proudly. “That represents some of the most skilled labor in Turkey.”

“I suppose it does,” I said, “but tell me, Abdul—what about the really necessary trades, the coal miners, the steel workers, the textile operatives, the farmers, and the railway people. Are they working?”

The little Sultan threw himself back on his cushions in a paroxysm of laughter, in which even his ancient Secretary was fain to join.

“My dear sir, my dear sir!” he laughed. “Don’t make me die of laughter. Working! Those people working! Surely you don’t think we are so behindhand in Turkey as all that! All those workers stopped absolutely months ago. It is doubtful if they’ll ever work again. There’s a strong movement in Turkey to abolish all necessary work altogether.”

“But who then,” I asked, “is working?”

“Look on the tablets, Toomuch, and see.”

The aged Secretary bowed, and turned over the leaves of his “tablets,” which I now perceived, on a closer view, to be merely an American ten cent memorandum book. Then he read:

“The following, oh All Highest, still work—the beggars, the poets, the missionaries, the Salvation Army, and the instructors of the Youths of Light in the American Presbyterian College.”

“But, dear me, Abdul,” I exclaimed, “Surely this situation is desperate? What can your nation subsist on in such a situation?”

“Pooh, pooh,” said the Sultan. “The interest on our debt alone is two billion a year. Everybody in Turkey, great or small, holds bonds to some extent. At the worst they can all live fairly well on the interest. This is finance, is it not, Toomuch Koffi?”

“The very best and latest,” said the aged man with a profound salaam.

But what steps are you taking,” I asked, “to remedy your labor troubles?”
“We are appointing commissions,” said Abdul. “We appoint one for each new labor problem. How many yesterday, Toomuch?”

“Forty-three,” answered the secretary.

“That’s below our average, is it not?” said Abdul a little anxiously. “Try to keep it up to fifty if you can. We must not fall behind you in Canada.”

“And these commissions, what do they do?”

“They make Reports,” said Abdul, beginning to yawn as if the continued brain exercise of conversation were fatiguing his intellect, “excellent reports. We have had some that are said to be perfect models of the very best Turkish.”

“And what do they recommend?”

“I don’t know,” said the Sultan. “We don’t read them for that. We like to read them simply as Turkish.”



“We can’t pay a cent. Isn’t it great?”

“But what,” I urged, “do you do with them? What steps do you take?”

“We send them all,” replied the little man, puffing at his pipe and growing obviously drowsy as he spoke, “to Woodrow Wilson. He can deal with them. He is the great conciliator of the world. Let him have—how do you say it in English, it is a Turkish phrase?—let him have his stomach full of conciliation.”

Abdul dozed on his cushions for a moment. Then he reopened his eyes. “Is there anything else you want to know,” he asked, “before I retire to the inner harem?”

“Just one thing,” I said, “if you don’t mind. How do you stand internationally? Are you coming into the new League of Nations?”

The Sultan shook his head.

“No,” he said, “we’re not coming in. We are starting a new league of our own.”

“And who are in it?”

“Ourselves, and the Armenians—and let me see—the Irish, are they not, Toomuch?—and the Bulgarians—are there any others, Toomuch?”

“There is talk,” said the secretary, “of the Yuko-Hebrovians and the Scarooovians—”

“Who are they?” I asked.

“We don’t know,” said Abdul, testily. “They wrote to us. They seem all right. Haven’t you got a lot or people in your league that you never heard of?”

“I see,” I said. “And what is the scheme that your league is formed on?”

“Very simple,” said the Sultan. “Each member of the league gives word to all the other members. Then they all take an oath together. Then they all sign it. That is absolutely binding.”

He rolled back on his cushions in an evident state of boredom and weariness.

“But surely,” I protested, “you don’t think that a league of that sort can keep the peace?”

“Peace!” exclaimed Abdul waking into sudden astonishment. “Peace! I should think not! Our league is for war. Every member gives its word that at the first convenient opportunity it will knock the stuffing out of any of the others that it can.”

The little Sultan again subsided. Then he rose, with some difficulty, from his cushions.

“Toomuch,” he said, “take our inquisitive friend out into the town; take him to the Bosphorus; take him to the island where the dogs are; take him anywhere.” He paused to whisper a few instructions into the ear of the

Secretary. “You understand,” he said, “well, take him. As for me,”—he gave a great yawn as he shuffled away, “I am about to withdraw into my inner harem. Good-bye. I regret that I cannot invite you in.”

“So do I,” I said. “Good-bye.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Reconstruction in Turkey* by Stephen Leacock]