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Footsteps of a Victorian Woman in the Ottoman Middle East: Edith Sykes' Travel Notes

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Abstract

Edith Violet Sykes (1872-1930) is an undiscovered character in the historiography of travel literature. She is the wife of a British agent and diplomat Sir Mark Sykes, who was renowned for his deeds in the Middle East and the Sykes-Picot Agreement. She is actively engaged in politics, establishing Chaldean Relief Committee for Armenian and Assyrian populations, and criticizing the violence in Ireland. Her travel notes in 1906 in the Ottoman Middle East shed light on her Orientalist mindset, the construction of East vis-à-vis the West, and how Victorian-born woman approaches this land and its people. In that sense, the purpose of this article is multifarious: First, this study will be the initial and detailed presentation of the unpublished travel notes of Edith Sykes. Secondly, the different assets of the Ottoman Middle East such as rivalry among the tribes, people's living, and political disturbances will be discerned through the British woman whose narration aids with the transition of events into political discourse.

Keywords: *Edith Sykes, Orientalism, Travel, Ottoman Empire, Middle East, Imperialism*

Orta Doğu'da Bir Viktoryen Dönem Kadınının Ayak İzleri Edith Sykes'ın Seyahat Notları

Özet

Edith Violet Sykes (1872-1930) seyahat yazınında henüz keşfedilmemiş bir kişidir. Edith Sykes, Orta Doğu'daki faaliyetleri ve Sykes-Picot Anlaşması ile bilinen İngiliz ajan ve diplomat Mark Sykes'ın eşidir. Aktif bir şekilde siyasi çalışmalar ile ilgilenen Leydi Sykes, Ermeni ve Süryaniler için Chaldean Relief Committee'yi kurmuş ve İrlanda'daki şiddeti eleştiren yazılar kaleme almıştır. 1906 yılında Osmanlı Orta Doğusu'nda gerçekleştirdiği seyahatin notları, Oryantalist zihniyetini, bir Batılı kadın gözünden Doğu imgesinin inşasını ve Viktoryen dönemde dünyaya gelen bir kadının seyahat ettiği coğrayaya ve o coğrafyanın insanlarına karşı yaklaşımını göz önüne sermektedir. Bu anlamda makalenin öncelikli amacı, Edith Sykes'ın yayınlanmamış seyahat notlarının detaylı bir incelemesini sunmaktır. İkincil olarak amaç, Osmanlı Orta Doğusu'nda aşiretler arasındaki çatışmayı, insanların yaşamlarını ve siyasi çalkantıları, anlatısını politik bir söyleme çeviren İngiliz bir kadının gözünden incelemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Edith Sykes, Oryantalizm, Seyahat, Osmanlı Devleti, Orta Doğu, Emperyalizm*

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Introduction

Not enough is known today about the life of Edith Sykes who was the wife of famous British agent-diplomat Mark Sykes, despite her humanitarian activities in World War I by running a hospital[1] and her being the co-founder of the Chaldean Relief Committee. Thus, this article has two major objectives. The first, it reveals the orientalist[2] and imperialist manifestations of Edith Sykes in her unpublished travel notes. The second, it indicates how her narration turned into a political discourse as she benefitted from her observations in her articles in the newspapers such as *The Times* to draw attention to the conditions of the minorities.

Although there is limited information related to her life, the place of Edith Sykes[3] and her unpublished travel notes covering the six months from the 27th of June to the 9th of November 1906 in the Ottoman Middle East is a valuable source for Victorian women's travel writing. Coming from a politically active family, she inherited her interest in the area from her father, Sir John Eldon Gorst, who was a British lawyer and a strong adherent of the Conservative. Her brother, Sir Eldon Gorst, was the consul-general in Egypt between 1907-1911. She was married to Sir Mark Sykes who, as one of the signatories of the Sykes-Picot Treaty concluded in 1916 to design partition of the Ottoman Empire, gained a reputation as the man who contributed to the drawing of the Middle East. When World War I broke out, Mark Sykes set a tour to France to examine the battlefields and supply centres facing the fact that people and soldiers were severely wounded. Yet, there was not enough medical facilities for them. Having turned to England, he and Edith Sykes thought of a solution. Thus, Edith Sykes went France, set up hospital there, brought "*5 doctors, 25 nurses, orderlies and drivers*."[4] Edith Sykes and her sister ran the hospital till the summer of 1915.[5] Considering the active role she assumed, the constituency suggested her "to take up his seat" in the parliament after Mark Sykes was deceased; nevertheless, she turned this offer down to be able to raise her children and attend personal responsibilities.[6] Yet, she did not abstain from political activities particularly for the independence of Ireland, drew attention to the suffering of the minorities, and supported the Chaldean Catholics. Moreover, she became the co-founder of the Chaldean Relief Committee which intended to provide aid for these people.[7]

1 Her service in World War I brought her French Red Cross; "Red Cross Medal", The National Archives, War Office: Records of Officers' Services (WO) 372/23/40395.

2 The term "orientalist" refers to the Western cultural mentality towards the Orient throughout the article.

3 Edith Violet Sykes (Gorst) was born on August 5th, 1872, in Lancashire and died on July 21st, 1930. Her grandson's book gives some details on her life at the Sledmere house and her correspondence with Mark Sykes. See: Christopher Simon Sykes, *The Big House: The Story of a Country House and Its Family*, New York 2005.

4 Michael Berdine, *Redrawing the Middle East: Sir Mark Sykes, Imperialism and the Sykes-Picot Agreement*, London 2018, pp. 8-9.

5 Edith Sykes gave an interview to a newspaper stating the happenings in France and French Bravery, "Yorkshire Lady Founds Hospital," *The Leeds Mercury*, December 2nd, 1914, p. 5.

6 "Lady Sykes and Central Hull," *The Times*, March 11, 1919, p. 8.

7 Joseph Yacoub, *Year of the Sword: The Assyrian Christian Genocide*: *A History*, New York 2016, p. 90-92.

Understanding the importance of the travel of Edith Sykes in 1906 requires a glance at the developments in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It was the time of "the Age of Empires" as Hobsbawm called it when the advanced dominated backward as colonial empires were rising and the world was shared among the states such as Britain, France, Germany, etc.[8] In the same vein, the Western perception of the "other" altered within this conjuncture because the concepts of "modern" and "civilized" became vital elements of the political agendas of imperial states. Relatedly, the concept of orientalism became prominent as an apparatus for the legitimization of the control of the East in the perspective of the East and West dichotomy in which the West is superior, civilized, and progressive in the face of inferior, uncivilized, and stable East. Particularly considering the British imperialism, there were numerous people who thought that imperialism was a vehicle for enlightenment and an advertisement of civilisation to be proud of, however, "the domination, economic exploitation, and military subjugation" was what actually imperialism corresponds to.[9] Particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the dominance of imperialist thought was more than solely the acquisition of knowledge related to the people and geography of the Middle East. In parallel with that, orientalism, in Saidian words, became a legitimization tool for imperialist propagation, served to the political discourse rather than being an academic field.[10] The orientalist approach became prominent and it required the acquisition of knowledge about the East as the West used orientalism "*as a Western-style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient*."[11] Therefore, the political interest, the reports on new archaeological discoveries that regularly appeared in the British press marched hand in hand with the convenience of travelling, contributed to the intensification of multiple dimensions of orientalism portraying the exotic East which enhanced Britain's imperial desires.[12]

There is a huge literature on women travellers in the context of gender and travelling. Billie Melman, examining how gender and class affected the European perception and representation of the "other," states that "*throughout the nineteenth century, female observers note the sameness of womankind, regardless of culture, class or ethnicity*."[13] Yet, the travel notes of Edith Sykes do not fit this generalization. She mentions the distinct

8 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empires: 1875-1914*, New York 1989, p. 56-57.

9 Robert Johnson, *British Imperialism*, New York 2003, p. 2-3. Ottoman Middle East was one of the significant examples. The region was zone of international competition related to its economic sources and strategic location.

10 Edward Said, in his groundbreaking book *Orientalism*, asserted three main discourses related to the orientalism: orientalism as an academic field, a style of thought indication the distinction between the East and the West, and an institution that deals with the Orient creating an authority over it: Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978, p. 2-3. It is significant to note that Billie Melman and Sara Mills benefitted from Said's *Orientalism* in their works to demonstrate the lack of gender issue in the book.

11 Said, *Orientalism*, p. 3. This vital book is still protecting its significance with its arguments on the hegemony of the West over the East with referring it through inferior interpretations for legitimizing its power.

12 Valerie Kennedy, "Orientalism in the Victorian Era", *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature,* V. 8, N. 22, 2017, p.2.

13 Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918: Sexuality, Religion and Work*, London 1992, p. 309

way of dressing, different races compared to European women, and diverse lifestyles. She presents a similarity only if it corresponds to a European life or manner. Besides, Sara Mills presents that women travellers' accounts could not directly be counted in the orientalist framework because their relation to the dominant discourse and the discourse of femininity is clashing.[14] In other words, women were regarded as subaltern whose voices were silenced. In a similar vein, Alison Blunt, in her work examining the relation of gender and imperialism over Mary Kingsley and her travel in West Africa, indicates that "*Kingsley publicly supported imperialism but privately empathized with Africans at least partly because of her split position as both superior and inferior, inside and outside Western discourses of power and authority*."[15] In the case of Edith Sykes, she functioned as the imperial apparatus with her knowledge related to the Ottoman government, categorization of people, and her political articles based on her observation. She displayed the orientalist mind of a hegemonic imperial existence looking at the way she describes several people ugly and found the places dirty and smelly as travelled to the East. Thus, her observations revealed the comparison between the superior West and the inferior East. In addition, she served as a bearer of hegemonic power which was attributed to the male travellers.[16] This also indicates the blend of orientalism and legitimization of the imperial policies where the inferior and uncivilized requires domination. Isabella Bird, who was the first female member of the Royal Geographical Society, stated that "*all Orientals prefer the tyrannies and exactions*."[17] The archaeologist and political officer Gertrude Bell also blended her travels with her political engagements. She also bears the marks of orientalist mindset indicating certain manners. [18] She even made this into a "career" and directly serving for the imperial agenda of Britain. These examples demonstrate that they challenged the "male point of knower" idea by their raising their voices and taking actions in terms of politics. Apart from that, Sophia Lane Poole, an English traveller of the same era, expressed the purpose of her journey as the wish "*to provide the essential to support worthy views on the many sub-divisions of the Eastern Question*."[19] Thus, their traveling during the 19th century was "*in many and varying ways, complicit in imperialism*"[20], particularly for the Ottoman Middle East. Although Judy Suh claims

14 Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*, London & New York 1991, p. 62-63.

15 Alison Blunt, *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa*, New York & London 1994, p. 110-111.

16 Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Desire and Power: A Feminist Perspective", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), London 1988, p. 108.

17 Isabella L. Bird, *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan: Including a Summer in the Upper Karun Region and a Visit to the Nestorian Rayahs*, V. I, London 1891, p. 171. Her membership to the Royal Geographic Society is an important signifier of her service to the imperial agenda.

18 For example, in her meeting with the princess in Tehran, the princess expressed her dislike of painting the eyes. Bell commented that she had "great astonishment when we informed her that such barbarism was not unknown even in England", Gertrude Lowthian Bell, *Safar Nameh: Persian Pictures, A Book of Travel*, London 1894, p. 101. For a detailed study on Gertrude Bell and her deeds in the Middle Eastern lands see, Taha Niyazi Karaca, *Sınırları Çizen Kadın-İngiliz Casus Gertrude Bell*, Kronik Kitap, İstanbul 2018.

19 Sophia Lane Poole, *The People of Turkey: Twenty Years' Residence among Bulgarians, Greeks, Albanians, Turks, and Armenians*, V. I, London 1878, p. xi.

20 Cheryl McEwan, *Gender, Geography, and Empire: Victorian Women Travellers in Africa*, Oxon 2000, p.11.

that the function of women travel writing was "*the cultural assessment of social orders and amenability to economic development rather than the cultural justification of British military domination*,"[21] the case of Edith Sykes challenges that perspective because she tried to draw attention to the condition of minorities in the Middle East as she thought that the people were suffering from the misrule of the government.[22]

Women's ambivalent position is ostensible, and this position bears the Victorian period's traces of being a domestic woman, being a part of imperial power and being a traveller. Thus, particularly the British women travellers' positions do not fit in a straightforward category, rather, their context of travelling were the blend of femininity and imperial agenda although each of their travel indicates these contexts in different degrees. They broke the chain of subaltern silence. In the travel of Edith Sykes, her dominant context is the acquisition of knowledge for the imperial agenda as she gives many details of tribes, tribal conflicts, and the deeds of the government all of which she utilized for the political discourse; while her narration include femininity as she examines the gender relation, the appearance of people, and familial bonds.

Interaction with the Middle East

The variety of dimensions in the Ottoman Middle East is available in the notes of Edith Sykes. One of the most salient details among its notes is the impressions she narrated related to the environment, people, and the daily lives of the people. In the Black Sea Region, she was delighted by the dense forests comparing them with the "bare and uninteresting" lands in Eastern Anatolia.[23] She found the scenery fascinating on the way to Kurdistan (as she referred to) in such a way that "*no photograph can do more than give a hint of it, nor can any pen describe its splendour*"[24], while in Kastamonu, she illustrated that "*the town is composed of hostels, racket, dine and fleas*."[25] Her approaches were not stable which is common when one resorts to geography with different characteristics. As Mrs. Ramsey, an English traveller, stated it was hard to "*give a clear idea of a modern Turkish inland town*" as "*one's first impression of it invariably… even of the most flourishing and important towns*."[26] The variety in the judgments of women travellers ostensibly comes from the fact that they ponder certain preconceptions when they arrived at the Ottoman Middle East most of the time fed by the Orientalist tales or the oral transmissions considering their environment in England**.**

21 Judy Suh, "Modern Travel on the Fringes of Empire", in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1880-1920*, (ed. Holly A. Laird), London 2016, p. 171.

22 "Chaldean Relief," *The Times*, January 15th, 1920, p. 8.

23 Turkish Historical Foundation, The Papers of Sir Mark Sykes, Microfilm 1, DDSY2/4 Foreign Affairs and Travel (1888-1919), 4/6 June 1906-November 1906 Ts. of *Pre-War Notebook: The journey of Edith Sykes, with Mark Sykes, from Sinope to Aleppo*, DDSY2/4, p. 16 (hereafter abbreviated as DDSY2/4).

24 DDSY2/4, October 18th, 1906, p. 35.

25 DDSY2/4, July 31st, 1906, p. 8.

26 W. M. Ramsey, *Everyday Life in Turkey*, London 1897, p. 2.

Customs and superstitions are an indispensable part of the travel notes as women travellers were interested in the metaphysical practices and the customs of the East which contributed to their image of the "mystical" East. For example, Lucy M. J. Garnett gave wide coverage to superstitions and folk-beliefs in her notes, underlining that they were like a complementary part of the Ottoman domestic life.[27] Edith Sykes expressed customs and superstitions of Turkish women, as well. She mentioned two beliefs that the consumption of the afterbirth right after delivery would serve as a medication for the mother. The other equally striking example was the belief that a piece of the liver hung over the puerperal bed would bring milk to the mother to nurse the newborn.[28]

Due to the status of Mark Sykes as an honorary attaché to Istanbul during the time of their travel, they were mostly welcomed by the high-ranking officials wherever they travelled. Edith Sykes, referring descriptively to the ceremonious greetings in her travel notes, humorously mentioned that their entrance to a village in Kastamonu was "*triumphal entry into the town" as "streets were full of people" and "officers and soldiers saluting*."[29] However, they were not always welcomed with courtesy by the locals because of the political dissidence of the time were often frustrated with foreign visitors and even regarded them as harmful to their territory. Moreover, this was fairly common and brought forth in the notes of various writers such as Reina Lewis who remarked on the dismay of the elite Ottoman women of foreign visitors who visioned them as "tourist spectacle."[30] Apprehension of Ottoman locals of the Middle East for foreign intrusion into their domicile found a place in Edith Sykes' observations and experiences of the local people. In their case, the unclear intention of the foreigner, and the ramifications of the international distress upon them might cause frustration for the locals.

An example Edith Sykes gave of the sort was when on their way to Aşkale.[31] They saw some Qizilbash Kurd women returning from milking their cows and a shepherd who Mark Sykes asked for some fresh milk. The shepherd gave the milk prickly, though grumbling, and saying "*Am I to give milk to everyone who passes on the road?*" and upon this rhetorical question Mark Sykes replied, "*Are you a Kurd and do not offer milk to strangers?*". Yet, his answer frustrated him a lot; the shepherd yelped that he "*fed a hundred dogs such as us at his door every day*" and the women "*seized sticks and stones and surged forward, the shepherd kept behind them calling out that we were "Franc macons*."[32] The event outwardly got serious as the next morning, a commission was assigned to investigate the case.

27 Lucy M. J. Garnett, *Home Life in Turkey*, New York 1909, p. 131.
28 DDSY2/4, July 18th, 1906, p. 5-6. *Helawi* or *halva* is an intensely sweet dessert.
29 DDSY2/4, July 27th, 1906, p. 8.
30 Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem*, London & New York 2004, p. 15-16.
31 A village of Erzurum today.
32 DDSY2/4, August 30th, 1906, p. 16. Franc macons-meaning free-masons, believed to be atheists, thus had an evil image in the eyes of most Turks.

Like most of the travellers interested in religious fractions and their diverse practices[33], Edith Sykes also participated in some ceremonies, one being the *Kadiris*[34]. Having observed or known others, she described how the howling of *Kadiri* was different from *Rıfai* dervishes and how they acted while praying: "*A venerable old Khodja with flowing white beard closed the proceedings with a long extemporary prayer, in which he prayed for everybody he could think of*."[35] Later she wrote how it resembled many "*dissenting prayer meetings in England, with the old men sitting round nodding their heads and groaning and old Mollah extemporizing*."[36] It is understood from her notes that she was acknowledged about these fractions as she compared *Kadiri* dervishes with *Rifai* dervishes.

Besides religious fractions, Edith Sykes was notably attentive to the women's appearance and clothing. Indeed, she was sometimes critical. Despite women's alluring jewellery, garments, and women's beauty in certain *harem*s, in some others she expressed women's clothing as they *"dressed as they are in chintz baggy trousers, a tightly buttoned-up bodice, on their heads a black bonnet with strings like any apple woman's are grotesque, to say the least of it."*[37] Her impressions were similar for Ladik[38] and its community: "*an uninteresting and decaying town inhabited by rude stupid looking people*."[39] She stated multiple qualifications of the Black Sea people as they "*are very handsome, of a Greek type, as indeed they must be by Greek (...) at Istifan*[40] *I came across many fair women and children with blue eyes*."[41] Furthermore, she found the women gentle and friendly and underlined their timidness as, "*the young ones very pretty, they fly away like frightened deer at the approach of a strange man*."[42] She also noted that "*people are poor and much talkative than the Turks*" comparing them with Kurds. For more on Kurds, she mentioned that *Ziriki* Kurds were ugly but nice, and like the *Heriki* people they differed from the Qizilbash. She was solicitous in connections and differences between the races so for Tel Afar[43] besides mentioning that it was an ancient Turkish settlement and people spoke Turkish she added that they resembled Yezidis in appearance, she commented that it must be due to intermarriages. A similar comparison is apparent in other studies concerning the expressions when identifying women. Dimitrios Kassis, referring to the travel book of Frances Elliott, asserted that "*race influences all attributes of human nature*" portrayed the 19th century Greeks as genuine beauties as they were of the "*Mediterranean*

33 Another English traveler Mrs. Ramsey also gave detailed comments about her experience in Karahisar where she watched the ceremony of the whirling dervishes mentioning the manners of the dervishes, the music, and their attires ending her impressions that "Really, for "fanatics", they are most amiable and agreeable people." Ramsey, *Everyday Life in Turkey*, pp. 270-277.

34 For further information related to the religious fractions and travellers' interest in them see, İbrahim Şirin, "Batılı Seyyahların İzleniminde Sufiler", *Sufi Araştırmaları*, V. 3, N. 5, 2012, 21-47.

35 DDSY2/4, July 18th, 1906, p. 5.

36 DDSY2/4, July 18th, 1906, p. 5.

37 DDSY2/4, July 31st, 1906, p. 5.

38 Ladik is a village in today's Samsun in the Blacksea region of Turkey.

39 DDSY2/4, August 1st, 1906, p. 9.

40 A village of Sinop.

41 DDSY2/4, June 27th, 1906, p. 2.

42 DDSY2/4, June 27th, 1906, p. 2.

43 A city in Iraq.

stock" whereas Turks were "*ugly Asiatic*"[44]. The use of the word "grotesque" is important. It connotes diverse meaning in time, it signifies a "peculiar nature" and "*ugly, monstrous*" figure where a body forms "*the basis of abuses, oaths, and curses*."[45] The similar use of grotesque is procurable for the women of Balkan geography as Andrew Hammond gives an example from a travel book where "*the women's reputed unattractiveness is associated with a grotesque interbreeding ("between a toucan and a penguin") that at best implies an absurdity*."[46] Thus, when Edith Sykes displayed infelicity with the people in the East displaying a classical discourse for the Orientalist perception. As Edward Said demonstrated, there was a biological determinism in the Orientalist discourse where backwardness and uncivilized nature of the communities were associated with the Eastern people in the perspective of the West.[47] Therefore, Edith's way of describing *vis-à-vis* the Eastern people enunciate much to reveal her orientalist perception.

Moreover, Edith Sykes praised women's attires as graceful and commented that they were strictly and carefully veiled, however, the harvesting Greek-Christians she talked with in Tokat spoke Turkish and they were partly veiled. She praised the women of Heriki for their graceful garments and noted that they were very different from the ones between Tosya and Erzurum as they did not veil.[48] Going from Erzurum to Muş, Sykes camped at a Kurdish village that impressed her as destitute but friendly. She said that the unveiled women were not only beautiful but equally bold and independent as the man.[49] Edith Sykes did not comment on women's veiling, but Mary Hume-Griffth who travelled to the Middle East with her physician husband, wrote in her memoirs that women's veiling stole their happiness and "imprisoned them" for life.[50]

As the travel proceeded, Edith Sykes mentioned the robbery of three men on camels followed by some Bedouins. Having been regarded as "subaltern" and "marginal" groups of the Ottoman Middle East, the manners of Bedouins were salient among the travellers. Lady Blunt, an English traveller, stated in her memoirs that "*thieving is the rule, nor is the term harami (thieves) ill-taken when applied to them*."[51] In a similar vein, Edith Sykes narrated that for the first time in their journey, they were robbed in an Armenian village. She was thwarted by the situation of people whose "*begging and their thievish ways so offensive*" resembling them to a "*London beggar*."[52] Her interesting interpretation of the event was "*They do not appear to be cowards or rather they presumed on our forbearance, I suppose, and rightly for one word as to our loses and the 15 soldiers would have ransacked that village from end to end*."[53] Her statement purported a lot as she indicated

44 Dimitrios Kassis, *Greek Dystopia in British Women Travellers' Discourse*, Newcastle 2018, p. 75.
45 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, (trans. Helene Iswolsky), Bloomington 1984, p. 25-27.
46 Andrew Hammond, "Typologies of the East: On Distinguishing Balkanism and Orientalism", *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, V. 29, N. 2-3, 2007, p. 210.
47 Said, *Orientalism*, p. 207.
48 DDSY2/4, August 30th, p. 18.
49 DDSY2/4, September 14th, 1906, p. 19.
50 M. E. Hume-Griffith, *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia: An Account of an Englishwoman's Eight Years' Residence Amongst the Women of the East*, London 1909, p. 223.
51 Lady Anne Blunt, *Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates*, New York 1879, p. 391.
52 DDSY2/4, September 14th, 1906, p. 19-20.
53 DDSY2/4, September 14th, 1906, p.20.

that soldiers did not get on well with the locals, thus, they took advantage of the theft to plunder the village, touching on the fragile relations between the government and the locals.[54]

Edith Sykes' interest to the relationship between men and women is straightforwardly noticed. In her notes, she admired the collaboration between them at work as she elucidated that both women and men worked together in the fields reaping the corn and carrying them to the ox-wagons in Istifan. Upon having seen women carrying their babies at their back even when they were at work and asked herself "*if only our women at home could do likewise how many little lives would be saved ?*"[55] It is understood that she hoped and wanted the women of England to be more aware of their welfare and more diligent. As for the Eastern part, she complied with and quoted Anne Blunt, an English traveller, who stated "*the Bedouin woman is hard-worked and happy*" upon seeing "*lusty young fellows*" toiling their wives who carry a load at their back. However, closing to their camp, she saw a man leading his donkey and carrying a small bundle of barley while behind him, was his wife holding a baby and carrying a huge sack. The woman continued to follow him with her load when the man mounted on the donkey. Disapproving the scene she had witnessed she reprimanded that "*Yes! the Bedouin woman is hard-worked, certainly*."[56] Actually, activity for women in England until the very end of the 19th century was defined by some as "supervised the smooth running of the household."[57] With this reasoning in mind, observing the way women existed in a different society and the extent they worked together with men caught Edith's attention, however, the treatment and inconsideration towards women triggered her deploring remark.

It is catchy to see that she was first attracted by the town when she had a distance to it, nonetheless, as she permeated into the town, all the allure went away which piquantly recapitulated her orientalist perception. Mosul was one of the kinds:

> "The town looks beautiful and picturesque as you approach it from a distance but once within its streets all illusions vanish, for it is an evil-smelling dirty town. But for the first time, I really felt I was in the East. Crowds of Arabs fill the streets, disgusting odors [sic] assail your nostrils, a silent string of camels stalk across the desert, minarets, and domes rise in clusters into the blue sky."[58]

Obviously, her vision of the orient was not associated with fairy-tales but was a combination of masses, bad smells, camels, and religious constructions all of which in her perception displayed backward and uncivilized places. On the one hand, she appreciated the geography and the rigor of the women, on the other hand, she depreciated the characteristics she regarded uncivilized in certain ways, revealing her orientalist mind as the travel proceeded.

54 Although Bedouins are notorious in certain travelogues, Bedouins were highly affected by the state leaders "the ethnic, social, cultural and ideological identity": R. Kark & S. J. Frantzman, "Empire, State and the Bedouin of the Middle East, Past and Present: A Comparative Study of Land and Settlement Policies", *Middle Eastern Studies*, V. 48, N. 4, p. 488.

55 DDSY2/4, June 27th, 1906, p. 2.

56 DDSY2/4, October 30th, 1906, p. 42.

57 Pamela Horn, *Life as a Victorian Lady*, Gloucestershire 2007, p. 16.

58 DDSY2/4, October 22nd, 1906, p. 38.

Impressions on *Harem*

Harem has been a concept subjected to many assumptions concerning the Ottoman Middle East. Basically, the word *harem* denotes a spatial division not restricted only by gender. The root of the word means sacred and forbidden; relatedly, it stands for space "*which general access is forbidden or controlled and in which the presence of certain individuals or certain modes of behaviour is forbidden*"[59]. Thus, it signifies a place where women freely acted and passed time without the intrusion of men.

The orientalist texts describe the *harem* as a place of pleasure, lust, and exoticism where men, belonging to the Eastern world, enjoyed women, their beauty, and services. Halil Halid, who was one of the intellectuals of the time, challenged this orientalist perception of the *harem*. He elucidated that this idea was wrong since any man who could manage to keep two wives in harmony could be considered as courageous although there was no law against polygamy, including, however, that this was not a frequent practice.[60] In the early 20th century, the meaning that combined with the Orientalist concept of the *harem* became much more challenging, however, the perception of harem was widely recognized and accepted as a place of pleasure.

For the western women travellers, *harem*, where women dwelled had different meanings.[61] It denoted a place where women had a separate but lively space of their dominance and freedom, though limited as compared to their men counterparts. One of the women travellers expressing striking impressions on *harem* was Annie Jane Harvey who wrote that "*the first visit to a harem is a very exhausting business, for everyone feels shy, and everyone is stupid, and the stupidity and shyness last many hours*."[62] While Miss Pardoe, an English traveller, gave acknowledgements of the baths and she defines their liveliness of the bath where women "*assemble to discuss every subject of interest and amusement, whether politics, scandal, or news (...) but, above all, to enjoy the noise, the hurry, and the excitement, which form so great a contrast to the calm and monotony of the harem*"[63]. Besides, Mary Hume-Griffth mentioned that there was a seldom "happy *harem*" and that *harem*s were not "*the abode of peace*" adding "*How can there be peace when the heart is full of jealousy and hatred?*"[64] One one occasion, Grace Ellison, an English journalist, asked Halide Edip, a novelist and advocate of women's rights, how the English women could help the Turkish women for their progress. Halide Edip replied "*Ask them, to delete forever the misunderstood word harem and talk to them in common Turkish homes. Ask them to try and dispel the nasty atmosphere which the wrong meaning of that word has cast over our lives. Tell them what our existence really is*."[65]

59 Leslie Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, Oxford 1993, p. 4-5.
60 Halil Halid, *The Diary of a Turk*, London 1903, p. 47-48.
61 Christoph Herzog, "The Urban Experience in Women's Memoirs: Mediha Kayra's World War I Notebook", *Women and the City, Women in the City: A Gendered Perspective on Ottoman Urban History*, (ed. Nazan Maksudyan), New York & Oxford 2014, p. 149-150.
62 Annie Jane Harvey, *Turkish Harems & Circassian Homes*, London 1871, p. 54.
63 Julia Pardoe, *The Beauties of the Bosphorus*, London 1838, p. 15.
64 Hume-Griffith, *Behind the Veil*, p. 228-229.
65 Grace Ellison, *An English Women in a Turkish Harem*, London 1915, p. 2.

Edith Sykes, in her travel notes, gave a wide place to the concept having been to the *harem*s of high-ranking people and tribe leaders but not to the Ottoman Imperial *Harem*. Her first visit to the *harem* in Anatolia was in Erzincan. It was the Marshall Zeki's *harem* which was within his house and was not a place full of the women but those of Marshall Zeki's immediate family. After alluding to the physical appearance and jewellery of Madame Zeki, Edith Sykes noted being served coffee, various syrups, and cigarettes. She also inferred that Madame Zeki had eight beautiful slave girls and though she could not bear a child to the Pasha, he refrained from having another wife. She described the lifestyle, of the couple she identified with European mentality as "*live together more after the manner of Europeans, eating together when they are alone*."[66] Although she did not express private comments related to the *harem* of other high-ranking officials, the *harem* she mentioned did not match the Orientalist *harem* narration. Then she visited the wife of *mutasarrıf*[67] and conveyed that there were several children of the *mutasarrıf* of whom the wife demonstrated as hers and his other wife's children. The important detail Sykes underlined was that the little girls were told to stand outside the door while their brothers sat in the room on cozy chairs. She persisted that girl sat beside her, on the sofa of honour. Her approach to the woman can be discerned through minor details keeping in mind that she goes through a period when women began to remove the boundaries of their domesticity.[68] Thus, she was attentive and susceptive to the conditions of women. In another narration pertaining to her visit to Erzincan, she was deplored to witness a man who was seventy years of age having four wives whose ages were twenty at most.[69]

Edith Sykes's travel notes demonstrated that she paid great attention to the attires of the women in the *harem.* In a place close to Bitlis, she paid a visit to their host's *harem*. In her notes, after giving a brief description of the *harem*, she stated that there were three ladies "*two of them being in the usual cotton dressing gowns, the third young and plump evidently a fresh addition to the harem, being dressed somewhat more picturesquely*."[70] She continued "*The chief wife was excessively untidy and uninteresting and completely mastered by her child a spoiled boy of two years old. All the servants were Armenians*."[71] She had visited the *harem* in the evening, had coffee, and talked with the couple of visitors who came to see "*the frank woman*."[72] This signifies that Eastern woman were also curious about Western women whose appearance, traditions, and life were all different.

The life in the shaykh's *harem* was a fruitful experience for Edith Sykes. She was a guest in the Kurdish Shaykh's *harem*, meeting the Khanum, (the lady of the house), "*a tall handsome if fierce-looking Kurdish woman of about 50*", who was "*dressed in a bright emerald green satin skirt, a blue velvet jacket with red plash cuffs and collar, on her head was a black handkerchief with a row of gold coins across her forehead*."[73] As a display

66 DDSY2/4, August 29th, 1906, p. 14.
67 The Administrator of the district in the Ottoman Empire.
68 Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, London 2009, p. 14.
69 DDSY2/4, August 29th, 1906, p. 14.
70 DDSY2/4, September 17th, 1906, p. 23.
71 DDSY2/4, September 18th, 1906, p. 23.
72 DDSY2/4, September 18th, 1906, p. 23.
73 DDSY2/4, October 9th, 1906, p. 26.

of respect for the guest, Edith Sykes was seated on a sofa while the Khanum sat on the floor. Sykes purported to be uncomfortable about this, as she "*begged her to sit beside*" [74] herself. She continued her portrayal of the women as:

"A good-looking girl who I think was the daughter of the Shaykh's other wife brought coffee and cigarettes; she was gracefully dressed in a loose green shirt**,** silk robe, round her waist a very handsome gold and silver belt, on her head a purple gauze handkerchief with gold coins on her forehead."[75]

Khanum of the *harem* stated that multiple wives "*the Shaykh has two wives, with us, there are two, three, or four, but with you, there is only one wife, that is much better*," inferring to difficulties of polygamy.[76]

Considering the narration of Edith Sykes, women in the Middle East did not regard polygamy as sympathetic. Her other visit to the *harem* takes place in Disa, close to Hakkari, where they stayed in the house of a *Bey*. The *harem*, as she stated, was conducted by Major Domo of the house. Sykes elucidated that there were two wives, one with several children, whereas the other had none. The other *harem* she visited belonged to Shaykh Sadık in Khatuna. She depicted the first scenery of *harem* as a "*gallery packed with a surging and busy crowd of women many of whom were carding wool, while huge bales of goods lay about in confused heaps, there must have been some 60 women and children, the clatter and bustle can scarcely be described*," adding the details of the beautiful dresses the women were wearing.[77] The second wife was from Beirut; "*a homely looking elderly English woman*" and she expressed she was "*the complete antithesis of the Buyuk Khanum*."[78] She mentioned that the young wife confessed that she missed her home. Edith Sykes was upset over the condition of the situation of the young bride when she enviously pointed to the Panama hat Sykes was wearing and told her that it reminded her of Beirut.[79]

The positions of women were harassing for Edith Sykes. She did not imply fascination related to the women's lives in the *harem*, expressing it as a place where women involuntarily rendered certain services to men**.** Even, at the beginning of the journey, she triflingly stated that the only peril for the journey would be closed town to a Pasha's *harem.*[80] All in all, the *harem* was a place of disturbance for Edith Sykes rather than a place of freedom and enjoyment. As different and more recognizable from the other English women travellers, she carried women's positions in a *harem* to a political level in her article in *The Times* titled as *Chaldean Relief* where she indites that "*a large number of women were retained in the Turkish and Kurdish harems; some of the women were sold and resold*."[81] She had the idea that the existence of women in *the harem* was a burden

74 DDSY2/4, October 9th, 1906, p. 26.
75 DDSY2/4, October 9th, 1906, p. 26-27.
76 DDSY2/4, October 9th, 1906, p. 27.
77 DDSY2/4, October 12th, 1906, p. 30.
78 DDSY2/4, October 12th, 1906, p. 31.
79 DDSY2/4, October 13th, 1906, p. 31.
80 Simon Sykes, *The Big House*, p. 154.
81 "Chaldean Relief", *The Times*, March 11th, 1919.

and they lacked freedom. Thus, she used her experiences for indicating the deploring condition of the minority women and evaluated it as an involuntary dwelling for women.

Impressions on Tribes

The journey enabled Edith Sykes to interact with the tribes with different ethnic groups which allowed her to discern differences among them, their conflict of interest, and their relationship with the government. For instance, she stated that in one of the uplands of Turcomans, some approached them for Mark Sykes to transmit their request to Sultan that they might not return to the upland as they had no place to go to there and they loathed living in the villages. She commented, "*The insane government wishes to turn these people off this fine grazing downland and convert it into miserable corn, for what crops could grow on those bleak uplands!*"[82] In a similar vein, she did not hide her denouncement for the fact that forests were all destroyed by villagers, and a peasant informed that the government encouraged the destruction as they could get tax out of the grown crops. She listened to another side of the story from the police officer who accompanied them from Tosya uttering the perspective of government officials who stated that the villagers paid high taxes during harvest, the forests were protected well, and people did not attempt to avoid their military service. He also mentioned the Hijaz railway construction, adding that "*The villagers will go and work on the Hijaz Railway for six months or a year but would not go there to colonize, they don't want to make money and grow rich*."[83] The officer's comments on the villagers' unwillingness to make money were the truth as the workers in the construction worked under severe conditions. The wage of workers in the railway construction was not paid in time or they were not paid at all.[84] Furthermore, they had to deal with hot weather conditions and bandit attacks which obstructed the pace of the construction.

Edith Sykes mentioned that the situation in and around Muş was equally troublesome for the Turkish villages and the Kurds were in destitute. She added she and her husband were robbed in an Armenian village for the first time. She stated further that the people's sufferings are diverse as "*they are robbed by the Zaptiehs*[85]*, by the Circassians, by the soldiers, and taxed heavily by the government,*" yet, she quoted from the Catholic Armenian bishop of Muş "*they cannot give to everybody*."[86] She gave acknowledgements on *Sason* Kurds stating they were "*much better off than the people in the Mush plain and its vicinity*", adding that they lived in a secluded way and suffered from tough road leading to their place, left unattended to protect them from "*the frequent visits of tax collectors and other marauders*."[87] She informed that All-Wise Abdul –implying the Abdülhamid II- convinced the Kurds to abandon nomadic life, settle in a home, and pay

82 DDSY2/4, July 24th, 1906, p. 7.
83 DDSY2/4, July 25th, 1906, pp. 7-8.
84 James Nicholson, "The Hejaz Railway", *Asian Affairs*, V. 37, N. 3, p. 322.
85 The officer who maintains the order and safety of the people in the village.
86 DDSY2/4, September 14th, 1906, p. 19.
87 DDSY2/4, September 15th, 1906, p. 21.

taxes.[88] The burden of taxation has been an issue for a long time as Garnett mentioned taxes, for the small farmers in Turkey, were "*perhaps the most highly taxed individual in the world*."[89] Thus, the taxation and related economic inadequacy of the people in the region was a long-standing problem for the Ottoman Empire.

Moving along the East, Edith Sykes noted the adventures they passed through during the events they witnessed between the rival tribes. Between Bitlis and Van where they camped one night, a *zaptieh*'s rifle was stolen under his head. When the robber was caught, he confessed that he belonged to a band and the members were thrown to prison. Edith Sykes continued by asserting that "*as they were Hamidieh they will doubtless go scot-free and the unfortunate zaptieh will be punished*."[90] "Hamidieh" here refers to the Hamidiye Regiments, which was a group of cavalrymen appointed by Abdülhamit II to provide central authority in Anatolia, create a new socio-political balance, benefit from the military power of the tribes, prevent Armenian activities in the region, integrate Kurds into Ottoman political and social organism, and empower the territorial defence against probable Russian attacks.[91] With this implication, she was also being critical of their privilege although they were a significant regiment of the government to provide stability in the region.

The journey included a visit to religious places such as the Armenian Monastery in Erzurum, and they paid a visit to the French Dominicans in Van. In Disa, where most of the villages were Christians, namely Nestorians, and Armenians, they were invited by the Chaldean Catholic priest and attended his Mass in Chaldean language. She reiterated that she had never seen "*a native church in more perfect order*."[92] She alluded to the reformation and the neatness of the Chaldean Church which was of importance for Edith Sykes for the leading role she later assumed for the support of Chaldeans in Mesopotamia who were asserted to have been exposed to the mistreatment of the Turkish government. Moreover, she was regarded as "the first heart to express all the charitable sympathy of the English for the Assyro-Chaldean nation."[93] These meetings and the observations of the people's suffering consequently provided a basis for her activities with the aim to relieve the minorities' position. In the extract to the editor of the *Times* by the Chaldean Relief Committee titled as *Chaldean Relief*, she mentioned the poor conditions of the Chaldeans in Upper Mesopotamia, stating this race was "*the victims of Turkish method of government as much as any other of the Christian races under Turkish rule*", and posited that "*the men were taken, their towns and villages massacred*."[94] It is significant to note that the issue of Assyrian Christians and Nestorians is connected with the missionary aims of imperial power and the indication of "*a by-product of growing Western dominance*," as

88 DDSY2/4, August 30th, 1906, p. 18.
89 Lucy M. J. Garnett, *Turkish Life in Town and Country*, New York & London 1904, p. 112.
90 DDSY2/4, September 23rd, 1906, p. 24.
91 Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone*, California 2011, p. 2; 34.
92 DDSY2/4, October 11th, 1906, p. 28.
93 Yacoub, *Year of the Sword***,** p. 92.
94 "Chaldean Relief," *The Times*, January 15th, 1920, p. 8.

the West dealt with these people for a long time.[95] Thus, she used the conditions of these people both as a propaganda element for the pernicious approach to them and as an observations added to the knowledge of the Middle East.

Edith Sykes extensively referred to the conflict among the tribes and the government's stance which incited and agonized the people. As verified in her notes, there was tension in the region resulting from clashing and conflicting interests among different tribes, power struggles, and relations with the government. One of the examples in her notes was a fight between Shaykh Sadık and Shaykh Berzan in 1906. As she learned from an Agha who was the enemy of Shaykh Mohammed Sadık, Shaykh Sadık's four hundred men assaulted his castle; however, they were suppressed. He added that "*Turkish Government requested him to guard the Urmia Road which runs down the valley between the mountains, and promised him a monthly payment for so doing, he left his village therefore and built the castle he now lives in ever looking the valley*,"[96] yet, the government paid him nothing. He complained that he did not have enough food to feed people when the winter came and sent people to other villages to borrow corn. Moreover, he said that his attempt to make peace with Shaykh Sadık remained in vain. He was invited to a celebration for their reconciliation; however, he was poisoned with a glass of tea. Edith Sykes did not comment on the veracity of the account of the Agha, however, when they visited Shaykh Sadık, she stated, "*it was not difficult to imagine him dropping poison into his enemy's tea*."[97] In fact, it took some time for them to see Shaykh for as they later learned, Shaykh Sadık was revealed to have 250,000 in gold in the room, he never left and that he acted to be ill when people come to see him. The information that Edith Sykes provided is worthy of attention as she personally observed what was happening in the Middle East lands particularly with the tribal resistance as she learned the binary condition of power struggles.

Edith Sykes was able to get in touch with conflicting sides and noticed how high the tension was according to the accounts she heard. During her visit with Mark Sykes to Ahmet Agha's castle, they learned that he went to join and support his friend Shaykh Berzan who had been fighting with Hasan Agha adding that three days before their arrival, Shaykh Berzan and Ahmet Agha killed four soldiers and got twenty-six rifles. Lady Sykes drew attention to the impacts of conflict after seeing that the wall of Ahmet Agha's castle was perforated with bullets while some of the houses were burnt. At that point of the journey, they had to send a man to inquire Shaykh Berzan for the safety of their route that laid between the hostile forces, namely, kaimakam of Accra and Shaykh Berzan. An Agha named Hassan, and some people living on the West side of the Zab river supplied the kaimakam £300 to help eliminate Shaykh Berzan who owned villages on the Westside. Initially, the kaimakam had attempted to suppress Shaykh Berzan by entrapping him. When this failed, Hasan Agha with the soldiers provided by the kaimakam burned and looted the five villages of the Shaykh Berzan. As a result, 1500 people were left e

95 Andrew Wilcox, *Orientalism and Imperialism: From Nineteenth-Century Missionary Imaginings to the Contemporary Middle East*, London 2018, p. 4-5.

96 DDSY2/4, October 11th, 1906, p. 28.

97 DDSY2/4, October 12th, 1906, p. 32.

homeless just when the winter was coming. When they set forth the other day, she was severely affected by spotting burnt villages and the conditions of people. She narrated the misery of two people who were looking for their belongings in the dilapidated place and the woman cursed the Turkish government."[98] Edith Sykes' reflections which were acquired from locals and the religious leaders mostly focused on the pressure and sufferings of the locals and she associated these with the government's "*misrule*."[99] Thus, her experience and assumptions generated her political argument concerning the conditions of the minorities under Ottoman rule. This is exclusively significant for Edith Sykes as she later turned her observations into political discourse.

Lady Sykes witnessed the struggles among the tribes and how their lives were manipulated by frequent challenges due to regional rivalries. Observing the conflict between the tribes, she concluded: "*It is very strange to be staying with the enemy of the man you are going to visit the next day and for the time being to be arming yourself against possible attack from your future host*."[100] On the other hand, the region appeared to have developed an immunity to rivalry and tension as Lady Stanhope narrated in her memoir "*poisoning is often in the thoughts of Eastern chieftains, no doubt; for they cannot but be an object of jealousy to their rivals, who are scarcely their superiors in power and influence*."[101] Mary Eliza Rogers, writer and traveller, included the tension between the different factions.[102] When analysed through the narrations written at different times, they imply a power struggle and conflict of interest among diverse factions which were extended over a while and the local people were highly suffering from it. Undoubtedly, she traced a brilliant summary of the Middle East during the time span she wrote about.

Conclusion

The travel notes of Edith Sykes present a remarkable projection, encompassing details from the lives of the Middle Eastern people to *harem*; from tribal dispute to the critic of government which blended with an orientalist perspective. It is observed in her articles in *The Times* after the journey that the vision she acquired and the information

98 DDSY2/4, October 19th, 1906, p. 37.

99 The detailed discussions related to political arguments are beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the context of the Anglo-Ottoman policy always requires consideration. The end of the 19th century witnessed the marks of the breakdown in Anglo-Ottoman relations where the traditional policy of protecting Ottoman territorial integrity was laid aside by England as to her economic interest such as the railway construction and England's colonies in the Middle East which steered policy of England to be more attentive. Furthermore, the position of the minorities caught in the middle between the international competitions and power struggles in the Middle Eastern lands. That might be the reason why Edith Sykes was persistent to divert readers' attention on their sufferings in the mentality of the period's political atmosphere, accusing of Ottoman government. In a different example, George Hepworth charged England's protection of Armenian as a "sham and shame," mentioning the oppression against the Armenian but they were doing nothing; George H. Hepworth, *Through Armenia on Horseback*, London 1898, p. 156-157.

100 DDSY2/4, October 11th, 1906, p. 29.

101 *Travels of Lady Hester Stanhope; Forming the Completion of Her Memoirs narrated by her Physician*, V. I, London 1846, p. 343-344.

102 Mary Eliza Rogers, *Domestic Life in Palestine*, Cincinnati 1865, p. 261.

she gathered turned into a political discourse in which she underlined the claimed misrule of the Ottoman government. Relatedly, she called Britain to take action. Thus, she stands as a British woman who contributes to the knowledge gathering in parallel with Britain's imperialistic gains.

Her observations particularly related to *harem*, minorities in the Ottoman Middle East, conflicts among tribes, and the government not only confirmed her place as a British woman who served to the interest of her country but also made her place in the travel literature in the Middle Eastern lands. Her narration served as a base for her political argument related to the Middle East both as a bearer of British political mentality and the orientalist perception in which the East is perceived as uncivilized. In the ongoing women travel literature, she both finds her place in as figure who plays part in the production of imperial knowledge and having the traces of the mentality of Victorian born and raised women as she investigates the women's relations with their child and how women were treated by men. Although she can be regarded as subaltern by male-oriented discourse of travelling, she speaks of a woman as a part of British dominance.

Indeed, she stands as a recently discovered, yet a valuable traveller whose travel notes include substantial observations related to the Middle East as a British woman who belonged to the Western world, her home:

"I quite agree with Lady Anne Blunt that the semi civilization of the Beyrout Hotel gives one a decided shock after coming from the desert. What does this noise and clatter mean? This beating of knives and forks on the plates, are these manners better than those of the quiet Anatolian peasant? Of the Kurdish Agha with his shy hospitality? Or of the graceful Bedouin? Truth compels one to answer "No!" But still, it all reminds one of home, and so is welcome."[103]

103 DDSY2/4, November 29th, 1906, p. 48.

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