

A NEAR EASTERN IDYLL IN A NEW ENGLAND VILLAGE.

by

Eveline Scott.

I had a letter from a friend in America the other day and this is what it said: "You will be very much distressed to hear that Mercy Lane is dead. Sprightly, vigorous, caustic, kind hearted Mercy Lane! She died in February in her seventy-eighth year. She had been ailing long, you know, but could not bear to leave the Red House in the Vermont hills, for a trip to Boston. At last Grace persuaded her to brave the winter snow and they went down together to their old missionary doctor, whom they had known in Turkey and he did what he could for the invalid. She went to a hospital, never realizing that her active life was coming to a close, and there she died. She grew a little delirious towards the end, Grace says, and asked her sister to pull her bed near the window so that she could see if the Bosphorus were blue or gray that morning; and once she told her nurse to keep quite still, for she was sure she heard the muezzin, calling from the village mosque. Turkey, you see, and the old life were with her to the last.....".

The letter and its message called up a hundred memories. I cannot remember a time when the name of Mercy Lane was not a byword in our family. Stories of her energy, her caustic remarks, her managing ways, her sprightly manners, were the joy of my childhood. And then did I not have that most poignant memory of all, my visit to the Red House in Vermont itself? And so the pictures came tumbling over each other in my mind and it seemed so strange that the last story of Mercy Lane had been told and that I could never see her small sparkling eyes again nor hear her voice raised in heated argument.

The first part of the history of Mercy Lane, I must patch together from the stories that my mother told me in America when I was a little girl.



On rainy Sunday afternoons, my mother would let an interested little girl curl up on the big sofa, and put on her knee an inlaid box, made of sandal wood, with a lovely, musty smell. And inside there were all kinds and sizes of photographs. Mother would explain nearly every time, because the little girl like to hear it many times repeated, that she and Mother and Father had not lived in America always, but only for a few years. Although they were American, they did not find that America felt like home, because you see, they had been born in a far off place, away over on the other side of the world, where there was beautiful blue, blue water called the Bosphorus. The name of the place was very long, but quite easy to pronounce---Constantinople. In this place there were cousins and aunts and uncles and heaps and heaps of friends. Then the photographs would be taken out one by one. There was the picture of grandpapa taken in a fez, just for fun; another one of Uncle John wearing his best suit, a silk hat and a bushy brown beard. There was a delightful picture of Polyxenie, the little girl's Greek nurse, who took care of her till she was three years old, but who had to be left behind when Mother and Father came on the long journey to America. She was dressed in a funny baggy, black dress, and sat very stiffly in a chair, staring in front of her, while her two big hands were folded on her voluminous white apron. On her head was a white kerchief, leaving only a fringe of brown curls to encircle her matronly face. At the bottom of the pile would come pictures of Mercy Lane. The little girl didn't altogether like Mercy Lane, but she was exciting and she had, oh rebellious thought, even scolded Mother long ago. All the pictures of her were different. There was one of her, quite young, with pretty brown hair falling down her back, which set off her sharp, intelligent face with its irregular features and turned-up nose. There was another of <sup>her</sup> Mercy Lane in the costume of a Turkish lady, sitting on a cushion on the floor, with a tambourine in her hands. You could not mistake that turned up nose, even though the rest of the figure was pure Orient. Still another showed Mercy Lane, now a thin, tall lady standing with a



group of funny, swarthy men, all wearing fezes, one or two with wide red girdles round their waists, and Mother explained that these were some of the poor people in Constantinople that Dr. Lane had cured and whom Mercy had helped and nursed.

It seemed that Mercy had been a very dear friend of grandmama's. She lived in an adjoining village on the Bosphorus and came down to see Grandmama and all the children very often. The children didn't like her at all, Mother said. As soon as she came, she scattered them. "What now,--worrying your Mother again", she would say, "out into the garden you go every one of you. Fresh air! Fresh air! Nothing like fresh air for growing young bodies!" Once rid of the children, she would sit with grandmama in the drawing room and they would talk of all manner of interesting things, for one could often hear their laughter <sup>from</sup> the garden, and they would drink tea and eat cakes and grandmama would be lost to her children for a very long time.

## 2.

Mercy and Grace Lane were the daughters of old Dr. Lane, with the long patriarchal beard, who, for years and years, had been a missionary in Constantinople. The Lanes lived in Hissar, a village on the Bosphorus noted for its gardens and ruined towers and sloping hills. Their house was a great rambling red affair set in the loveliest old Turkish garden you would imagine. The garden was full of every kind of flower. Tall trees lined the winding path to the door. An arbor of wisteria stood at the back of the house, and behind that, up a few steps, was an old-fashioned well, whose buckets were worked up and down on a huge Turkish wheel. The Lanes had lived here as long as anyone could remember. Mrs. Lane, spare, and quiet, carrying with her for forty years, her New England cut of countenance and her Puritan conscience, made a quaint figure, in her oriental garden or talking Anglo-Saxon Turkish to her little Armenian cook. Her two daughters, while they had no definite "careers" as spinsters are wont to have nowadays, filled their days with a hundred deeds of kindness. Whenever there was a sick person in the village



Mrs. Lane would say : "Now Murrey (she always slurred her rs), get the big basket hanging on the kitchen doorknob and take down this jelly and the chicken broth I made yesterday, to Mrs. Jim. I hear she's quite poorly. And Murrey--- stay right with her if she needs you. I won't expect you back."

Mercy would put on a rakish and old-fashioned hat (her clothes were always a scream) follow her mother's directions and bring health and cheerfulness in her train, as she entered the house of a sick friend. With much bustling and many exclamations, she would set the house in order and as likely as not announce that she had come to stay a week.

Grace was never able to participate in the errands of kindness for she had a weak back and after a little gardening, she would sit in her chaise longue and knit interminable warm garments for Armenian orphans and destitute Turkish refugees.

Mother and daughters adored the easy-going, generous doctor, whose strange calling in life had brought them to this queer corner of the earth, when they rightly belonged to New England. It was before the days of medical missionaries. Dr. Lane had primarily come to Turkey to cure sick souls, but as he had taken two years of the medical course, as a young man, he knew something of common ailments. His long experience had taught him a great deal and in consequence he had become a clever physician and the natives had the profoundest faith in his ability. He moved among them like a slow and benevolent god and his medicines were much more keenly appreciated than his Biblical teaching. But he never forgot the calling which was real to him and always he wrapped his pill around with a text.

In the glow of his genial temperament, the three women lived. In the Turkish village, with only a handful of colleagues near by, they seemed exceedingly American, but to anyone from America they appeared oriental and cosmopolitan and essentially "different". They loved the people of the land and could talk to them all in their own languages. They could cook "pilaf and dolmas" more easily than baked beans and brown bread, and they all loved with



an extravagant devotion their quaint garden, the old Red House and the country in which they had always lived. They knew all the ins and outs of the lives of the people around them. Mercy was continually scolding her Armenian protégés for being timid and one often saw her taking the village "hanoums" to task because they persisted in being hopelessly thriftless. She scolded and petted in turn, but notwithstanding her sharp tongue, it became a tradition, if any one were sick or in trouble, to send for Mercy Lane and she always came to minister and assist.

And so the years went by and everyone talked of Mercy Lane and her eccentricities. Most people were afraid of her, many criticised her but no one could stand up against her.

## 3.

This was the Lane tradition, so to speak, before I had any personal experiences of them or their home. Their name became very familiar but a kind of Fate kept them a myth for me, many years longer, for I did not see them when at last we all returned to our adopted land of Turkey. That was when I was fifteen. I can remember arriving at the busy port of Constantinople, full of romantic anticipations. I was about to see those strange places and quaint people which my mother had told me of, during my childhood in America. My bedtime stories were to materialize in flesh and blood and of course one of the first persons I thought of seeing was Mercy Lane, ~~the inimitable Mercy Lane~~.

But this was where the Fates were prepared to cheat me. When I got to Hissar the Lanes had gone. Completely gone. Gone for good. It seemed too incredible and I remember I shared the blank astonishment of my mother, when we realized that we had just missed them. Old Dr. Lane was failing and the missionaries advised that he go home to America there to end his days. I wonder when people in such positions will realize that America is no longer "home", after a residence of fifty years in the East. The Lanes, only dimly



feeling, as yet, that they were leaving their real life behind them, broke up the home in the old Red House and bade farewell to literally scores of friends, of every nation under heaven, who wished them Godspeed in a dozen languages. And when we arrived we found the Red House empty and the garden folorn and desolate in the melancholy autumn air. My mother took me over the house. It echoed with voices for her; and even I, in spite of my usual youthful indifference to reminiscence, listened with eager attention to all her memories. This was where Mrs. Lane used to sit in her armchair in the sunshine; here was Grace's corner and there through the low window you could see the arbor covered with wisteria in the spring, where tea was served every afternoon. As we left, old Haiganoush, the Lane's Armenian cook, met us at the gate, and said, had we had a letter from the Lanes and how were there and she would like to send her love.

Yes, there were letters, but they told sad news. Old Dr. and Mrs. Lane did not survive one New England winter. They had all returned to Lensfield in Vermont, to their only relative, a decrepit sister of Dr. Lane's, who had almost forgotten their existence. The tired old man died a week after they landed in America and the two sisters had just bought land with a barn upon it and were ready to sink all their small savings into turning it into a house, when Mrs. Lane left them too. And so here they were, cut off from all that had been familiar to them for half a century, tied to land in Vermont, with their hearts in Turkey and winter coming on.

I don't know where they got the courage, but they rebuilt their barn the following spring, and tried to make the best of things. Mercy wrote amusing letters full of anecdotes, sprinkled with Turkish words, which she always used in conversation. They both wrote of their difficulties, told of getting their only water from a frozen pump in the garden, of how the villagers looked upon them as foreign interlopers, and of how they had planted their first seeds in a garden which they were determined to have around their new house. Grace learned to cook and Mercy searched out and found the village



poor and began ministering to them vigorously, scolding and petting them in turn as she had her Armenians and Turks in Hissar. The sisters wrote scores of letters. The answers, bearing the familiar foreign stamps, were their meat and drink and kept them alive during those first hard winters.

We, in Turkey, talked about them constantly. Friends of Mercy's read and re-read her letters, until they knew, I am sure, every lane and path in Lensfield and all the vagaries of the inhabitants. They were enormously missed and Constantinople society never seemed quite the same without Mercy's scathing comments on the weaknesses and eccentricities of its members.

As I grew up the story of the Lane sisters in Lensfield grew dim and few echoes of their strange existence reached me. I spent my time in growing up and in my adopted country and a very engrossing process it was. The sunshine of the East and the blueness of the Bosphorus entered my soul in some strange way, and I developed a love for the East that was almost physical in its intensity.

## 4.

1914 was the year I was to enter college and I set out with a stout heart for adventure in the New World. It was a wrench, leaving the Bosphorus and four years away from it seemed very long. How much longer they were to seem when the war cut us off from all news and made us doubt the certainty of ever returning. I always think it was the war that was finally responsible for my seeing the Lanes at last. I had been prepared for homesickness but for nothing like the acute longing I experienced. Was it just ordinary nostalgia or did the horrors of the war add to my bitter feeling of exile? Not only had I missed my family, but absence from the familiar cobbled roads, the great towers, the swift running water of my native village on the Bosphorus, became daily more painful. The tall boxes of New York that passed for habitations filled me with disdain. I wanted low, unpainted, wooden houses with wisteria flung across them. Instead of the rattle of the subway and elevated, I longed for the sound of swishing cars in the water, for the shrill whistle of Bos-



phorus ferry boats, for the mournful tap-tap of the night watchman, pounding on the cobble stones. Never was true American less in sympathy with her own country.

It was in June 1917, while I was in one of my blackest moments of homesickness, that a letter came to me one morning in a quaint, thin, old-fashioned hand, bearing the postmark of Lensfield, Vermont. It was from Grace Lane. She had heard of my being in America this long while, and for months she had wanted to ask me to come and see them at the "barn" but she had hesitated, seeing how far would be my journey, and how simple their hospitality. Could I come and spend a week in July? They had known my mother well, while she was still a child---dear little Dorothy Sinclair-- and they would love to welcome a child of hers.

And that is how I came upon my Near Eastern idyll in a New England village. I arrived at the miniature station one warm day in July, just at noon I remember, and stepped off on to a platform where only five or six people had congregated. It took no effort at all to pick out the two sisters. There they were in their quaint, home-made missionary clothes, looking so prim and old and infinitely genteel. I ran up to them and they recognised me at once. "There she is!" cried Grace, in a flutter and holding me at arm's length, "her eyes are Dorothy's but she has her grandmother's coloring."

Such a welcome as I had! In a few minutes I found myself walking between them to their house. It was only a step, over the railway bridge, through an orchard and up a hill overlooking the lake. We all talked together as if we had known each other always. How was my journey, and was I tired, and when did I last hear from my mother and were all the friends in Turkey well and had I heard that the Mission school was fuller than ever, notwithstanding the war? And so on and so on. I was bewildered and breathless. So much alive my two hostesses were, so keen-witted in their antique costumes and their home-made hats trimmed with Turkish embroidery. We were all as excited as children and it was because, while our feet were walking across the New England



grass, the feet of our spittits were stepping on uneven Turkish roads and the sweet Oriental sunshine was blinding us with its brilliance.

Shall I ever forget my first glimpse of the "barn"? We came upon it quite suddenly after passing by several dignified white and yellow New England village houses, scattered in irregular rows. It loomed up behind a thin screen of trees, and I caught my breath in a gasp of recognition. It was the old Red House in Hissar! These sentimental sisters had rebuilt their barn in the most extraordinary way to resemble the house they had loved on the Bosphorus. It was painted red, the same dull red that blended so well with the careless vines and trees that clustered around it. The garden positively had the same overgrown look of its Turkish forerunner and there was even a little arbor to remind them of the lovely wisteria covered one across the sea. They watched my face and knew that I had recognised what they had done, but we could not speak of it.

If the exterior of the house had seemed familiar, what shall I say of the interior? It was all Turkish. Over the entrance hung a verse in Arabic, "Welcome, O Stranger!" and in each room we went through, every object spoke of home. ~~There were~~ Persian prints upon the walls, and inlaid tables and brass candlesticks and old fashioned rugs. And pictures, pictures, pictures! Pictures of mosques and Hissar Towers and caiques and minarets and stone pines and judas trees---all the dear familiar things that my eyes had longed to see.

When we sat down to lunch I had an opportunity of studying my hostesses. I could have recognised Mercy anywhere, her sharp upturned nose, her small sprightly eyes, and her severe caste of countenance. She wore an old white blouse and skirt with a formidable belt of brown silk, held together by a very masculine clasp of oxidized silver. Grace was less conspicuous in a black merino dress, cut in many gores, with a high neck and long sleeves - her collar ornamented by a cascade of old lace pinned with a large and ugly cameo brooch. Our meal even, had a taste of home. These old maids were far too poor to afford the luxury of a cook (how they must have sighed for the easy,



going Haiganoush) and so Grace turned out her Turkish dishes at will, "dolmas, and "pilaf" and that nice rich soup flavored with egg and lemon.

We talked, how we talked, of Turkey. It seems, as I look back upon that strange and magical week that it was made up largely of talk. Mercy lived up to her reputation and on my third morning announced: "You're late this morning. Breakfast's at eight sharp," and I felt properly crushed.

We led an isolated life. These ladies had only a very few friends. The ordinary prosperous New England farm folk had no use for them. "Them lone girls," they said, "is stuck up--that's what they are. Always talkin' about their travellins and findin' nothing good enough for them in God's own country." So they made their lives out of letters and old friends who visited them occasionally and out of endless reminiscences of the happy days in the East. I would catch them looking at me strangely and wistfully. "That was your Mother's laugh," said Mercy suddenly one day. "You are not really like her. She was much better looking. But there are moments when you make me see her clearly."

They brought out albums of red and green plush, full to bursting with old photographs of friends <sup>and</sup> relations of theirs, and some of mine. How we laughed at the old fashioned clothes and stiff poses.

"That's Mrs. Milbank," said Mercy, pointing to a severe looking female in a tight bodice, "the third Mrs. Milbank. You'll not remember her--No-- she was long before your day. Of all the determined spinsters! She caught the Rev. Ephriam Milbank--yes she did-- scarcely a year after his second wife died. Quite shameless, my dear, and she a missionary. And she never had any looks to speak of, and was thirty seven, every bit of it, on her wedding day. They lived--you know the house--in that tumbled down place near the old Mission Chapel. The Rev. Ephriam was never the same man after his third marriage."

I loved her reminiscences and egged her on as much as I dared. "That, my dar, is Miss Bailey, Clarissa Bailey. She was the first American lady teacher in the school for Armenian orphans. Isn't she pretty? And you



see that Mecca stone brooch she is wearing? It was given her when she and I were bridesmaids at her sister's wedding. You've heard of her sister haven't you? Mrs. Dr. Silas Smith, the young American who was such a friend of your grandmother's in Bebek. I always thought her son would marry your mother, my dear, but he didn't, though he wanted to, I know. He went to Persia and died there of typhus and your Mother surprised everybody by choosing George Sinclair and a very fine young man he was, too. There was a lot of talk about it at the time."

How strange it was to hear one's mother and father spoken of like that, as though they had ever been just two ordinary young people, setting all the tongues wagging when they became engaged. It was like walking straight into the pages of a story book, but a story book with a difference, for the allusions and the characters were all dimly familiar and you knew the end before you knew the beginning.

On Sunday morning after church Grace took me to the cemetery on the hillside above the wooden church and we put flowers on the graves of Dr. and Mrs. Lane. She gave me a glimpse of her bitterness at leaving her home in Turkey, as we walked along the elm bordered road. "Is it not strange," she said, "that my father and mother should be buried in this unfamiliar place? I feel as if cypresses should be near by and the blue water." Then after a pause, "You know, coming to America was like the beginning of Death for us. Our bodies are here but our hearts...." She broke off, her lips trembling. I had never known homesickness like this. My own, so soon to be satisfied by a happy return, was a mere nothing beside it.

Even in a week I was able to envisage the lonely, quiet, monotonous life these two women led. Work filled most of their waking hours, quite ordinary, uninteresting housework. The arrival of the trains, bringing mail, was the one excitement of the day. All this, in summer. But when winter set in their life must have been that of two hermits. They told me how they battened down their floors, closed up all but three rooms, in their big house, and were



snowed up to the window sills till April. Why had they ever left Turkey? Why had they ever come to such a bleak spot as Lensfield? Why was there no other means of living open to them? I puzzled over these questions but they remained unanswered.

On my last morning I looked out of my window at the lovely rolling green country that spread itself out so beautifully on all sides of the Red House. And I saw the Boston train winding its way around the last curve, till it disappeared in the distance. It was the only reminder of the world outside Lensfield. I was soon to take that train back again into the world. But my two old maids must stay on, with their dreams and their memories till their last Journey was made. A sense of injustice and pity welled up in me. Perhaps I betrayed my commiseration too plainly, for as I left Mary said in her bright, hard way:

"Tell your mother we're very happy here, and life is full of good things. We don't want to go back to Turkey --now. I have an idea that anyway after the war it will be quite changed and I'll wager you yourself will be homesick for America."

But Grace gave me a last kiss and said: "It's been like a breath of Hissar to see you, my dear child, and we will always remember your visit."

Mrs. Harold L. Scott,  
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Turkey.

(about 4,000 words)



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