

REMINISCENCES

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In 1908, one early summer morning, (July 24, to be exact), I woke up with a great commotion from down-stairs. I got up at once and ran down. My mother, who did not get excited easily, was solemnly reading a declaration from the morning paper aloud, to the gathered house-hold. My elder sister, who was always emotional, was weeping tears of joy, some of the servants keeping her company. On asking the reason for these unusual proceedings, I was told that the Constitution had been declared! I must admit that at the age of 12, my ideas about different forms of government were rather hazy, as that subject was strictly taboo anyway, during the reign of Sultan Hamid. But during the following days, through the hilarious jubilation of the press, the street-corner orators, the excited neighbors and friends who kept running in and out of the house, it was made clear even to me that we had been living in a most oppressive regime, under the most villanous of Sultans who had been defeated at last, and a glorious victory won by the nation. This news fell into our midst with the explosion of a bomb-shell, because almost nobody had heard about the revolt of the armies in Salonika, then a province of the Ottoman Empire. Abdulhamid II had been frightened and given back the Constitution which he had abolished 32 years previously, at his accession to the throne.

Now, why a change in the form of the government should make so much difference in the life of a child? That was soon to be seen. Even the man I was going to marry had been decided that very July morning! (Such is kismet!)

A year previously, I had finished the primary school - a mosque-school - where turbaned hojas taught us reading, writing, a little arithmetic, and also how to pray, what verses from the Koran to learn by heart -- all in Arabic, of course -- and all the formulas and precepts of our religion. When I had finished that school, I was given a choice by my father between piano and painting lessons at home. As I hated the piano, I chose painting which I did really like. For a whole year an elderly Armenian gentleman came once a week for my instruction in that art, and make me an accomplished young lady. Foreign schools were forbidden to muslim girls. The very few who sneaked in and out of the College back-gate were the daughters of influential fathers. Now, why wasn't I sent to a secondary Turkish school for girls - of which there were plenty - I don't know. We never questioned Father's reasons. So, what was left to me at the age of eleven was to copy postal cards on canvas, to do some needle work when I felt inclined, and then to read and read whatever came my way. In that I was lucky: my father had a very good library to which we all had access. As we never dreamt of buying books or magazines from outside, what I could read was highly classical and strictly censored. This helped me immensely in my future studies.

Then suddenly, one day in September of the same year, my father told my mother that I was to go to the American College for Girls in Scutary. That too came as a bomb-shell, but of a different kind. I was stupefied with happiness!

Now, you may wonder, why so much about the past history? If I can make the back-ground of my generation clearer, you may understand better what the College did and meant in our lives.

It was symbolic that we should go to the College in horse-drawn dilapidated carriages, through the poorest section of poor Scutary, climbing dusty roads, by lonely cemeteries. After this

journey when you came to the gate in the high, secluding walls and entered the lovely grounds, it was like walking into the Secret Garden of the story book. To me it was a wonderland of strange people: foreign teachers, all of them perfect ladies, no doubt on that point, and a multitude of happy, lively, strange girls of every nationality: Armenians, Bulgarians, Greeks, even some Russians, and Europeans. We, the Turkish girls, were received with special kindness, consideration, and some curiosity. At this point I must make something clear: in A.C.G. from the beginning to the end there was no difference ever made on account of our nationality or religion, no question of quotas were ever made. If anything, we were spoiled. That was Dr. Patrick's ruling spirit: she was interested in individuals, not groups. She had come to awaken the womanhood of the Orient.

At the beginning we were just a handful - seven or eight - some of them even younger than myself. There were no preparatory classes; we started with John's first reader: "I see the bird, I can see the bird." Maybe what some of your mothers started with in America. Our arithmetic and geography was taken care of by Miss Nellie Summers-tall and pretty - also a little awesome to us! She knew perfect Turkish, having been born in Istanbul, the daughter of Captain Summers who had charge of the life-saving stations on the Black Sea. To her both the College and the parents of many generations of girls owe an endless debt of gratitude for her impartial discipline during her long years of service in the Preparatory Department.

Before starting on my teachers I must say a few words about the general atmosphere of the College in those days. It was different, because people were different half a century ago! Please don't think that I am criticizing the new generation - which has been done even on the tablets of ancient Babylon! But it is a fact that there was an air of dedication, a more apparent spirit of service for the others. We were surrounded by high walls - in fact and in spirit. We had very little contact with the outside world -- both the student body and the teachers. Maybe because the city and the life in it were more alien to them, than they are now. We, boarders, left the College only once a month, when we had a holiday of three days. Nobody ever thought of protesting, neither our parents, nor ourselves. We were at school, therefore, supposed to be studying day and night. There were no movies, no parties (outside), as to boy friends-- that was something unheard of.

Into this world of seclusion and femininity some men came once a week - like visitations from another world. Those were our language teachers from over Robert College! There was Mr. Michailides, the Greek teacher, tall and handsome, who had already married the daughter of Prof. Eliou - a graduate. Mr. Barsamyan, the Armenian teacher, with a barbish and long, poet-like hair of fin-de-siècle appearance - who finally married our sweet, gentle Miss Panosian. There was Mr. Voykof, the Bulgarian teacher, a sworn widower. For him I have a special place in my heart. In my senior year he became the carrier-pigeon of a sudden correspondence that started between two Colleges. And last of all, I must mention our very dear Turkish teacher - Tefvik Fikret. Among all the blessings that I have received from the College the wonderful opportunity of having that great man as my teacher for four years--I consider the greatest. He was not only a great poet, but a great moralist, and a great leader of young minds. He came only once a week - taught us three periods in succession - and after taking a brief recess for tea - we ran back to our class room for another solid hour. Such was our love for him! I used to keep note of his every word. In one of my note books there is this sentence: a person must be faultless! (Insan kusursuz olmalı!) He believed in it, lived by it, and expected us to do the same. You should see his corrections of our compositions:

not only grammar, syntax, vocabulary and thought-context-- he corrected even our calligraphy. It is one of the most cherished facts of my life that he knew our engagement in 1915 just before his death, and was happy as a child about it.

Teachers were not all that came over the Bosphorus, fiancés and suitors crossed over like Leanders crossing the Dardanelles to meet their Heros. First of all I remember Mr. Larson with his huge red moustache to pay his call to Miss Rowell. Now and then he gave us song recitals in German. I am afraid our delight in those recitals were not purely musical. Later on, when our preparatory had been moved to Arnavutköy -- into the Missuris Palace, at the foot of the hill -- we used to see young Prof. Scott, coming to have tea with our charming Eveline Thomson -- who was so popular with her students. Our red-cheeked Bulgarian teacher, Zarafinka Kirova also was receiving visits from Prof. Black. And many others as the years went by, and the relation between the two Colleges grew closer.

Our life in Scutary had been rather shabby compared with the palacial accommodations of our new building. To be able to take a bath on any day, at any hour, was a luxury undreamt of. But in those old grounds too we had the compensation of our lovely trees and shrubs, and the endless walks and talks with friends under their shade. Among all those different nationalities only our Armenian friends and a few of the Greeks could speak Turkish. With the Bulgarians, who were almost the majority, we had to speak English-- which had been a great blessing in our acquiring the language. I remember those Bulgarian girls with affection -- among whom I had very dear friends. They were exuberant by nature, sincere and usually demonstrative in their relations. They were big and well-built girls with especially lovely complexions. The other day, when an American gentleman was telling us about his recent trip to Bulgaria, he especially mentioned his impression of the Bulgarian women, going to work in the early hours with heavy countenances and sallow cheeks. The sad picture almost broke my heart. I wondered where my friends were, Tzwetana, Mara, Flora, who must have become old women by now like myself, and those unhappy girls may be their daughters.

As a whole, our life was not dull at all. Compared with our lives at home, it was full of excitement and action: concerts, plays by different groups, lectures by distinguished personalities passing through Istanbul -- we never lacked visitors from every part of the world: tourists, trustees, friends of the faculty made an instructive procession over our speakers' platform.

We also had two rival literary societies, with secret mottoes and very secret ceremonial initiations: P.B.T.U. and Theta-Alpha. At the beginning of each school year, when the new students came, there was a terrific scramble on both sides to get desirable recruits.

Sundays were very special days. We dressed with all the fuss due to a big occasion. In the morning there were Bible classes in the pre-1922 days. Then came a service in the chapel. We always had very good sermons by distinguished outsiders. Then came a sumptuous lunch, when some of us could sit with the preacher at the President's table. After lunch we had a quiet hour, when we were supposed to write letters home. The evening also was lively with singing of hymns--some of them still awaken nostalgic echoes--as things done with friends usually do. We never missed an opportunity for any kind of celebration: Christmas had its tree and choral singing. There were even passion plays some times. There was the first of May with its may-pole and dancing in the garden. There was the St. Vallentine's day, with its anonymous, silly messages which went as far as the Hissar Castles sometimes.

I think we were especially lucky in our teachers. Almost every one of them sincerely dedicated to her work, the very fact of her taking such a long journey to an unknown and in those days much suspected land, would prove it.

I would love to mention them all one by one had time permitted.

Dr. Ellis and Dr. Miller were our history teachers. Dr. Miller got so interested in Turkish history that she planned to write a book about the women of the Palace, who had been influential in the affairs of the State. Even after my graduation I worked with her translating passages from Turkish historians. She accumulated a stupendous amount of material. Meanwhile she wrote a very interesting history of the Palace School. But unfortunately she never accomplished what she had started and died some years ago. I saw them both in 1950. Dr. Ellis still her busy, energetic self.

Miss Perkins and Miss Conner (who became Mrs. Williams and was married in the Marble Hall, on the same day as myself), were our English teachers, both alas, are gone. They were the ones who inspired and urged us to do our best in a language so different from our own; they were the ones who lit the flame in our hearts for the beauty that is English literature.

Who can deny what ever enthusiastic, ever vivacious Miss Dodd has done for the College? An archaeologue, and an art lover, she is the one who started the College museum, and the art library. Who can forget the photograph-covered wall of the corridor in Barton Hall, which were our first introduction to the master-pieces of the world as we walked arm in arm, up and down, waiting for the bell to ring.

Miss Burns and I started College together. She as a teacher, I as a student. It seems she was only 25 when she came, but we never thought of her as a young woman. She was the one who always took responsibilities beyond her age. She was the one, during the terrible days of the Balkan war, with a school-full of unhappy girls whose fathers and brothers were killing each other at the fronts, who soothed us, loving and sympathizing with each of us. She was interested in us individually, in everything we did. One day, at her table I mentioned that I had taken "The Picture of Dorian Gray" from the library. At once she cried: "Mihri, please take that book back and promise me never, never to read it!" I was surprised but obeyed her and took the book back. But unfortunately, many years later I broke the spirit of my promise and went to see the movie. When I saw what a horrid thing it was, I understood the reason for her anxiety. She wanted to protect and shield us from everything she considered ugly.

Dr. Wallace was the one during the last and the worst year of the World War I, in Dr. Patrick's absence, who kept the school going, despite the American Ambassador's repeated orders to close.

In 1914, when the whole College moved at last into the new buildings, we had great celebrations. Who can forget the joy and excitement of those days? It was after the spring vacation, Dr. Patrick had wanted the seniors to enjoy at least their two last months in the new surroundings. Everything was in bloom - and the Plateau spread a different view of the Bosphorus at our feet. We celebrated the event with a wonderful pageant in front of Barton Hall: each group in their national costumes. And of course, there were speeches and speeches in the Auditorium. Of all these things said, I remember a sentence by Halide Hanım, the first Turkish graduate. She said: "These buildings look familiar to us, like a dream come true." And that great dreamer was Dr. Patrick. In the

words of Miss Jenkins: "Mary Mills Patrick has been the College, and the College is the manifestation of the vision and thought of Mary Mills Patrick."

In 1871, at the age of twentyone, she was sent by the American Mission Board to Erzurum, a town in an Eastern province of Turkey, to teach in an Armenian girls' school, where she had to learn Armenian. After four years, she was transferred to Istanbul, to teach in the American High School, which had been started by the contributions of a group of idealistic American women. The temporary building was at Gedik Paşa, until 1876. The first principal of the school was a Mrs. Williams who considered her business to "teach Bible, and how to live by it." All the teaching was done in Armenian the boarding students numbering 18 Armenian girls. But Mrs. Williams knew that the original conception of the founders was that it should be for all the girls of the Near East. Therefore, she changed the language to English. All this time Dr. Patrick was busy teaching ancient Armenian Grammar, Algebra, Geometry, and Physics.

Now try to realize, from those humble beginnings how the birth and growth of the present College was consummated. Until her retirement in 1924, Dr. Patrick was the driving faith and spirit behind that phenomenal achievement. The story of the College illustrates her courage, her unselfish devotion, her power to convince others to invest in a faraway land, her absolute refusal to lose hope no matter how cloudy the sky. She was the one who had sublime confidence in women's power to think and to achieve. Her ambition for her work knew no bounds. She always believed the best of every one - including her faculty and her students. Her faith in womanhood had no bounds, in a cool unemotional quietness of the spirit. Her dynamism, all that strength that was the source of her success was never on the surface. I remember her always very calm, and somehow aloof. And when you think of her religion, at the beginning of her career, starting as a young missionary coming into a heathen land, you will realize what a long road she had travelled. She had not only broadened and widened, but had gone up, into the pure realms of the spirit. In her own words, religion to her was the love of seeking after the truth, the love of service to others.

When considered all in all, she was one of the lucky mortals to whom a worthy ideal is given in early life, for which she works day and night all through that life, and finally given the greater luck of seeing that ideal realized.

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