

A.C.G. Assembly Talk

by Mrs. Charles S. MacNeal

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*Mrs. MacNeal on
about her school
Misuris Palace
in Yale
1914-15
Mrs. MacNeal*

The various Alumnae who from time to time look out from this platform across your hundreds of faces are filled with emotions varying as they wish they were once more sitting down there with you, or are glad they are not. But even those of us who would not change places with you must, I think, feel a measure of envy. Our world outside is so frightening, - and you look so safe!

When I think of my own days at the American College for Girls - just forty years ago - it is this atmosphere of security, contrasted with the insecurity of life outside, that envelopes my memories. But I wish I could give you a picture of those items, to show you that your sisters of all the years have had fun like yours and the same absorption in the life here.

When I say "here", I do not mean up on this hilltop; for the College in 1914 - 15 had moved only part of itself (from Üsküdar) into these new buildings. The Preparatory School (where I spent what was then called the Sub-Freshman year) was in the old Misuris Palace at the bottom of the hill. I have always been glad that I had the privileges of that romantic place.

Where now stands the Turkish Primary School, beside the College gate, there rose a huge old building, with a gate of its own, on the quay, a fore-court with a garden, and high above the street, on a level with the second floor, a pebbled terrace where we played at recess. The palace itself, - rather gaunt and unadorned outside - was imposing within, and full of interesting features.

On the top floor was the apartment of Dr. and Mrs. Murray, our Principal and his wife, - and also the school dining room, so that we went, surprisingly enough, upstairs to our meals.

The ground floor had its special uses, which I shall mention in a moment. And the middle floor was mainly occupied by a vast Study Hall, in what had been the grand Sofa or main living room of the palace. Long windows on the Bosphorus side, opening on the terrace, were edged with colored glass; there were candeliers with dangling prisms which sometimes cast rainbows across our desks; and the ceiling, as in all fine old Turkish houses, was an intricacy of painted carving. We sat at double desks, with narrow aisles between the pairs; - very convenient for the passing of notes, I am sorry to say, but a discomfortable arrangement if you had a desk-mate you didn't like, who borrowed your best pencils and chewed them.

We had Assembly in the Study Hall, the first period every morning, with Dr. Murray on the platform at the reading-desk, the other teachers in a row behind him, and Miss Taylor, the music teacher, at the piano to lead our opening and closing song. Once

or twice a year, in that Hall also, there was a piano recital by a group of trampling music-students. At least, I was always so much a trembling one, that it seemed to me the rest must fear as much as I did this ordeal. My friend, Ulviye Bedi (now Bayan Isvan, mother of two Robert College graduates, and Mother-in-law if I am not mistaken, of two Girls College ones) was my admiration and despair; for she played beautifully, and with apparent ease and pleasure, even in front of the whole school.

Which brings me to the uses of the Misuris Palace ground-floor. Under the Study Hall was a room of similar size, called, as the one here in Gould is called too - the Marble Hall. It had been the entrance-hall of the Palace, paved in marble, dim with purple light from stained-glass windows, and terminating in a broad, divided flight of slippery marble stairs which led up to the main floor above. This quite splendid apartment was used for receptions and parties; but to me it was only a sort of glorified corridor to the three small rooms which opened from it on the side toward the College road. There were the practice rooms for music students; and they were called respectively, Piano Two, Piano Three, and Piano Four. (Piano One was upstairs.) Each was a bare little room, with matting on the floor, a battered music stand in the corner, a piano and two chairs. In winter, warmed by the sun only, as I recall, they were very cold places to practice in! One had to stop periodically and rub one's hands. But I spent many happy hours there. Piano Three was the best. All of us who had practice hours tried to get Piano Three! I even remember a sad occasion when I lowered my behaviour marks because of Piano Three. The girl whose piano it was, didn't want to practice that period; so she came to the door of the Study Hall where I sat, and (unseen by the teacher on the platform) made known to me, through the sign-language in which all school-girls are proficient, that Piano Three was free. Of course I had no permission to practice during that study-hour; but how could I resist such an opportunity? My desk was on the aisle leading to the door; and I tried the mad expedient of slipping down from my seat to crawl on hands and knees out of the room. I think I might have made it if the girls in the adjoining aisle-seats hadn't become convulsed with laughter at my procedure - thus attracting the attention of the Study Hall teacher. Alas! Instead of Piano Three, I got a "Report" as it was called.

Our classrooms were not in the Palace, but in the wooden Yali on the other side of the road - the house in which the gateman now has his office. From the terrace of the Palace, a wooden corridor or covered bridge went across over what is now the gateway, to a door cut into the wall of the Yali's second floor. Our classrooms were small - extra-crowded because of the stove in each one, for we had no central heat; and I am sure that rickety old building was a headache to the administration. In fact, one alarming day it caught fire! We were having Assembly, when one of the teachers came hastily in, mounted the platform, and whispered something to Dr. Murray. I still remember how her hand shook as she held it to her face. Dr. Murray left the room at once; and a moment later we saw him pass the door going toward the Yali, in his hand a fire-extinguisher. At this, one girl screamed; - and I think we might have broken up in a panic, if it had not

been for the level-headedness of Miss Taylor. We had been standing singing, as she played, and as our voices quailed, she whirled around on the piano-stool and faced us.

"Sing!" she cried. "Stay in your places, and sing!"

She kept us singing till Dr. Murray himself came back - fortunately in a very short time. The fire had been put out immediately.

We had a great affection for that old Yali; and we worked hard in those uncomfortable classrooms - with the same heartaches over 5 1/2's and 6's and 9's that you have today.

One of my teachers there was someone still very close to the College in heart, someone whom most of you know - Miss Summers. She was a young woman then, our teacher of science. She was severe, and we were a little afraid of her classes; but she had a clear, sure way of explaining; and her praise and rare smile really meant a reward. As a girl, she had grown up as some of you know, at Şile, on the Black Sea, where her father, Captain Summers, directed the Life-Saving Station. She described to us vividly the Şile Rocks of black basalt, which stood so firm against the pounding of thunderous Black Sea storms.

Our English teacher, Miss Anderson, a delightful person, with a great sense of humor, could be nearly as strict as Miss Summers. One day, when no one in our class gave her the proper definition of a myth, she required every girl to look it up and write it out twenty times. Believe it or not, though I have forgotten many worthier matters in these forty years, I can still repeat that definition:-

"A myth is a story, the origin of which is forgotten, that ostensibly relates historical events, which are usually of such character as to serve to explain some practice, belief, institution, or natural phenomenon."

-But Miss Anderson was one of the best English teachers I ever had, here or in America. It was she who opened my eyes to the fact that stories didn't just flow from the tip of an author's pen. A tale like The Great Stone Face or Rip Van Winkle became doubly interesting when she pointed out that it had a pattern and a plan. And it was Miss Anderson who introduced me to Charles Dickens. We read Pickwick Papers that year; and Sam Weller was the first character in a book who made me laugh till I cried. We Sub-Freshmen specially loved Miss Anderson because she helped us to write a Class Song, and to publish a monthly magazine called, grandly, The Morning Star.

Such good times we had! - especially in the Spring, when we could skip rope on the terrace at recess, and when the hill, up which we used to stroll during the noon hour, was foaming-over with plum blossoms and wistaria and horse-chestnut. We stuck flowers over our ears, wandered arm-in-arm, and sang a song we had learned in Singing Class, which began:

"The sun is bright, the air is clear,
The darting swallows soar and sing,"

which seemed exactly to express our inarticulate joy. Miss Taylor's singing class was called by the old-fashioned name of "Vocal Music"; and it occupied, as you see, a large place in our interests. Like the Preparatory School this year, we even gave an operetta. It was nothing like such a classic as The Mikado, and I am sure not nearly so well done; but we were tremendously involved and excited. It was Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs; and we gave it in the month of May, out-doors, on the level place between the road and the path, at the bottom of the hill, under the great plane trees.

Sometimes we went up to the College for a play or a concert in this, then very new, auditorium; - or over to Robert College for Founders Day or Field Day. The two colleges were entirely separate then, with different presidents; - so an expedition to that little-known territory was even more of an adventure, perhaps, than it is to you who go more often.

I was myself a day-student, who lived at Rumeli Hisar. The tram-line had just been completed (of course no one had yet dreamed of such a thing as a taxi), - and we used to think it great fun to ride in the women's compartment at the front of the tram. A curtain divided the Haremlik from the rest of the vehicle; and behind this we could giggle and cut-up to our heart's content. This was in the old days, you see, when Turkish girls were secluded and still wore veils. A Turkish friend of mine from Bebek, named Selma, sometimes walked to school with me, wearing of course, her black satin çarşaf and veil. She could put back the veil, if there was nobody coming toward us along the quay; but when a man appeared - even an old fisherman, and even at a distance - Selma would say, "Now I must shut my face" - and pull down her pretty black gauze. To tell the truth, I rather wished I too could wear this fascinating accessory.

Selma and I often went to school on foot from Bebek; - in fact I would walk all the way from the top of the Robert College hill to the bottom of this one. It was exhilarating to face a cold South Wind and the waves dashing their spray over Arnavutköy Point.

But there were other things, not happy ones, which loomed behind our College days. The First World War was in progress then; and while we schoolgirls did not think too seriously about it, perhaps, in the midst of our Algebra and French Composition, our games and private jokes - we were aware of that heavy black cloud; We saw long lines of soldiers on horseback riding past the College gate; cannot were towed up the Bosphorus on pontoons; and sometimes we heard the beat of a drum in the village streets where men were being recruited. This was very frightening.

But do you know, young though we were, I think we had a feeling that the College was in some way a place that wars could not reach; a fortress against all that fear and abnormality. It kept us warm and safe, while the world outside was cold and dangerous.

You too have this feeling. It comes partly from your very absorption in the daily life here; in your friends, your parties and plays, and also in the classroom world, your teachers and your books. You are working deeper and deeper into the life of the mind and spirit, creating your own personalities - growing up; - and the outside world is for the present less interesting to you than the College. The frightening things that you must face later, touch you only lightly here - - only the echoes of the drum.

Why do the Seniors cry, at the end of the year? Because, they know that no matter how many troubles they have had in College, and no matter how many joys they will have outside, here in a special way, they have been safe. They have wakened every morning to a familiar routine; work that is suitable and beneficent for them, play that is fun, teachers to help them, friends to share every experience, sheltered sleep at night. The Seniors cry because after June everything is going to be different: what work to do will then be a problem; friends and fun they must find for themselves; - even food and shelter will suddenly no longer be automatic.

When you pass out of these protecting gates; the drums beat very loud.

Be glad you do not have, like my Selma, to "shut your faxes." Your world is, on the whole, less frightening than hers.

But Selma and I, as well as you College women of forty years later, carry something which keeps us - or should keep us - from too much fear. I cannot tell you exactly how it happens; but if we have taken what the security of the College offers us, if we have been absorbed in the good activities for which afterwards there will be no opportunity - we will have forged a kind of armor, that can withstand the fiery darts against which less fortunate women have no protection. This armor is an inner one, not dependent upon what you work at, where you live, or how much money you have. It is the courage which is one mark of an educated woman. And in the sense in which I am speaking, this sort of protection is not acquired by your own virtues; it is given to you, free; you have only to take it. It may be forged out of seemingly unimportant events: - something which has happened to you perhaps this very morning; I know my armor, such as it is, has in it the laughter of Sam Weller, the indomitability of the basalt rocks at Sile and the resourcefulness of a young music teacher who could control a hundred frightened girls. Or it may be made out of great things like the philosophy of Plato, or the music of Bach. Whatever it is, you have it to protect you, and an uneducated woman has it not.

Forge that armor well! Our College is giving you the substances to make it of.

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