

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

Constantinople

by Alphonso Taft

Passing through the archipelago of islands, some of which are very famous, we arrived off the coast of old Troy sailing through between that coast and the island of Tenedos, whereof the God Apollo was the Lord and where the Greeks concealed themselves and their fleet while the wooden horse carried Ulysses and his comrades into Troy. The range of mountains to which Mt. Ida belonged as well before us with no such doubt hanging over its identity as hangs over the exact location of the city of Troy itself. But the narrow region in which the city flourishes cannot be questioned. The plain looks inviting and it was undoubtedly densely populated with a brave and warlike nation. It was in Asia, over against Greece and may well have in a fabulous age, been the seat of interminable wars and romantic bravery, and furnished ample fields for the imaginations of the great poet whose stories in the hands of modern antiquaries have become history. This country however is but sparsely settled. It is difficult to account for the fact that this old, if not the oldest country in the world, should have so few people at the present day. Whither have they gone? This remark applies to Turkey in Europe as well as to Turkey in Asia. Once, in conversation with the Turkish ambassador at Vienna, I said, by way of complement that while almost every other nation of Europe was represented among the emigrants to the United States, there were none from the Sultan's dominions and I concluded that they must be so well satisfied with their own country that they did not choose to go abroad. He replied that that was not the reason; but that the Turkish Empire was so thinly peopled that they could neither be spared, nor had they any excuse for seeking lands elsewhere. But where are the descendents of the countless myriads who once were at home in these vast regions?

Sailing up the Trojan coast, we reached the entrance to the Dardanelles; and there past the mouth of the far-famed Scamander. – It was a mighty river in the imagination of Homer, but to the eye of the traveler is little more than the equally-famous rivers supposed to flow down on either side of Athens into the Aegean Sea. The whole coast however with the river and the mountains are from an historical point of view interesting, and the scene itself is picturesque. Proceeding up the Dardanelles, and into the sea of Marmara, we arrived in sight of the rising sun and of the minarets of Constantinople, at the same moment; and nothing in the way of scenery could be more inspiring and delightful. The heavens were bright and clear, and although we had left the heights of Mt. Ida behind, still looking to the south we had in view the far higher Olympian chain of Asia Minor covered with eternal snow as we approached the Bosphorus with Asia on our right and Stamboul with its golden towers and lofty domes on the left. The ship entered the Bosphorus and advanced to the north of the Golden Horn and there it anchored; not at any landing but in deep water where it awaited the approach of a variety of boats to take

off its passengers. The panorama was unrivaled. Old Stamboul on the side of the still more ancient city of Byzantium with its lofty structures on the long ridge upon which the city was built including the grand old church of St. Sophia now a splendid mosque and the Seraglio on the point of the ridge all in full view. The Golden Horn and the two cities of Para and Galatea on the north side of the Horn and on the west side of the Bosphorus, and on the Eastern or Asiatic shore the city of Scutari which has a high and commanding site and the most picturesque hills on either side of the sparkling Bosphorus as you look toward the North the banks and hills variegated with palaces and beautiful gardens as far as the eye could reach. No pilot was needed to find the channel. The water was deep everywhere. Here we were in the heart of the ancient world where was the grandest seat of Roman power. Is it possible to conceive a point on the earth better adapted to be the capital of the world. The world has long felt that Constantine made a mistake if he did not even commit an act of sacrilege when he abandoned Rome the conqueror of the world and the mother of nations full of the arts and memories of Roman glory to transplant the seat of his vast empire to the banks of the Bosphorus. I once shared that sentiment. But when now we look upon the splendor of the site he selected, and compare it with the inland and cramped position of Rome, we realize that there is no ground to the complaint of Constantine. He at that time had command of all the powers of the earth and with the facilities then existing there was no other place to compare with Constantinople for an emporium or a capital. New York, which is its great rival as a site for a commercial center had not then been discovered. London even had not yet excited the attention of the great world; and the wonder is that this splendid seat of power and commerce should in the hands of the Turks remain stationary or retrograde, while London and Paris with such inferior natural advantages should leave far behind the capital of the ancient world. The Turks in the course of time gained military power enough to conquer the Romans and take their capital and to hold it. But there their power ended. In the works of civilization they were powerless; and never added anything to the grandeur or wealth of Constantinople. Civilization and improvement were driven away from the great Roman capital, and sought their home in London and Paris.

But the Turks have not destroyed all the mementos of Roman power which they found in that great city in 1402 when they overpowered the degenerated Romans and took possession. The Roman walls still stand, monuments of Roman enterprise in her better days; that stupendous wall running across from the sea of Marmara to the on the West line of the city a distance of about six miles with the deep fosse is 75 feet in height. The fosse is 25 feet deep 40 feet in width. The bottom is cultivated in the way of gardening. The wall enclosed Constantinople on the West at the time the Turk took possession; and it is observable that there has been no extension of the city in that direction. The ground outside the wall is a pasture without buildings or improvements of any kind; while as you pass through Stamboul from East to West there are to be observed considerable tracts of ground which have been laid bare by destructive fires and these bare spots have been in many instances left unimproved and vacant.

Constantinople from without is wonderfully picturesque and beautiful. But when the traveler enters the city itself, he finds the streets in the worst condition, and the dwellings plain and wretched. The houses are mostly of wood, and are unsightly. The mosques and public buildings are imposing, but the private houses are mean and perishable. Many of

the important streets are not graded so as to be fit for driving. I had a draft on the Ottoman Bank which is one of the most prominent banks in the city, and undoubtedly sound and strong; and yet the building was unapproachable by any kind of a carriage. One might climb up the street on horseback; but the most natural way to reach it was on foot. This was in Para. But the streets of Stamboul are no better.

One of the remnants of Roman civilization is the church of St. Sophia now ornamented with four tall minarets which have been erected to make it a mosque. Still, the evidences in the building of its Christian origin are abundant. Though not quite so vast as St. Peter's at Rome, it is an immense structure. The interior is opened in one enormous space rising 200 feet to the great dome where are four colossal cherubs in mosaic which the Turk, in order to obliterate their Christian origin covered with paint. Time, however, has worn off the paint. There is also the name "Jesus" in one of the lofty galleries which was also covered with paint; but has been revealed by time. To enter this holy place it is necessary to take off one's shoes, and wear the slippers which are furnished. In the body of the house, which is carpeted there are theological students studying the Koran. They are committing it to memory like children. As the faithful enter the great church, they prostrate themselves upon the floor and kiss it. But I found none so pious as to refuse money. Indeed, this famous old church is used for profit; and the arrangements are all made with a view to get as much money as possible. By an outside ascent of about 75 feet in perpendicular height, you come to an immense gallery for the women. There are in different parts of the buildings monumental inscriptions perpetrating sundry cruel executions on account of religious differences in faith.

The power of Constantine who erected this famous church is indicated in many ways. Much of the ornamentation was taken from Pagan temples. Constantine had embraced the Christian faith, and he had sovereign power over the civilized and Pagan worlds. He did not hesitate to take from the Pagan temples the finest columns of marble, and various precious stones; so that there are not less than 104 columns of various colored stones which form a prominent feature of the church. No man can afford to visit Constantinople without spending at least half a day in this noble church. It is well worth the trouble.

I do not wish to give all the points which are worth a visit to that city. But the old race course of the Romans can not be omitted. This is now a dirty looking common. But the race-courses were elliptical in form, and ran around a central oblong space which was occupied some times with monumental structures. In this case there still remains an Egyptian Obelisk, the tripod taken from the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, and a tower of stone something more than a hundred feet in height. The obelisk is perfect and beautiful, covered with hieroglyphics. The tripod is bronze consisting of three bronze serpents winding spirally round each other, forming a column 30 or 40 feet in height. The three heads at the top of the column are so bent as to form a tripod on which the prophet could sit or could place a seat and deliver oracles. And these hollow serpents would also conduct sound from the bottom to the top. From it could proceed the most impressive oracular sounds. This is perhaps the oldest instance of so large a work of bronze, being much older than Roman civilization. Constantine did not hesitate to take this oracular column from its Pagan worshipers, and plant [it] in the center of his Circus Maximus. The heads have now been cut off, and are kept as curiosities in different places. At the

other end of this central part of the course is an old tower of stone, venerable and respectable as the work of the Romans. The earth has risen by the dust of so many days probably about 15 feet around the foot of each of these columns. But cribs have been made and kept around so that it is not difficult to see their full height, and even the inscriptions upon their bases can in most instances be read. The great obelisk from Egypt has on its base an inscription in Greek purporting to address the reader, and to say that several emperors had attempted to raise it in vain; but that it suffered itself to be erected by Theodorus the Great. The Roman ruins of Constantinople have their inscriptions in Greek which tests the Western travelers somewhat more severely than the inscriptions in Rome. The public buildings are generally for the accommodation of the Executive, the Sultan. As there is no legislature in Turkey, there is no occasion for Halls of Legislation. But there is not wanting a variety of beautiful palaces for the Sultan and his household and the heads of his departments. The intrigues of the Turkish Court are famous; but across the nation I have always understood to be a most prominent characteristic especially when any money is to be paid or expended or any obligation is to be performed. That so noble a city and country should be so kept back from advancing in accordance with the progress of the ages is a deplorable fact and no complementary ingenuity in defense of the Sultan and his government can excuse it. What shall be done with the Turk is a troublesome problem of the present day and one which would not be difficult to solve but for the further fact that the European powers cannot agree who shall have this great capital. The position of the Turkish government is most humiliating. Founded on brute force in its origin, but wholly unable to maintain its power by its own strength, and entirely dependent upon others. Behind all nations in progress, it is suffered to exist in Europe as a nuisance by the contending and jealous powers of the rest of Europe for mere political reasons. I can have very little patience with those who spend their breath in an attempt to exalt Turkish Despotism. Despotism at least is founded on ignorance and superstition; and it deserves no encouragement or support from any member of any civilized community of the present age. What will be the result of the collision of the European powers on the Eastern question is not yet possible to foresee with any certainty or satisfaction. If Russia was not almost as bad a despotism as Turkey, one might desire to have Russia have the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles and the crescent city which she so intensely seeks. Austria would be a more enlightened government than could be expected from Russia, and would offer less danger from imprinting despotism on all of Western Europe. If Greece had firmness and constancy enough to form part of a great Republic, or a great and enlightened monarchy, it might solve the question.

But this is a problem for which we republicans are in no wise responsible. We are only interested in the consequences as affecting the welfare of the human race. As the Bosphorus connects two seas, and as doubt has been expressed which way the water in the whole runs, it being said to have undercurrents running in a different way from the upper currents, one might expect to find a canal-like channel not particularly interesting. But the fact is quite different. The water is lively and sparkling, and the currents are rapid though the channel is very deep. The banks are delightful, adorned with houses among trees and verdure. The hills on both sides are wonderfully picturesque, and contribute to the wealth of scenery on the Bosphorus from Marmara to the Black Sea.

Constantinople is a municipal corporation extending from sea to sea, and includes the

whole Bosphorus and both sides of it. It is most remarkable that so little has been done to improve the ways of transit in all that region. The steep hills, or bluffs, are still climbed by donkeys on paths which are not practicable for any kind of vehicle. The more usual way of ascending these bluffs is on foot. The bluffs are numerous inhabited by people who get up and down the precipitous hill-sides as best they can by their own muscles to and from the Bosphorus where they step on board a steamer or take a caique and go to such point as they desire. The caique is an institution of Constantinople and the Bosphorus which is worthy of special notice. It is a long, sharp, light boat propelled by two oars in most cases operated by one man and capable of carrying at most two passengers, provided they sit very still and balance well for a small mistake in that regard will upset the concern, and pitch the occupants into the deep. But they run quite fast, probably six miles an hour down stream. They are not all so small. Some are large enough to carry four passengers, and some larger. The Sultan's caique was large enough to carry fifteen or perhaps twenty persons and ten or more rowers. It moved through the water rapidly. That is the approved way to visit the palaces and other objects of public interest on the Bosphorus. There are many palaces, and they are used for different purposes. Generally they are for the use of the Sultan. But there is a large and beautiful palace on the West shore not far from the Horn where reside the numerous widows of the dead Sultans. These ladies are candidates for marriage with noblemen of the Empire, and the government gives a generous endowment when they marry. This the government can well afford to do, as marriage takes them off the hands of the reigning Sultan. I did not see the sultan, but was invited to visit the Yildick Kiosk in which he mainly resides, and saw his son, a boy of 13 years, and the son of the former Sultan Assize of about the same age and their tutor who has their education in charge. We had their escort in viewing the grounds and gardens and stables of the Yildik Palace, dined with the boys, and had the privilege of asking them many questions which we should not have dared to ask the Sultan himself. They were bright boys and answered intelligently on a great variety of subjects in the French language which was given in English by the dragoman who is an attaché of the embassy provided by our government. Gen. Wallace said that he had seen one horse in the Sultan's stable which he should very much like to have. The son answered "You can have anything you ask." The general had intended to embarrass the young fellow by hinting at a present. The boys said they had been allowed to leave their school in order to accompany us as the Sultan was ill. They said they were required to master four languages besides their own; viz., French, German, Arabic, and I think Spanish. English was not one of them. The tutor informed us that the Sultan was taking a course of education for the boys quite different from what had been the custom of the sultans in the past. He said the object now was to give them a good literary education and scientific also. He further said that these boys were good scholars and of good behavior. They were certainly very civil to us. It was interesting to see and mark these young man who would be candidates for the highest position in the Empire; and yet no one could say whether they would be suffered to live to assert their rights to which by inheritance they would be entitled. The throne in that empire does not as in other monarchies descend directly to the son of the Sultan, but goes first to a brother. When Assiz was slain the throne did not go to his son but to his brother; and when that brother was said to be incapable, and was imprisoned in the palace, the throne went to the present sultan who was his brother and who says he is ready to give up the throne to him as soon as he shall

be pronounced sane and capable.

The politeness of the Turk is unsurpassed: that is, of the educated Turk. We found this to be true of all we met. They are exceedingly easy and polite in the society of ladies, though they do not introduce their own wives to strangers. We found they were exceedingly sociable and quite intelligent. Whether these men of the higher ranks are as superstitious as the mass of people, I have not had opportunity to ascertain. But the evidence of the most submissive superstition of the masses are unmistakable; and that is the secret of the Sultan's power over them. The women all wear veils which though thin are sufficient to cover their faces effectually from the sight of men. This custom is to strangers very striking and awkward. It seems to be according to the requirements of the Koran and the religious sense of the country and is not confined to the Turks. The ladies who are able dress with great richness. In that respect they are not unlike other ladies. The government insists upon strict compliance with the law, and the Koran in the matter of veiling. On one occasion not very long since, the Sultan after some great defeat gave it out that the reason why the Turkish arms which were formerly so triumphant had now been unsuccessful was that the people have failed to observe the sacred rites and duties of their holy religion; and the most prominent instance of this failure he said was that the ladies had ceased to wear veils of their former thickness and thus attempted to evade their religious duty. The result was that as usual in many other cases the ladies bore the blame when the men failed in their purposes.

One thing may safely be said of the government of Turkey; and that is that whether sincere in its professed belief of the Koran and the religious rites and ceremonies of its faith or not, it is strict in its enforcement of them among the people. To a stranger is obvious that that is the most reliable agency in securing obedience to a personal despotism such as exists in Turkey. The strictness in religious matters does not appear in the intercourse of officials and court favorites with strangers. While in the city we met the Secretary of Foreign Affairs and also a former Grand Vizier in a social way. We called on the Secretary of State and he promptly returned the call and conversed freely on a great variety of subjects for a long time, several hours at least. It was at the house of a professor of Robert College with whom we were stopping; and during the forenoon that college was the subject of our discourse and his remarks upon the institution were very appreciative, he declaring that he should be glad to have his own son have the benefit of its instruction. It was pleasant to see the peculiar grace with which he accepted a cup of tea, which is the customary entertainment offered to visitors who make or return a call. There was no pomp, but peculiar ease and grace as he rose from his chair to receive the precious beverage and the quiet way in which he again subsided onto his seat. I called with my friend the Professor also upon the ex-Grand-Vizier who resided in Rumeli Hyssar where the Robert College is located. We found him conversing with friends. He invited us very politely to seats, while he seated himself on a divan which was like a bed placed on a floor in the corner of the room. He seated himself in the corner, taking an easy position, and said in English to my friend who was a neighbor and well acquainted with him "Now Mr. Taft shall speak to me in English which I understand perfectly but can not speak so well, and I will answer in French which you understand perfectly." He was evidently at leisure, and he seemed to be prepared for a long conversation. He had not long been out of office, and the cares of state were no longer weighing on him. He

was curious to learn about our country, and was free to communicate information concerning his own country. He spoke of several interesting cities of the Empire which he hoped I should find time to visit. He seemed to prefer that I should visit the Asiatic cities which he thought would be more interesting to an American. The interview was highly entertaining and instructive. He was a man of great cheerfulness and vivacity and so at that season of the year (it was in May, and he was at his summer residence) he was living simply and in a house that was plain and cheaply furnished. He was evidently accustomed to live luxuriously and his manners were such as would become a gentleman of fashion, although there was nothing in them forbidding or assuming. We visited the city of Scutare on the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus which, as seen from the harbor or from any point on the western side of the Bosphorus has a picturesque and beautiful appearance; but as in Stamboul, one sees the illusion as soon as he enters the city itself. The houses are of wood and unsightly, and the streets are dirty and very uninviting. We saw there a vast cemetery in which the bodies are planted like a cornfield; and the monuments are uniform and monotonous. The contrast between that and the English Cemetery fronting on the Sea of Marmara is very striking. The occasion for the English grant for a cemetery on that sacred soil was the Crimean war. It would have been ungracious in the Sultan not to allow the English who were shedding their blood in the interest of Turkey a place to bury their dead. A beautiful place it is. If any one who hears me ever contemplates visiting the capital of the Muslim empire, I will take the liberty of recommending to him and excursion to the English Cemetery as one not to be omitted.

Friday is the Muslim Sabbath. On this day the Turkish ladies of high degree as well as many of less note are accustomed to go weekly in caiques up the Golden Horn a distance of some six or seven miles to near the head of the deep water to what is known as the "Sweet Waters of Europe." This ceremony is very interesting to strangers principally as it furnishes a charming opportunity to see the Turkish ladies all in their best costumes and observing the modes of their amusements and their worship at the same time. At the same time, however, the visitor sees a most interesting view of the city and the city wall, and the country outside the walls. There is a place on the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus visited and known as the "Sweet Waters of Asia" which may be as interesting; but we did not find time to take the trip, which, I think, is somewhat longer.

The superstition of the Turks is indicated in many ways. The Dervishes are an institution peculiar to them. There are the whirling dervishes, the howling dervishes. We saw the whirling dervishes who have their place of worship in Stamboul. The whole performance consists in whirling. In this they are very dexterous. They whirl rapidly and for a long time I think as long as it is possible for the human had to endure such rotary motion. They are grave and reverent and evidently regard this whirling motion as an act of worship. Across the Bosphorus in Scutari is the place of worship of the howling dervishes. It is said to be striking though signifying nothing but ignorance and superstition of the grossest kind.

Robert College is a regular institution of learning of a high order, where are taught all the branches which are taught in our best colleges. The students are generally from the Turkish Empire or the region of the Bosphorus or the Danube. Many have been educated from Bulgaria; and it is very probable that there has been planted among the young men

of Bulgaria the seeds of a liberal government. Many of the men who have taken a prominent part in the recent movements of their country against the domination of that country are young men who had been well educated in this Robert College. The institution was founded some years ago and has been sustained by the funds given by Mr. Robert. It is a most agreeable circumstance to meet in the city where there is so little heard of the English language a college in which all the pupils speak English, and pursue the studies we are accustomed to find in our own higher institutions of learning. It was a unique idea that Mr. Roberts should give his money for that purpose, and most people supposed it would be a failure. The result has been a great success. I think it has proved superior to the ordinary missionary establishments. It has not however hindered the missionary enterprises in that country, but rather facilitated them. There is now established, probably as a consequence of the success of Robert College, a Ladies Seminary on the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus, situated on the higher grounds of Scutari. We visited the institution and found every evidence of success and prosperity. The edifices are commodious, the professors are learned and earnest in their work, and well patronized. It has been supposed and I presume not without reason that the Turkish government has been jealous of these institutions as foreign to the ends of Muslim policy, and as endangering the influence of the Muslim faith. I was glad therefore to hear the Secretary of Foreign Affairs say in the interview to which I have just referred that he esteemed Robert College so highly, that he should be very glad to have his own son educated there, leaving it however to be inferred that there were political or religious considerations which deprived him of the privileges. The expression was friendly, and so far as he, a high official was concerned warmly appreciative of the work going on there and indicated that he in no manner shared the supposed jealousy of that institution. I think that while this Robert College is not very well understood in this country, any intelligent American who shall visit the institution and look into its methods and its results will come away deeply impressed with its usefulness. It is a delightful oasis in that educational desert. It is not too much to hope that in the course of time it will plant in the minds of so many of the young men of that region so much culture and so much intelligence in matters of government that despotism itself will be made to trouble and finally yield to better governments in that beautiful part of the world.

The Institution is fortunate in having a corps of professors of great learning and great ability; and the whole spirit of the college is wholesome and elevating.

The heights on the Bosphorus furnish delightful summer residences for the diplomats of the different nations represented in Constantinople. The breezes and the temperatures of that region are beautiful. The latitude of that city is about the same as that of New York, and is healthy and pleasantly temperate. The English government has two fine palaces in Constantinople, one in Stamboul and one on the Bosphorus some 12 miles above the Golden Horn. The other great powers have homes in Constantinople. It is regarded as a most important point diplomatically however dark and unpromising its political destiny may be. I had never met in any city before such a confusion of peoples and languages and costumes as we found in the Turkish capital. The jargon and the varied-colored costumes were indescribable. The costumes are picturesque and I think them not inconvenient except perhaps the veils of the women which would seem to be anything but convenient. I thought however that the women were more adroit than I supposed possible in

overcoming that inconvenience. As I took my seat in the street railroad car I observed that it was divided into two parts, – one intended for the ladies and the other for the gentlemen; and these two parts were separated by a curtain which was movable and liable to be disturbed by the winds. I happened to sit near the curtain; and as it swung it was easy to see something of what was going on in the other side. The first thing I discovered was that there were cigars in the hands of these veiled ladies as if they proposed to smoke. How they could smoke with these veils on was a problem. It was a moment however before it was solved; and the ladies were all smoking deliciously the veils having disappeared from the lower part of the face. They seemed to be sufficiently sociable and jolly. As to the beauty of these Turkish ladies I feel altogether incompetent to judge. The features were not sufficiently exposed to enable me, even if I were a connoisseur of beauty to form an opinion. The presumption is against them. For if they were very handsome they would in some way defeat the unreasonable scruples of the government and the priesthood, and display their beauty to strangers as well as to their husbands. These unsatisfactory veils however do not hide their lustrous eyes which certainly make an impression.

I can not pass from this great city without mentioning the characteristic multitude of the dogs which are met with in the streets. It seems to be a part of the superstition of the Turks that the dog must be tolerated, however useless he may be. There is an evident idea of sacredness attached to the dogs of Constantinople. They are, so far as I can discover entirely useless and they are without any beauty whatever. They lie sleeping in the streets and would be liable to be run over by carts or carriages but for the fact that they are held so sacred in the minds of that people that it would not be safe for a man to run over or to injure them. They are a yellow dog, of small size, and I never saw any manifestation of the least spirit in any of them. They all look very much alike. They seem to be in keeping with the dirty streets in which they live from morning to night. Probably they are more active in the night but I never had an opportunity to see them in the night as we did not stop in the city

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