ZOHRAH: AN INTRODUCTION

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A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE & WORK

By Minas Hlussian

A slightly expanded version of the following article first appeared in the Soviet-Armenian Encyclopedia, volume 3 (Yerevan, 1977). Minas Hlussian (b. 1903), the author of the article, is a distinguished Soviet-Armenian scholar and author of, among others, Krikor Zohrab: His Life & Work (Yerevan, 1957, 376 pages), and The Art of Krikor Zohrab (Yerevan, 1965, 214 pages).

KRIKOR ZOHRB\ was born in Constantinople on June 26, 1861 and died as a victim of the 1915 Genocide. After attending the local Armenian schools he studied civil engineering and law. He began his law practice in 1883 and simultaneously he taught jurisprudence at the University of Constantinople. He published three legal monographs: one in French, in Paris, the other two in Turkish, in Constantinople.
Between 1895-96 he successfully defended many Armenians charged with a variety of political and criminal offenses. As a result of his defense of a Bulgarian revolutionary in the course of which he accused a Turkish official of torture, he was disbarred and forced to live abroad. Following the Revolution of the Young Turks in 1908 he returned to Constantinople.

Zohrab began his literary career as a poet, but it was with the appearance of his realistic novel A Vanishing Generation (serialized in 1887 in the weekly Massis) that he became famous. His most productive period began in 1892, when together with Hrant Assadour, he assumed the editorship of Massis, which in 1898 became a daily. He contributed to several other publications, among them Haienik (Fatherland), Arevelk (East), and Azadamard (Freedom-fighter).

Zohrab produced works in many genres: fiction, literary portraits, articles, editorials, poems in prose and verse, etc. He is best known, however, for his short stories. Even his first essays in this particular genre were hailed as “magnificent revelations” (Hrant Assadour).

In Zohrab’s view, “Literature must speak of the people and serve the people.” The writer must be aware of the social problems of his time and his work must reflect the good as well as the bad, the beautiful as well as the ugly. For him the roles of science and art were interchangeable.

In his short stories Zohrab exposed the dehumanizing nature of money: its power to transform life into a nightmare ("Deliverance," "Beneath the Burden"); to promote injustice and moral degeneration ("The Gynecologist," "Have Mercy, O Lord," "The Churchyard"); alienation and hypocrisy ("The Mask," "It Seems to Me"). In other stories he defended women’s rights ("Postal," "Magdalene"), and exposed the miserable conditions of life in the provinces ("The Widower"). The tone he employs throughout these stories is that of impeachment rather than appeals to conscience.

Also valuable are his literary portraits, reminiscences, editorials, and travel notes, all of which are permeated with a deep concern for the fate of the Armenian people. He attacked foreign influences on Armenian community life ("Chinese Letters"), criticized Armenian intellectuals for their unquestioning acceptance of all things foreign ("Smyrna"), and condemned German imperialism ("Letters from the Front").

From 1908-15 Zohrab was a member of the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies. At this time he actively supported education, agriculture, industrialization, and the de-

* Stories marked with an asterisk are included in Part Two of this volume.
velopment of sciences and the arts. He opposed many unfair and arbitrary laws and he defended the rights of minorities. Of particular note is his courageous stand during the 1909 Adana massacres. Said Yervant Odian in 1913, “If it had not been for Zohrab, the victims would have been declared guilty.” Also to be noted is the memorandum of 1911 to the Turkish Prime Minister, wherein Zohrab demanded an end to the Hamidian methods of the Young Turkish regime. Fully aware of the coming catastrophe, he looked upon Russia as the saviour of the Armenian people. He entered into negotiations with the embassies of the Great Powers (1912-14), and in this connection he authored and published a booklet titled A Documentary History of the Armenian Question (Paris, 1913) under the pseudonym Marcel Leer. On May 20, 1915 he was arrested and savagely murdered on the road to exile.

Published Works: Voices of Conscience (Constantinople, 1909); Life As It Is (Constantinople, 1911); Silent Griefs (Constantinople, 1911); Pages From A Traveller’s Diary (Smyrna, 1922); A Vanishing Generation (Constantinople, 1924); Well-Known Figures & Selected Short Stories (Paris, 1932); From Our Life (Cairo, 1945); Collected Works, 2 volumes (Yerevan, 1962); About Literature (Yerevan, 1973).

A REMINISCENCE

By Gostan Zarian

The central theme of Gostan Zarian’s autobiographical book Cities, from which the following extract is taken, is the 1915 Genocide. Zarian, who escaped from Istanbul shortly before the deportations and massacres began, tells us here of the naïve and thoughtless conduct of most Armenians (including such eminent intellectuals as Siamanto), who preferred to foresee nothing by concentrating “on petty details.” Krikor Zohrab was a rare exception. “If in the next war, Turkey and Germany become Allies,” he had written, “the fate of the Armenians in Turkey will be in mortal peril.”
Cities was first published in serial form in the now defunct Hairenik Monthly of Boston in 1930, and in a volume entitled Yerger (Antillas, Lebanon, 1975, published by the Kevork Milidinetsi Literary Committee), which also contains two other autobiographical works by Zarian: The Traveller & His Road and West.

When great events are about to occur, men try very hard to foresee nothing; and in order to accomplish this feat, they concentrate on petty details and busy themselves with insignificant things.

Siamanto has donned a fez and is now laughing nervously in the inn where Armenian intellectuals gather to drink beer. As they drink, they argue. And what do they argue about? What else but radishes and the fact that they taste good with beer, provided one does not eat the leaves too, because radishes, you see, grow in filth.

"Is it possible, brother, that you are not aware of such elementary facts...?"

They talk about radishes and filth, but somewhere deep in their consciousness, they also think of the horrors of the coming day, about bloodied corpses lying in scorched fields.

"Yes, radishes grow in filth."

And they raise their glasses and drink their beer in deep silence.

At the Tokatian cafe Krikor Zohrab is seated at a table all by himself. There is sadness in his eyes.

And why?

"Baron Zohrab, they say that the Russians are about to attack... Just imagine what will happen if they do. The Armenian vilayets will be liberated. Our centuries-old dream will be realized. Independence!... Who knows what miracles history has in store for us yet. If our lands are liberated, we will all move there, right?..."

Zohrab sits there motionless and impassive. There is such ineffable sadness in his eyes.

"You don’t understand the Turks," he says. "Don’t let appearances deceive you. I tell you, there is no doubt in my mind that this time they will give an end to us and to our question. That’s right. This time they will take advantage of this unique opportunity and kill mercilessly. And why not? The great powers are busy with their own problems, the frontiers are closed—"

"What about the Germans?"

"The Germans will look the other way. What are we to them at a time when their own existence is in peril? I tell you they will massacre us all; they will annihilate the entire Armenian nation..."

I’ll never forget the great anguish in his eyes, the dark shadow on his face, the deep lines etched on his brow, and the melancholy accent of his voice which rings in my ear to this day.
“If you can leave, do so by all means. And the sooner the better.”
“That Zohrab effendi is exaggerating . . .”
“Even a child can tell this kind of war cannot last . . . Economic laws, social conditions . . .
No, no, it is madness to leave now.”
“Yes, of course . . . Marne . . . Joffre* . . .”
“Talaat declared yesterday . . .”
“Stay where you are. Take your time. Wait a while before making a move. Where can
you go with two children? To leave now would be sheer madness . . .”

A POWERFUL PRESENCE

By Kourken Mekhitarian

Kourken Mekhitarian (1890-1962) was a distinguished West-Armenian critic, editor, and
translator who was active mainly in Turkey, Egypt, and the United States. The following
is an extract from his book A Quarter Century of (Armenian) Literature which was published
in 1946.

Zohrab was such a powerful presence that to those who knew him he seemed indestructible, and now that he is dead, his spirit continues to dominate life from the other side of his tragic destiny and unmarked grave.

* Commander in chief of the French armies on the western front in World War I. He became famous as “the Victor of the Marne.”
Notwithstanding his Armenian origins and his uncompromising commitment to his people, Zohrab became an international figure whose star shone mainly in non-Armenian circles. Admired by his fellow Armenians, he was adored to the point of envy by the Turks. Though he was not allowed to be the head of the Ottoman State, he did eventually rise to be a member of the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies and a professor of Jurisprudence at the University of Constantinople, in which capacity he was to mold the minds of a new generation of leaders.

His political speeches in the Chamber were generally regarded as major events. Whenever Zohrab Effendi held forth on the destiny of the Ottoman Empire, he was heard. There was no doubt whatever in anyone’s mind that Zohrab would have been the most respected statesman in the Empire, and respected above all in foreign circles. Yet deep in their hearts the Turks could not help resenting him because he made them aware of their own inadequacies. But these same Turks could not also help bowing down their heads in adoration before him. It is said that his lectures at the university were invariably greeted with deafening applause.

LAST ENCOUNTER

By Hrant Assadour

The following extract is taken from Hrant Assadour’s Silhouettes (1921) which contains his reminiscences of seventeen literary figures, among them Zohrab. As already noted by Minas Hiussian, Zohrab was arrested on May 20, 1915 and murdered shortly thereafter. So that the encounter described here must have taken place a few days before Zohrab’s death.

I saw Zohrab for the last time in May 1915. We met by the Osman Bey Park in Pangaltı (Constantinople). It was a bright, sunny day. I asked him where he was going.

“Just taking my usual walk before lunch,” he said.

“May I join you?”

“Yes, of course.”

He looked troubled. He wasn’t his usual forceful, energetic self. His voice had lost its imperious tone. I tried to make conversation by saying that I had just reread with great pleasure some of his short stories in The Voices of Conscience, Silent Griefs, and Life As It Is.
“When are you going to collect the other stories in a volume?” I inquired.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I always wanted to publish my *Pages From A Traveller’s Diary* first, which appeared serially in *Azadamard*. That’s where I have expressed my whole philosophy of life.”

After that we reminisced about the year 1892 when we had collaborated as editors of *Massis*: How we would meet at an inn in Galata for lunch and argue endlessly about the contents of the next issue ... We didn’t always agree, yet I don’t remember a single instance when our disagreements ended in feelings of mutual hostility.

It was close to noon but we went on talking unable to tear ourselves away from each other.

“Maybe I’ll walk all the way back home,” he said at one point stopping. I still have some time to spare. These hikes may save my life. I’m told walking is the best way of getting rid of the toxins that accumulate in one’s blood vessels. My doctor has warned me that I am prone to angina pectoris. Sometimes I have these sharp pains in my chest that make breathing difficult.”

We shook hands.

As he walked off with brisk movements on quick, nervous steps, I followed him with my eyes for as long as I could.

I never saw him again.

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**TRIBUTES**

The list below includes the sources of the quotations that follow:


Zohrab's style is direct, concise, lucid, easily accessible; it reminds me of a palace that is flooded with bright lights—not a single dark room or shadowy corner. Everyone reads him with pleasure and wonder: the literary elite as well as the general public, the old as well as the young, even schoolboys and girls—though they are not allowed to read him. They all understand and appreciate him, and they all look forward to reading him...

SYBIL (Zabel Khanjian)
Novelist, poet

Zohrab was a spellbinding orator fluent in Turkish, Armenian, and French. For him the letter of the law was of secondary importance. His efforts were concentrated on humanizing and reforming the Ottoman legal system.

An internationally respected jurist who counted among his clients many foreign corporations, Zohrab considered it his duty to defend the weak and the poor.

He was supremely kind as a friend. Vengefulness, hatred and grudges were alien to his nature.

HENRY GERTMANIAN
Scholar

Zohrab is one of those rare individuals who do the work and live the lives of eight or ten men and excel in each.... He remains the most brilliant, accomplished and enduring figure in the Realistic Movement of our literature.

HAGOP OSHAGAN
West-Armenian critic

Zohrab is one of the most widely read authors in Soviet Armenia.

LUDMILA MOTALOVA
Czech Armenologist
Throughout his life Zohrab had an unquenchable thirst for beauty. He searched for beauty in human beings, in nature, in the world of emotions; and he tried to reflect that beauty in his writings. All one has to do is read the first couple of lines of any one of his stories to sense that what dominates Zohrab's work is beauty.

MINAS HIUSSIAN
Soviet-Armenian scholar & biographer

Zohrab loved life with a passion. He loved the pleasures of the mind with the same intensity that he loved the pleasures of the flesh. And yet, he somehow found the time and energy to produce 1300 pages of first-class prose that will always occupy a glorious place in our literature.

VAHE-VAHIAN
Armenian-American scholar

Zohrab viewed conservatives as hidebound obscurantists. He attacked the Armenian establishment of Constantinople—the Church as well as the bosses. He constantly urged the youth to adopt progressive Western ideas. Even when he went to extremes, he at no time passed the bounds of reason and common sense.

MESROB JANASHIAN
Mekhitarist literary historian

Zohrab was considered the foremost defense lawyer in Constantinople never having lost a case in court. He was capable of behaving as an intellectual with intellectuals, commoner with commoners, European with Europeans, and as an Oriental with Orientals. His fictional heroines were not merely attractively molded flesh. Everyone of them had her own unique way of loving and her singular social slant.

DR. HAMPAR KELIKIAN
Armenian-American surgeon & scholar
Of the following five stories "Deliverance" (original title Jidin Bardke, literally The Neck’s Debt) and "It Seems to Me" are from Life As It Is; "Infatuation" (original title Rehan, or Sweet Basil: in the Middle East a popular aromatic herb and house plant) and "The Monkey" from Silent Griefs; and "Magdalene" from Voices of Conscience. Each story is followed by the date of its first appearance in periodical form.

DELIBERANCE

It was a large, black leather bag and he carried it with him wherever he went. Like two constant companions, they were inseparable. It was with that bag that he brought home the bread, fruit, meat, and all the other necessities of life. Many years of sweat and toil had gone into that bag. The daily difficulties and problems that one encounters while engaged in the struggle for existence, also the joys, sorrows, memories and above all, the anxiety of no longer being able to provide for his family—they were all there in that bag. It was not so much a bag as a bottomless vessel that like a condemned
soul in Hades he tried to fill but was destined never to succeed.

Like the man, the bag had its good and bad days; nay, it seemed to have a soul and a destiny of its own. And it was that very destiny that the man served. Thirty years later, when misfortune with its steel talons, gripped and bound him in chains, the man realized at last that the bag had been his master and himself its slave.

Housep agha was a corpulent middle-aged man with a graying beard. A former prosperous merchant, then a modest shopkeeper, he was now a poor middleman, a peddler who for a small commission went from door to door and from store to store, carrying samples of linen and other low-quality fabrics, receiving orders, and delivering merchandise.

Others may speak of the law of demand and supply, but Housep agha knew that as far as he was concerned that was no law but just another device fate had contrived in order to frustrate his efforts to earn a living. Ah! if only he were alone, with no one to look after but himself. He had two daughters however, young girls both in their early adolescence, with all the sweet dreams and expectations of youth. He loved them with all his heart, and they were his only source of happiness. And yet, in their presence, he felt oppressed because beneath their wistful, innocent smiles he perceived an unspoken reproach. Like a man guilty of an unpardonable crime, he would come home with his head bent low, always trying very hard to conceal his despair with a smile.

They lived, all three of them—the two girls and their father (the mother having died many years ago of consumption)—on the heights of Scutari, in a small house which they rented for 200 piastres a month. The late lamented mother's picture—a youthful, emaciated woman—now hung on the wall of the tiny room facing the street. Many years had gone by since her death but her memory continued to live and they spoke of her every day. At night, after his daughters retired, the poor peddler would linger before her image in its gilded frame and implore for a little help from the other side of the grave. His strength, like his wealth, had now dwindled almost to the vanishing point. Every morning he ventured forth holding his bag with weak, quivering hands, and when, in the evening, he returned home, the bag would be, more often than not, only half full.

At dawn, as he waited on the dock for the ferryboat, he was sometimes given small orders by merchants, out of pity as it were, and he felt like a beggar accepting charity. On occasion he plucked up enough courage to join in their conversation and voice his own views,
which needless to add, were always in complete agreement with the speaker of the moment. And when the time came for them to move, it was Housep agha who would invariably stand aside respectfully for everyone else to pass first.

Whenever any one of the merchants would say something to the effect that he had been deceived in a recent deal, Housep agha would get angrier than the man who had actually sustained the financial loss, heaping insults on the swindler, calling him a thief and a man fit only for the hangman's noose. Other times when the company was in a more agreeable frame of mind, he would entertain them with jokes and pleasant little tales with the expectation of thus receiving a few more orders.

Everyone liked this fatherly man because he was never rude like so many others in his line of work and tended to accept adjustment in the price without haggling and protesting too much.

Housep agha may have had many problems, but so did the prosperous merchants, whose early morning conversations revolved more and more often now around ways and means to minimize costs and increase profit. The Persian trade—their main source of profit—was down. Everyone was getting smart these days. Low quality and defective merchandise—both items with large profit margins—were no longer in demand. What to do? There were some expenses—export duty, for instance, and salary for the office personnel—about which they could do nothing. But they could lower the middleman's commission, perhaps even eliminate the middleman altogether. Why the need of a middleman anyway? Why not order the merchandise directly from the textile plants and sell it to their clients themselves? There were other compelling reasons to justify this more efficient method of operation. Not being an authority on fabrics, a middleman lacked first-hand knowledge of the properties, quality and value of a piece of merchandise. Neither was he in a position therefore to explain these things to their clients.

Hearing this kind of talk Housep agha would shake like a leaf, and his bag would shake along with him. Whereupon the merchants would hasten to reassure him: "Housep agha, you've got nothing to worry about. What we are saying doesn't apply to you, of course. After all, you are our man..."

The poor peddler would heave a deep sigh of relief. But his business kept going down and his debts piling up everywhere all the same. And since he took good care of his appearance, no one could guess the desperate situation he was in. The bag had now become a useless appendage, but Housep agha continued to carry it with him wherever he went. At home he did his best to appear cheerful.

"How's business these days?" the older
daughter would sometimes inquire.

"So far so good," he would say with a
forced smile. "Things could be better, of
course . . . ."

"Promise to come home sooner today,"
the younger one would add, "so that we
can all go out for a walk together."

As always, the miserable wretch promised
them whatever they wanted. Poor orphans,
he thought, spending the best years of their
lives in utter destitution. I imagine a journey
whose best view is a long, dark tunnel with
no end in sight.

As always, early that day too, Housep
agha left for Istanbul on the first ferry,
carrying with him that black monster with
insatiable appetite that he hadn’t been
able to satisfy for thirty years now, hold-
ing it in a tight grip as if to suffocate it.
He found no work in Istanbul. He had
spent his last coins on the fare and the
time to return home was drawing near
with horrible speed. What am I to do?
What am I to do? He kept asking himself.
He even saw that question looming before
him in massive letters. He kept on walk-
ing, feeling all the while the emptiness of
the bag under his arm. Then he imagined
himself back home with his two daughters
beside him. For an instant he forgot his
troubles. He was once more the prosper-
ous merchant of the old days, and they
were about to leave the hut on the heights
of Scutari for a mansion in a wealthy
district. At last he would give them what-
ever their youthful hearts desired—new
clothes, new hats, everything—and seeing
their joy he was happy once more. Ah
happiness! he thought. How simple it
was, and yet, how unattainable! Then,
the weight of the large, empty bag
brought him back to his senses. He de-
cided to try his luck on a few more stores.
But is was all in vain. Wherever he entered,
he was invariably met with stony, hostile
glances. He felt intimidated and could not
bring himself to tell anyone that he didn’t
even have enough money to buy a loaf of
bread for his children. Instead he wander-
ed aimlessly up and down the streets in
complete silence, gazing at store windows,
mavelling at their contents, especially the
jewels and little ornaments glittering with
all kinds of precious gems. He thought of
his daughters again. He would never be
able to give them any of these things.
His daughters! What time was it? It was
getting dark. He broke into a run. He was
late. What was he doing there, loaing idly
in the streets anyway? He must do some-
thing. Ask someone for help. Yes. He
would do just that with the first familiar
face he saw. Where were they?—all the
people he knew? . . . At last he recognized
a face—a merchant whom he had known in the old days, when he was himself a successful businessman. But ever since he had fallen on hard times, the other had ignored him completely, and they were no longer on speaking terms. At this point he saw another familiar face coming towards him. That man owed him a favor—once, recently, when he had been in trouble, Housep agha had helped him. Yet now, as he hurried past, he pretended he had not seen Housep agha. And what about that man over there, smiling at him now? Just a derelict, alas!—even more destitute than he.

Housep agha advanced as far as the Galata Bridge, then he stopped. It occurred to him that since he didn’t have the required ten paras, he couldn’t walk across the bridge. At this point he also noted that something was amiss. What could it be? He wondered. After examining himself carefully, he realized what it was. His bag. He must have dropped it somewhere. He retraced his steps, on the trot, confused, flustered, totally disoriented.

That same night a corpse was seen floating and swaying gently on the surface of the water. It was the body of a corpulent, middle-aged man stretched out on his back, with wide-open eyes fixed on the heavens where the full moon shone like a huge silver coin. Barely visible below the surface of the water and drifting along with the body, there was a black leather bag with its strap coiled tightly around his neck. As inseparable in death as they had been in life, the bag sometimes pulled the head below the surface, but the head surfaced again with a jerk, as if struggling to free itself from the bag’s fatal grip. Later, when the body was dragged out on the shore, it was discovered that the bag—now looking like a permanently bloated and satiated belly—contained nothing but stones.

(1892)
INFATUATION

Even at that time I had a weakness for long, luxuriant hair, and seated as I was a short distance from her, I could not tear my eyes off her dense mass of black hair that against her enchantingly snow-white neck, and under the light of the lamps hanging here and there in the garden, had acquired a bright sheen. There was something meek and unassuming about her head that spoke to me with piercing eloquence saying an infinity of things. Again and again my eyes followed its adorable outline with its occasional rebellious little strands of hair that like mischievous children had somehow managed to escape the order imposed by the comb and now hung here and there in fine, silky spirals. Gradually a bond of intimacy grew between her head and me, and at one point, to my astonishment, she turned around and cast a glance in my direction—a tired, melancholy, yet inquisitive glance that fixed itself on me for a long time. Though not very pretty, her face possessed a serene yet disturbing quality that stirred the very depths of my being.

I was now sure that she had noticed the fascinated look on my face and that she had even smiled at me—one of those fleeting smiles that vanish like the last rays of the sun leaving behind a pink glow.

She was surrounded by several elderly people—probably parents and relatives—whose presence no doubt compelled her to behave in a manner that would arouse no suspicion in their minds. It was for that reason that she could not turn her head in my direction as often as she would have liked. Even so, whenever the opportunity arose, she cast a quick backward glance.

Seated there in all her mysterious allure, she appeared to me as that quint-essentially desirable being that one
dreams about in one's youth. Let her ignore me completely, let her maintain the indifference of a statue, I would love her as I have loved no one; I would follow her to the ends of the earth, and I would never—never!—give up revering her memory.

With a dreamy and absent-minded look on her face, she stared at the dark, placid sea now glittering with thousands of diamonds sprinkled by the profligate moon.

It was a peaceful, summer evening. The trees motionless, the air transparent and with something seductively inviting in it to which we both abandoned ourselves for hours.

Very slowly and with inaudible footsteps, they advanced in the silence of the night. Only occasionally her father's imperious voice would ring out, harsh and domineering.

I felt sorry for her. Her retiring manner betrayed a delicate, vulnerable creature living in an oppressively narrow family. She reminded me of one of those sickly flowers that grow near the trunk of a big tree—sheltered against the assaults of the wind, but also hidden from the rays of the sun.

Who was she? Where did she live? My curiosity increased as we approached our destination.

Finally they stopped at the door of a fairly new house in the neighborhood of the Catholic School. A frail-looking maiden opened the door with a flickering candle in her hand. In my desire to take a final glimpse of her, I advanced another step.

The father entered first, and was followed by the others. She being the youngest of all entered last. I was left all by myself in the darkness of the street.

Now I was free to look at the house for as long as I wished.

It was situated on a hillside overlooking the open waters of a bay. There was something pastoral in its delightfully simple appearance and setting.
Suddenly a light appeared in one of the up-
stair rooms. Then I saw the outline of her
head with the tresses of her splendid hair
now sweeping down her shoulders.

A short moment later the light went out
and everything sank back into darkness again.
But once more the silhouette of her head ap-
ppeared in the window. What was she thinking
about now, I wondered, seated there at her
window with her head cradled in her hand and
the gentle breeze caressing her hair—I could
see the shiver that ran over it. Was she think-
ing of the young man she met that night—
that longed-for stranger who, though she had
never seen before, seemed nevertheless as
familiar as an old, childhood friend—just as
I was thinking of her, standing there against
the wall in the deserted street below.

After a while I became restless with my
own forced immobility and began to pace
the street with my eyes never straying too
far from her window. What was it that I
expected from her? A sigh, a whisper, a
sweet word that would be the unmistakable
evidence of our mutual attraction?

She continued to sit there at her window.
I could not see her face clearly because it
was partly covered by her hand, but I could
see the sinuous outline of her head. There
she waited, mute and motionless, and did
not dare to utter a single word. Neither
did I—afraid that I might dispel that love-
liest of all dreams.

Somewhere in the neighborhood the night
watchman clattered his cane on the pavement
announcing the time. It was one after mid-
night.

Complete silence now.

As motionless as a statue she sat there at
her window, and I, gazing at her from below,
felt transported into a ravishing realm where
there was no one else but the two of us.

Hours passed.
A cock crowed.
Then another.
A flood of light began to flow from the
horizon to the east.

Her head remained in its original place, im-
mobile as always, except for the delicate spirals
of her hair trembling in the morning breeze.

More light filled the air.
I was tired and sleepy by then but did
not regret in the least the long vigil beneath
her window. She too must be as sleepy and
tired as I was, I thought.

I waited there a little longer.

Then, suddenly, I observed that what I
had taken to be her dense mass of hair
was nothing but a small potted plant
commonly known as rehan or sweet basil.
I was stunned! I seethed with rage. I felt ridiculous, humiliated, cheated! How could I have made the stupid blunder of confusing a potted plant with her head? Had I spent an entire night staring at nothing but a cluster of sweet basil?

Yet now, as I look back from the distance of many years, I feel not indignation but something akin to gratitude towards that pot of sweet basil, because for a whole night it gave me such happiness that no woman could ever give me.

What if it pretended to be the girl I loved?
What if it deceived me?

I don't hold that against it. I don't even begrudge all the tender love that I poured over its delicate leaves.

Let the cruel morning light dissolve my romantic reveries. I don't care. Because for me, that small cluster of sweet basil will always be her magnificently luxuriant hair.

(1892)

IT SEEMS TO ME

The grace of her bearing, the noble harmony of her features, the magnificence of her golden hair—everything, I loved everything about her, but above all I loved, nay I worshipped, her transparently clear blue eyes.

Gazing deep into a woman's eyes can be an eerie experience similar to that of viewing a sunrise over an abyss. The longer you look, the more mysterious shadows and unexpected ambiguities you see. What I found fascinating about her eyes was their purity and honesty. Hers was the kind of unadulterated, absolute honesty that was not so much a facet of her personality as a natural extension of her innermost self.
"You are my soul, you are my life, you are my everything—do you hear?" she would say speaking with the cadence and limited vocabulary of a child, a mannerism that was not altogether without a certain instinctive feminine charm. Her words were as sweet to me as the lyrics of a favorite song learned in childhood. No matter how often I heard them, they never lost their enchantment.

"No, no! I don't trust my eyes," she declared once when I tried to give her a photograph of me. "You are not there, but here..."—indicating her heart; "in a very deep and secret place reserved especially for you, where I can have you all to myself—do you hear?"

On another occasion she said:

"Do you know that I can tell it's you by the way you ring the doorbell, and by your footsteps on the staircase?—and a shiver of anticipation runs all through my body."

On entering a crowded hall, I too would immediately guess where she had been sitting by the arrangement of certain details and by her perfume still lingering in the air.

"You were sitting right here," I would tell her and she would smile, blushing with pleasure.

She had a way of gripping my hand and peering into my eyes with a gaze that was filled with anxiety, as if to say: 'Promise, you'll never forget me!'

When an old friend of mine from Smyrna came to Istanbul in search for a wife, Annik and I had stopped seeing each other for almost a year. The reason may be ascribed to my own juvenile fear of permanent attachments and greed for novel encounters and conquests. Even so, I never quite managed to forget her completely, and whenever I went through a disappointing experience, I would evoke her image in order to reassure myself that human relations were not always based on deception. And in my youthful arrogance, I imagined her pining away for my love, always faithful to my memory.

It was on a Saturday morning, I remember, when my friend dropped in to see me. He had come to inquire after a girl he had chosen to marry. Though he had already heard many favorable things about her, he wanted to have my opinion too before making a final decision. I asked him who she was. It turned out to be my Annik.

My first reaction was disbelief. Had she forgotten me then? Was she really going to marry someone else? How could I have been so appallingly wrong in thinking that she had been inconsolable over her loss of my love?
Noticing the baleful look on my face, my friend interpreted it as disapproval.

"Nothing like that," I hastened to reassure him. "On the contrary, Annik is a wonderful person, a well brought-up young lady of irreproachable reputation, excellent taste, sensitive, gentle heart—at least that's what they tell me. I don't know her well enough to express a personal opinion—never had the chance... I may have seen her here and there on one or two occasions, that's about it... But I know for a fact that she enjoys general approval."

"Exactly what I was told too. My decision stands then. Everything is settled. For an instant you gave me quite a scare. I thought I was about to commit a serious blunder by marrying her. If you have no objections then, you'll consent to speak for me at the engagement ceremony tomorrow. As you know, I have no one else in this town..."

I told him that was out of the question and gave him a thousand reasons why I couldn't make it. People from Smyrna can be very stubborn however, and my friend was no exception. He kept insisting so unrelentingly that I had no choice but to give in and resign to the inevitable.

The next day, my friend and I set off to the reception together and when we entered her house, we found it crowded by her relatives and friends. As the only guest from my friend's side I was to represent his family and relatives by uttering all the traditional words, congratulations, and good wishes.

Coffee and cakes were served. Annik was nowhere to be seen. What would happen, I wondered, if she entered and saw me sitting beside her fiance? Her old love would suddenly flare up with the violence of a blaze leaping from a long smoldering fire and she wouldn't be brave enough to go through with the ceremony. And then I imagined the scandal that would follow. She would fling herself at my feet and screaming uncontrollably say: "I am yours, my love, and I cannot belong to anyone else!" Her parents would intervene, pull us apart, drag her by the hair across the floor, and cast her into a dark room like a criminal in a dungeon.

It was a mistake. I shouldn't have come.

Annik made her entrance at last. Despite the presence of all the guests, she retained her composure. How admirable of her I thought. All my fears vanished. She acknowledged us with a graceful nod, then proceeded to greet the rest of the company with just the right degree of courtesy and warmth.
I was impressed, nay stunned, by her calm in which I could not detect a single trace of tension and emotional turmoil. I had expected at least something in the nature of a mild shock. When our eyes met, she should have stopped in her tracks as if thunderstruck, go pale in the face, stagger forward with shaking knees. And if the company noticed these changes in her, they would have dismissed them as natural reactions to the solemnity of the hour. I would be the only one who would know the real reason of course. Why mince words? I might as well admit that I felt deeply hurt and humiliated.

Half an hour later the ceremony was over and I stammered all the usual congratulations and best wishes.

More coffee and cakes were served. Everyone relaxed and the conversation became more animated. Jokes were told, laughter was heard.

My friend and Annik stood by themselves in a corner by the window. At this point I couldn’t help observing that they were casting glances in my direction and saying things to each other. Was she talking about me? What was she saying? How did she manage to disguise her passion for me? Did my friend suspect anything? Then I saw them wave at me, urging me to join them. I approached them with some reluctance. What was I to say to them?

"Annik, I want you to meet my best friend," he began, adding: "Since you both live in Istanbul, you may be acquainted already . . ."

There was a pause during which Annik took a good look at me, squinted as if trying very hard to remember me, took a second look, this time examining me very carefully from head to toe. There was no hint of pretence in her demeanor. She appeared so totally absorbed in her efforts to remember me that for an instant I became convinced she had indeed forgotten me completely.

"It seems to me," she said at last, "I have seen the gentleman somewhere . . . but I regret to say I cannot recall when and where."

(1898)
or two and reflect over the boisterous laughter of the parrot that like the laughter of most people lacked both aim and motive. For a moment or two, I would also stop by the cage of the monkey, watch his expertly performed tricks on the trapeze, and marvel at his restless temperament. And whenever his sharp, intelligent eyes met mine, I could not help thinking that whatever he lacked to be a complete human being, surely it couldn't have been feelings.

The monkey's favorite servant, the *persona grata* that was allowed to take care of his difficult and capricious needs, was a Greek servant girl by the name of Marika, who had come from one of the islands of the archipelago and, in addition to enchanting beauty and charm, had about her the air of a sea goddess. I should add that she was also a particular favorite with all the guests. An acquaintance of mine, a sensitive Turkish journalist, in whose company I often visited that house, shared my curiosity for this monkey, and he would recount strange stories about him.

"You may believe this or not," he once said laughing, "but this unfortunate beast has fallen desperately in love with the Greek servant girl—which goes to show you that his taste is no less discriminating than ours. I have read somewhere that certain species of
New World monkeys, very much like knights of olden times, fall in love, carry out abductions, and establish lasting bonds with their mates. It doesn't surprise me in the least therefore that our monkey too has fallen in love with Marika."

When he noticed the skeptical expression on my face, he added: "Please, believe me, it's a fact. I have studied this creature carefully and I tell you he shows all the symptoms of a deep passion, very much like Romeo's for Juliet."

Indeed I began to notice that whenever Marika approached, the monkey, his eyes brightened, a shiver of excitement ran over his hairy skin, he began to tremble from head to toe, and like a man in the grip of delirious joy, his behavior became bizarre and unpredictable. As docile as a slave, he would place his small mischievous head beneath the girl's hand, all the while trying very hard to reach out and touch her with his hand. These and a thousand similar changes in his behavior betrayed his intense love and anguish. And while all this was going on the parrot would continue guffawing ceaselessly as if to express its contempt for the monkey's suffering which it could neither understand nor feel.

Gradually this passion acquired scandalous overtones. The monkey would become jealous and grind his sharp teeth whenever anyone dared to approach Marika or speak to her. As far as his thin but unbreakable chain would allow, he would advance in his cell and lunge at his rival with such ferocious hatred that it struck fear in the hearts of all bystanders.

Sensing the power she had over him, the Greek girl became embarrassed and hid herself from his view, sending the food with other servants. Distressed by this, the monkey would barely touch the food with his lips. This went on for days so that his master was afraid that the poor beast would die of starvation.

His tricks and games had now come to an end. For long hours, that restless and nervous creature would stand motionless in his corner, and only when the girl happened to be passing by his cage, he would jump with the frenzy of limitless rapture, tear at his chain, turn this and that way, and pace his small cell furiously.

But one day Marika left for good, and the small, shackled beast waited vainly in his corner to see once more that lovely being over whom he believed to have certain rights.

We were in the middle of a particularly important card game when the news reached us. Immediately we left the table and rushed to see for ourselves the unbelievable spectacle.
From his chain that was now coiled around his bar and thus shortened, the monkey hung motionless in the air, his feet not touching the floor, his right paw clinging to the chain as if to caress that very instrument of his death. His eyes were closed. There was something solemn and somber on that restless and mocking face that lent to his infantile features a sublime expression of liberation and serenity.

How and when had this happened? Had it been the result of a simple accident? Was it possible for such an expert acrobat to become suddenly entangled to the point of suffocation? The servants who were more familiar with the creature’s habits, maintained that he had committed suicide of his own free will, thus expressing a contempt for life that was stronger than in most human beings.

I will never be able to forget that diminutive body hanging from the end of its chain, the twisted head, the small paw that held on to the chain as if to keep himself from falling down. And I could have gone on staring at it for a long time had it not been for the parrot’s sudden burst of laughter that brought me back to my senses. It was a hollow laughter that made no distinction between life and death.

(1911)
down about her shoulders giving her head a slight backward slant as if by their weight.

She ushered me into her tiny apartment on the fourth floor of a tenement building and assuming the drool air of a Barker drumming up customers, she showed me her bed—a big, wide, deep bed that occupied nearly half of the room—and the clean white sheets and pillowcases after which she forced me down on it and laughing all the while like a street urchin, took hold of my head and said: "Won't you give us a kiss then?"

She was an experienced girl and in her earnest efforts to dispel the timidity of a raw youth, she overwhelmed me with proofs of her affection. There was something inebriating in the aroma emanating from her body.

"I am the youngest tenant in the whole building," she said. "I'll be seventeen on Easter Day."

She sat curled up beside me, making herself as small as a kitten, her head nestling against my chest. I had known her for only five minutes, yet she spoke as if we were old, intimate friends, wanted to know all about me, asked endless questions, but before I had a chance to answer any of them, she began telling me her own story—the usual sad story of her kind of unfortunate girl that may be summed up in a couple of sentences.

"My poor little mother died two years ago," she began, investing that word 'little' with such tenderness that it pierced my heart.

"I never got to know my father. I have a younger sister aged fifteen, and an even younger brother; also a grandmother. They are all I've got. My sister and brother go to school. I support them."

She delivered the last phrase with evident pride, as if to say: I am the head of this family; I am responsible for them; they depend on me.

"Enough of this talk," she suddenly burst out trying to dispel the gloom that her words may have created, and for an instant I felt the entire weight of her body on top of me, her lips pressing very hard against mine.

That was as far as things went that day however. She stubbornly refused to satisfy my youthful ardor. "Nothing doing," she kept saying. "Today is Good Friday. What are you, an infidel?" It was indeed Good Friday. I must confess nonetheless that I was taken aback by her piety.

"Do you plan to take communion?" she wanted to know.

"I don't know... I guess so," I mumbled.

"And you?"

She gave me an astonished look as if I had asked a most impertinent question.

"They don't give communion to the likes of us!"
"Why don't they?"

"Because we can't repent knowing that on the next day we will be committing the same sin. And if I don't sin, who will look after my brother and sister, and my old grandmother?"

She seemed to be familiar with all the rules and regulations of the Church and spoke with the self-assurance of a priest and was even more unsparing on herself than a priest would be, I thought. I remember to have reflected then that if the Church's regulations were applied consistently, businessmen, shopkeepers, journalists, and lawyers should not be allowed to take communion either because they too were compelled to sin every day by lying and deceiving for professional reasons.

"How old are you?" she said.

"Twenty."

And as she went on hugging and kissing me, I kept raising all kinds of objections against the Church's discriminatory practices. The Church was, after all, a human rather than a heavenly institution, I thought, and like all such institutions, it was bound to be riddled with all kinds of inconsistencies and injustices.

"I'm going to church now," she said after giving me a last, dismissive kiss. "Come back after Easter. I'll be waiting for you. We are still friends, aren't we? Promise you won't see another woman in the meantime."

I promised—the promise of a twenty-year-old.

After that we loved each other for about a year. She may have been unschooled and plebeian, her love may have been of the mercenary kind, but she was herself a thoroughly honest and decent person, which may explain why she enjoyed wide popularity among men of all ages, nationalities, and classes.

When I got to know her better, she would occasionally express embarrassment over her lack of education, but never her work. And all the while she took care of her little brother and sister from a distance and did so with such exemplary selflessness that I am sure it never occurred to her that she was sacrificing anything by selling her body to total strangers.

There was a mob at the entrance of her building and I recognized among them thieves, murderers, and similar riffraff jostling one another in their efforts to get in and satisfy their curiosity. A couple of policemen stepped out with pen and paper in their hands—probably having just registered the crime that had been committed earlier that day. When I asked the people nearest to me the reason behind this commotion, I was told: "They hit one of the girls in the building."

My premonition, which never fails me in such moments, sent a cold current down my spine. Breaching the wall of humanity that stood between me and the entrance, I rushed up the staircase and into her tiny flat which was now jammed by tenants. I saw a doctor
leaning over her bed. And there, lying in her
bed, I saw her for the last time.

Contrary to her habit, she was now dressed
in white—a white as pure and as dazzling as
snow. Only on her left breast I noticed a red
stain, like a rose in an immaculate field.

As soon as she caught sight of me she
tried to smile. I heard the doctor stating
that her condition was hopeless. She expressed
a final plea to take communion, at which
some people ran to the nearest church, but
returned soon after saying the priest had re-
fused to come. A little later she breathed her
last and except for her little brother and sister,
no one shed a single tear for her.

Years later, when I recounted this in-
cident to a church dignitary, a theologian, he
explained in some detail the doctrinal reasons
why she had been refused the sacrament,
pointing out the difference between adultery
and promiscuity on the one hand, and
prostitution on the other, adding that in the
first instance the Church was prepared to
make certain allowances, but in the second,
it must take a more uncompromising stance.

Though I could not refute them, his
explanations seemed to me specious as well
as cruel and unconvincing.

And never, I shall never forget her lying
there in that wide and deep bed of hers,
with a red rose on her breast.
(1902)
Once in a while I come across certain characters, among them so-called friends and acquaintances, who tug at my sleeve, take me aside and whisper: "Why don't you concentrate on your own affairs, man? This writing business doesn't fill the stomach."

Let us hope that these belly-worshiping poltroons will have no influence on the coming generation. We need men dedicated to ideas and willing to place the interests of the community above their own.

We all of us, condemn prostitution; yet, how many of us engage in that line of work! Lawyers who perjure themselves for a few pieces of silver; journalists who sell their conscience to vested interests; doctors who prolong a useless treatment; young men who marry wealth. In what way are these individuals different from common prostitutes?
My code of ethics: Between the real and the imaginary, choose the real; between truth and falsehood, choose truth. At all times. Everywhere.

Those who feel no responsibility towards the community as a whole must be self-centered nonentities—regardless of who they may be and where they may live. People who know nothing of the world that surrounds them deserve to drown in the tedium of their own petty calculations and interests.

A newspaper is not a chameleon. It should not change its colors to please readers. It is bound to make enemies. I would measure the moral success of a newspaper by its willingness to make enemies.

One must learn to view life from a certain point of vantage; one must learn to observe it with a vision that is clear and all-encompassing. Otherwise one will see only the mean and the petty and never the great and the beautiful.

So-called important and unusual events leave me cold. I prefer to unmask the hidden meanings of every-day occurrences which tend to be ignored by the majority.

I have noticed that some of our young men who travel all the way to Europe to complete their education, leave our city as ignoramuses and return as imbeciles. As soon as they acquire a glancing knowledge of a foreign language, their own becomes a source of embarrassment to them. All they have to do is learn the rudiments of science and they think they qualify as sophisticated cosmopolites. Though themselves the most ridiculous simpletons, they spend most of their time making fun of others. Their heads empty, their pockets bursting with their fathers' money, enamored of the latest fashion, they seem to have only one ambition in life: to please women. What are these young men but apes of their European counterparts, completely useless to their people as well as to humanity.

One should confront the misfortunes of life not with despair and dejection but in the same way that one confronts the sud-
den arrival of an unwelcome guest—with a smiling face. We Armenians should sing and laugh more often in order to develop that degree of emotional health and intellectual balance without which we can achieve very little in this world. A nation that is given to lamentations will never amount to anything.

To be talented and to have a distinctive personal style are two entirely different things: the first is like having many friends; the second, like having one good friend.

Evil is only one note in the polyphony of existence. Without the ugly we would take no notice of the beautiful; eliminate vices and virtues would cease to be admirable; redemption without a preceding fall would be inconceivable. In short, the world would be a tedious, monotonous, gray place not worth bothering about.

Like everywhere else here too the Armenian is that most pathetic of all creatures: the perennial outsider who continues to think the whole world was created to welcome him with open arms. Oblivious of his own problems, he occupies himself with other peoples' problems. In no position to shape his own destiny, he takes it upon himself to direct the destiny of the globe. Since the environment in which he lives refuses to adapt itself to him, he does all the conforming and adjusting. As impressionable as soft wax, he acquires indiscriminately the virtues as well as vices of the country in which he happens to be living.

In the same way that nature abhors a vacuum, literature abhors the absence of ideas.