

AHMET RASİM

First stirrings of youth

Translated by Meri Işın

An elderly man shocked by the blatant prostitution

in the streets was saying, "I was fifteen or sixteen. My father sent me home to fetch something. It was just before noon. I went upstairs and found my mother in her room weeping. Her eyes were red and she had tied a poultice of lemon juice and coffee to her brows. She looked distressed. My aunt was sitting next to her, massaging her wrists.

"What happened, mother?" I asked.

In a voice full of misery she answered, she answered, "There's nothing the matter, son."

"How can there be nothing the matter, mother. Look at the state you're in. Are you ill?"

"No, dear. Don't worry."

I went out into the hall. There I saw my old nurse. She was crying with the same grief. I asked her what was going on.

"Quiet, my child. Quiet!" she replied.

"What is going on, nurse dear."

The poor thing began to sob uncontrollably. She pulled me by the arm and took me into the other room. Amidst her sobs she told me, "You know our friend Remziye Hamm in Sarigüzel?"

"Yes, what about her. Has she died?"

"She isn't dead, but her heart is broken."

"Why?"

"Her daughter has fallen into bad ways!"

I was upset.

"Really!" I could think of nothing else to say. My wetnurse began to cry again. As she wiped her eyes she declared, "I hope it is a lie! Something inside tells me it is."

I took whatever it was I had been sent for and returned to the shop. My father was a devout man. When he saw me he asked, "What happened? Are you tired?"

I told him all about it. He stroked his beard.

"That a daughter of that family should fall into evil ways. It's unbelievable. It must be malicious gossip, or a misapprehension!"

My poor father did not cry but he coughed three or four times in quick succession. He could not sit down.

"God forbid! It is not for us to question, O Lord," he sighed as he rolled up the sleeves of his halı* shirt and pointing to the ewer indicated that I should pour it for him. He made his ablutions and performed his prayers. He was still murmuring, "God forbid! The good Lord moves in mysterious ways."

Guessing the state my mother was in, he kept repeating, "She will be ill for weeks. She is too frail and delicate for such ordeals."

That day he closed the shop earlier than usual. Although it was his habit to go shopping afterwards, that day he did not even drop by the coffee house, but went straight home. I stayed downstairs with my nurse.

"She fainted twice," she told me, and then added, "They say Remziye Hanım will be in the next world today or tomorrow. They have called in physicians, and said prayers for her, but she has still not come round. How can she? What humiliation!"

Then she began to call down curses upon the girl. "If it is true, may her eyes be blinded, may her heart be plucked out. May she come out in plague boils."

See how such an event affected people forty or forty-five years ago. Note the euphemistic wording of the story. There was nothing about her becoming a prostitute, no explicit accusation

* Cotton and wool mix fabric which did not violate the religious proscription against wearing silk

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that she had become whore. All they said was that she had fallen into bad ways.

In my youth I used to overhear talk of this description: "She lapsed but later she repented. Now she is a married woman with children. She conceals even the hem of her skirt, and never misses prayers."

"My family does not associate with her. She behaves immodestly."

"The master's daughter-in-law is a strange girl. I think she has had a school education. Last week she came into the shop. Is she mad or what? She kept lifting her veil, then closing it again, and looking out of the shop. She laughed. I nearly threw her out. Our shop is for shopping, but not that kind."

"He divorced her, and by the three repudiations!

"What was the reason?

"She went out shopping without permission!"

"That's ridiculous!"

"In my view he's right. If a woman doesn't tell you when she is going shopping, she won't tell you when she goes somewhere else. Suspicion is enough to make anyone consumptive."

"I hope so! They are engaged."

"They were engaged, but afterwards we broke it off."

"Why?"

"Her mother is dead, and her stepmother was originally her

father's mistress. Apparently they only got married later on!"

"I got home to discover my daughter wearing eyeliner. That's what you can do with your eyeliner. I slapped her. Then hot water and soap."

"She's only a child. How should she know?"

"People learn whatever they know in their childhood. She's not to blame, it's her mother's fault. She's been influenced. I have warned her so many times not to talk with the downstairs neighbours. 'What can I do, they come to visit me?' she says, and goes on talking to them. This time I put my foot down. 'It's either me or them' I told her."

"Good heavens! A thousand thanks that we have not sunk in hell. What do they think they're up to? Is this a holy day or the whores' festival? Confound them! May God give them their deserts. Haven't they got fathers and husbands? Look at that one! Has she tied her bathroll to her backside or what?"

"Where have you been?"

"At Nuriye Hanım's. God preserve us, her daughter is ill."

"Oh, poor thing!"

"But we warned them at the time not to marry her off to that fellow. We told them the rumours about his entanglements in Beyoğlu, but they didn't listen and went ahead with the marriage. It turned out to be true. The poor child found out, and brooded over it, but dared not say anything. He's a dragon, not a father! Do you think he'd listen? In the end she fell ill. Oh God, don't let mine make the same mistake. I'd rather he were a simple porter than a womaniser. Anything would be better than that!"

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The prostitution of antiquity seems oldfashioned compared to today's. Supposedly the infamies of ancient Rome and Greece reappeared in the Byzantine Empire, spreading like wildfire the moment the seeds took root. It might be thought that this storm of depravity which flared up in the west and swept along the northern coasts of Africa, and eastwards into Syria and the Eastern Roman Empire, stirred up tornadoes in this climate. Yes! Exploiting its civilisation as an instrument the West once again indulged in corruption of the East's virtue.

They used to say that war was one of the most important reasons for the rise of civilisation. It turns out that they were right!

Ahmet Rasim (1864-1932), auteur de poèmes, de nouvelles, de livres d'école, d'histoire et de sciences et qui a fait beaucoup de traductions, est plutôt connu par ses articles de journal et ses souvenirs où il décrit son enfance, sa jeunesse et sa carrière de presse avec un style très vivant.