

A LETTER TO A CONFERENCE OF OLD STUDENTS, APRIL 1951

by E. C. ALLEN (C.M.C.)¹

My dear Fellow Students, old and young,

How I wish I were with you to-day, instead of in a nursing-home, which has bored me stiff by keeping me in bed since February. It has its points, of course—and being so helpless now, I suppose it's 'all for the best'—but that's enough—and 'when upon my couch I lie, in vacant

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or in pensive mood,' I picture the Barn and with all the new chairs filled with eager people, so glad to see each other and with such a lot to hear and tell—and I am not there, alas; the first Conference I have missed!

I came to Scale How in 'ninety-nine—I was twenty-two, older than most of the students, gay people of eighteen more or less. I was a fortnight late and term had begun. All the new juniors knew each other and their way about. A senior helped me to unpack and carry the contents of a large dress box up to the room I shared with two others, the first on the left on the top landing. I had, of course, only the space that was left, the back three pegs of the hanging half and the floor of the shelf half of the cupboard. Rydal was frozen over and special trains ran from Manchester to Windermere for skating. The hills looked beautiful in the snow.

I loved Miss Mason from the first moment I saw her. The gracious welcome she gave me, her soft voice, and gentle manner. In that first year I learnt to love her more and more. She gave us that series of lectures known now as 'Parents and Children.' She never worried us, nor meant us to worry ourselves. What you know as Drawing-room Evenings were gatherings of her friends, and our part in them was to tease Mr. Boyle (senior) while Mrs. Boyle tried to wind his scarf round his neck in the hall when it was over, and to admire Miss Firth, so sweet and demure. Which reminds me: most of you know I sometimes write about the term's artist for the P.R. After I had been at Scale How about a fortnight, I sat down for tea beside the Senior Monitress and asked her where she had been that afternoon. 'Up to Mrs. Firth's,' she said. 'We had Perugino.' 'Oh,' I said, 'what's that?' So I was not far from the young man in *Punch* who asked was Botticelli a cheese or a wine?

I may say, that for the first month I was only happy and warm out of doors. Fraulein Diez took an interest in me because I came from a village where she had been governess in a family of three girls, Professor Jebb's (a great Greek scholar and late head of Bedford College). They were all older than myself or my sisters so I did not know them well. She introduced me to Marion Flower, the Senior Monitress. The next morning, in the classroom, she was busy writing lists on slips of paper. I asked her what she was doing. 'Making lists; your name comes in many of them,' was her answer, 'and there are many more on the board over there.' Completely at sea, I walked over to the board, saw it was covered with lists, could not understand what they meant, so feeling miserable, withdrew to my desk, which was in the corner at the back of the room furthest from the fire. I had not sat continuously on a wooden seat (except in church) since I was at school, and my bones ached and I understood why some seats had little woollen mats on them. In time I settled down.

I loved Miss Mason and Miss Kitching, at whose table I sat, and I thoroughly enjoyed

taking the other side in whatever argument Miss Pennethorne chose to begin. I don't think I ever sank to jogging my neighbour's elbow every time she tried to drink, but I did find out what 'Sloyd' meant, and every walk I took revealed new beauty. Stock Ghyll in winter after heavy rain is wonderful. The walk to Sweden Bridge is packed with romance. In spite of a skirt the regulation 'three inches from the ground,' I climbed the walls when I could not find a stile, [p 142]

and our 'Juniors' play was one of the best ever. Miss Pennethorne as a witch, stirring a pot of glue to the chant of 'Double, double, toil and trouble, paper fold and binding double,' was warmly applauded.

On our half-term holiday we went in a real coach with four horses to Keswick. I had an awful cold, so was compelled to travel inside, but the thrill was all the same. We went down to the Infants' School for our evening classes of metal-work, botany and hygiene, and there I hammered out a brass ashtray and learnt not to ask too many questions about words I did not understand. We climbed Wansfell on Jubilee night to see the bonfire lit, a most thrilling sight; and went up Kirkstone Pass to have the red, white and blue paper wreaths round our hats turned to pulp.

The Senior Monitress had the privilege of getting Miss Mason's tea on Sunday, and I helped her. We made buttered toast and she carried the tray in and I stood outside with the dish to follow. One of our privileges was to walk to church with Miss Mason. One waited on the step for her and once I was honoured by going for a drive with her. We talked about Jane Austen, and she told me Mr. Woodhouse in *Emma*—'One of our little eggs, soft-boiled, as Serle knows how, is not indigestible'—was her favourite character. And we laughed over 'Mr. E.' and Jane's long letters.

Fraulein Diez taught us Italian and once Miss Butler and I, sitting at a little side table, found Miss Mason's table listening in silence to our recital of the passage which we had learnt that morning. Miss Hodgson taught me much and Lucy Gore of my year wrote a delightful poem about her of which the last verse was:

Now students dear, Miss Hodgson said,
We've had a pleasant poke;
Shall we be turning home again?
The students never spoke,
But that was hardly odd, because,
They'd found the flower of oak!

But I think I have said enough, and will 'make way for honest men.' Oh, I've remembered Miss Mason used to visit the bedrooms now and then and leave her card on the bed.

Once I was in the Senior Monitress's room when I should have been in my own bed, looking at her Sloyd models (she was an expert) when suddenly Miss Mason appeared at the door which was wide open. We were not attempting to conceal our villainy. She looked at us and said very quietly, 'I'm sorry,' and went away. Not another word was ever spoken of that moment. It did not take me three minutes to get into bed.

When we came back in January 1898, Miss Mason was ill, and I remember saying to

someone—Miss Kitching, perhaps—that the new juniors do not know Miss Mason at all. But I think they felt her influence in the house, though her physical presence was not seen. I hope some of my year will now add to these reminiscences!

Good luck to you all.

E. C. ALLEN

¹ Miss Allen died on January 4th, 1952.