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Arlington, Vermont
July 30, 1953

Dear Mr. Castor:

Now I have my fluently-typing Ediphone secretary back from her vacation, I'll sit down at once to dictate some of the things I remember about General Pershing. I want to make a preliminary statement loud and clear--that is, that these are only dictated, just as they come into my head, and won't be revised before they are sent to you. So for goodness sake, don't quote literally from any of it, if you find anything in it to quote at all, but take out your editorial file and smooth up the English before you think of using it.

The first thing that comes into my mind is about that geometry class that Pershing taught. I have already written you the composition of it, fully grown young men, some of them not so very young, already in the university and desperately clawing their way into a knowledge of geometry to make up for deficiencies in their lack of good high school training. It was simply impossible that a little girl of thirteen or maybe I was fourteen that year could possibly have been a "star" student. So do eliminate that. It was an amiable thought of Pershing's when he was writing in his old age of his memories. Now, of course, the quality of his teaching is an indication of his character. I remember it very well, because it was the only time in my life--even in my years in France, where the teaching at that time was very old fashioned and by rote, that I ever encountered a teacher who taught a living subject like geometry as he would have taught a squad of raw recruits. He was teaching to drill--that is by telling them what to do and expecting them to do it. He was of the kind who said, "Lesson for tomorrow will be from page 32 to page 36. All problems must be solved before coming to class."

As I remember it, he never gave us any idea of what geometry was all about, and I now have the impression that he didn't know himself that there was anything more to geometry than what was on page 32 and following. I particularly remember that class because one girl in it, a little girl of about my age, was completely bewildered by geometry. She didn't understand it at all nor was anything ever said in class to make her understand it. But she had the quick facile memory of a youngster of that age. And she was also very much afraid of Pershing's harsh rebuke when somebody didn't know a lesson. So she ended by committing her lessons to memory--literally to memory. That is, if anybody had changed the lettering of a problem, or the different points of a triangle, for instance, she wouldn't have been able to do it. But by committing it to memory she was able to get through each day's recitation putting it correctly on the board. And as I remember, she was passed at the end of the year without Pershing ever having detected the fact that she didn't understand a word of what she was saying. And yet the older men students who were working for an engineer's course, got a great deal out of it. The point was they had the motivation, and also the maturity of mind and experience which took them out of the class of the bewildered little girl, and enabled them to need just what Pershing gave, a sort of supervision of self-education.

So much for his geometry teaching. Now for his training of the battalion, which was really quite an interesting sociological American phenomenon, if you let me use dictionary words. The student body was composed of very provincial young American men, rather older than many university students in the east. They had had not the slightest contact with military training, or any other form of external discipline. Some of them, like Alvin Johnson, of the New School for Social Research (do look up that and see his chapter on Pershing) couldn't see any sense to it and didn't like Pershing at all. But quite a number of the others were devoted to him. My brother speaks of him with the greatest enthusiasm, personally. He took those raw country boys, recalcitrant to discipline as they were naturally, and by West Point methods shaped them up into a battalion which took many a prize in inter-state drills--which were the fashion in those days. He also gave them some lectures in tactics (I remember seeing the diagrams on the board in our geometry class left over from a tactical recitation) and gave them some elementary notions of what military activity in war times amounted to. In short, he did a very good job I think. And he had a really wonderful success in transposing the West Point atmosphere briefly into those hours when the battalion was drilling or parading.

Now I think is the time to tell you the story of the derby hat. It is a funny story about Pershing, but I think one which shows something of the quality of his personality. Once a week or so, maybe it was at longer intervals, maybe it was two or three times a year, the whole battalion had a dress parade--which the boys simply loved, of course. And it was something to go to look at too, in a town where there wasn't so very much and nothing else of this kind. So all the other students, and the professors, and a lot of townspeople used to come and stand around on the sides of the parade ground to watch the battalion maneuver, and finally come swinging up by platoons into a long, perfectly straight line across the parade grounds.

Because Pershing did so much of civilian work, he was a student of the law school at the university there as well as teaching a class, he often wore civilian clothes. He had at the back of the parade ground a tent where he kept records and things of that sort, where he often used to change his clothes, before coming out on the parade ground. He was invisible in the tent while the battalion was wheeling and maneuvering and finally coming into a straight line.

Then the usual routine was that he stepped out on the parade ground and walked across it at his snappiest pace, his legs swinging out straight in that West Point crispness, and stood with his arms folded up under his nose while the young adjutant advanced from the front line. The adjutant who admired Pershing's military bearing did his level best to make his civilian legs swing out as straight as Pershing's did, and when he came in front of him, he came to the salute and said in a loud voice, very audible to all of us watching, "Sir, the parade is formed."

Then Pershing would answer the salute with a very snappy West Point salute of his own and, barking out of the corner of his mouth, in his harsh, top-sergeant, professional military man's command would say, "PreSENT Harms!" or whatever it was that the commanding officer says at that point.

One day when I happened to be tailing along among the spectators on the side lines, After the adjutant ~~had~~ marched out from the line of the battalion, the flaps of Pershing's tent parted and he came out as usual, marching as usual as if on a West Point parade ground, but with his derby hat on instead of his military cap. He had changed his clothes evidently in a hurry and had forgotten to change his hat. Of course everybody simply froze in horror, in suppressed amusement, (for nobody dared to laugh) and in wonder what he would do next. Utterly unconscious of his aspect, he stepped across the parade ground just as snappily as ever, the adjutant had come up to meet him just as ever, although wondering wildly what was going to happen, came to the salute and said, "Sir, the parade is formed." Pershing then brought his forefinger up to what he thought would be the visor of his cap and encountered the brim of his derby hat. Without a change in a muscle of his face, he brought his hand down just as smartly as if he had given the salute, turned on his heel, marched back with his legs cracking straight as he walked to his tent, went in, came out with his cap on, walked back across the big parade ground, the adjutant still standing waiting, everybody still perfectly silent, without a ripple or the turning of a head anywhere. When he got out to where he usually stood, he went right on with the interrupted salute and barked out in his usual harsh voice, "PreSENT Harms!" or whatever.

Now I always thought that was characteristic of him, that he had so established the military tradition of decorum that a perfectly unbridled middle-western group of spectators did not laugh, did not comment on it and did not laugh afterwards. (I did! And I'm laughing)

ever since, whenever I'm thought of.

Years later when I saw him in Paris during the first World War, I was asked by some army newspaper to write something about him. I have been dragooned into this, several times in my life, because so few people seem to have known him personally at all. So I said to him, "I think people would be amused and would like the story of the derby hat." He looked startled, and said, "Well, all right. But you let me see it before you send it into the magazine."

So after I wrote it, I showed it to him--I haven't any copy of the way I put it, but I daresay very much like this. He read it through gravely and then handed it back to me and said, "All right, I'll pass that." And then he added, "You know you are the first person who ever spoke to me about that." Now I think that too is characteristic of the man and shows a good and broad side of his nature. He didn't mind that story being told. That he passed it, showed a certain liberal largeness of personality which most people don't attribute to him.

As I remember it, he came to the University of Nebraska just as my father also went there as Chancellor. That is, they were both new to the situation. I think my father took his measure pretty early, and anyhow he did have a reputation for--well, it wouldn't be called drinking nowadays when everybody does it, but of not being the most sober member of society; and anyhow my father was a pretty good educator, and knew that a full-blooded young man of that age (he was past 30 then) really wouldn't have enough to do to keep him out of mischief just with training the battalion which wasn't allowed too many hours out of the regular educational work. So he suggested energetically to Pershing

that he study law in the university law-school while he was there. This Pershing did, and became very much interested in it and took his degree at the end of his four years there and has often told me that it was a great help to him in many ways. It certainly was a help to him while he was in Lincoln.

after that, for years

Now I am afraid I don't remember anything about him at all except that when we were living in New York, which was between 1900 and 1910, or thereabouts, he suddenly appeared at the apartment one day to ask for my father's endorsement of that terrific promotion of his by President Theodore Roosevelt which took him over the heads of goodness knows how many ranking officers. My father was in bed with lumbago at that time, and my mother said it was impossible to see him because he had a very bad case and couldn't even turn over,--was lying with his face to the wall. But Pershing (what was he then, Colonel perhaps?) said "Oh, that is all right. He could see ~~him~~^{me}." So he marched into the bedroom and leaning over my father put the matter to him, and asked him to sign on the dotted line. This my father did because he always liked him, and you know how liking goes. Anybody who feels that he is liked shows a much more amiable and humane side than one who feels he is being kept aloof.

Then along came the Second World War. I was married with two children then, and went with my husband to France in 1916, taking the children along. My husband entered the ambulance service for one of the French armies, and was at the front a good deal. If you look up in "The Brimming Cup" the passage in which I describe the first appearance of the American troops marching through Paris, I think it is about page 285, you will see what they looked like, to us, and what kind of troops Pershing had been commanding on the Mexican border. Pershing, as a matter of fact, marched at the head of that parade on the Fourth of July, but I didn't notice him specially nor think anything about it because it had been a good many years since I had remembered there was such a person. We had been living in Vermont very quietly ever since we had been married.

But shortly after that, I had a very cordial note from him from the Hotel Crillon, where he was staying with his staff, inviting me to come and have breakfast with him--the only time that he had free. So I went, and found that he was almost hungrily glad to see somebody he considered one of the home-folks. He didn't speak French, you know, and I think it was the first time he had ever been in Europe, and he was a man--as West Pointers of that period were--without the slightest traces of what we call culture, such as practically all French and British officers had. He received me with open arms, so glad to see somebody who spoke French, about whom he knew personally and who didn't want anything from him. Naturally he was surrounded by people who were trying to trade on any sort of contact with him in the past, to get some sort of military favors.

He not infrequently asked me to come to see him, to have a meal with him and his staff, during the rest of the war days--when I was in Paris, that is.

And there I got an impression of him entirely different from the very slight impression that I had had before as a little girl. He

was not on his guard with me at all, evidently thinking of me still as Chancellor Canfield's little daughter. And he was under considerable nervous strain so that he frequently spoke out quite frankly. And I remember some of those talks, which I will try to set down here for you although they don't amount to anything.

I remember that he asked me to meet him and his staff the evening he got back from the front after the first engagement in which American troops had taken an active fighting part. I don't now remember which engagement it was, but you probably know it if you are familiar with that history. He sent an orderly for me in a car--this was a great luxury in Paris at that time--to pick me up at the house of an old French friend where I was staying. We went to Foyot's restaurant, over in the Luxembourg quarter of Paris. I knew about Foyot's, everybody did. But we had very little money, certainly none to waste on expensive restaurants. This was the very old restaurant which was the especial favorite of the Senators whose assembly hall was in the Luxembourg Palace close at hand. I don't know how Pershing happened to choose it--probably some French attaché on his staff had suggested it. When we arrived at the door, we were met by the Maitre d'Hotel himself in all his elderly grandeur. And he told us that the Foyot restaurant considered itself honored by having General Pershing and his staff, (there were about ten of them) there, but that they were going to give him a private room where he could talk at complete ease, as he could not in the public room. So I, greatly impressed, tagged along with the staff and went upstairs to a very handsome private room, where I had never been before, you may be sure, and never have been since. I tell you this story because it illustrates a phase of Pershing's character which I thought admirable at the time. The Maitre d'Hotel seated us all at a long table (wasn't it funny, a tiny little mother of a family with those American officers) and then leaned over Pershing most respectfully with a pencil and paper in his hand to find out his wishes for the supper.

But Pershing, just fresh from the first battlefield, was boiling with excitement and elation, and he didn't care what we had to eat. He glanced up briefly at the Maitre d'Hotel's respectful face with its long side whiskers, and said, "Oh, I don't care what we have, anything you've got!"--said to the Maitre d'Hotel of Foyot's! I almost burst out laughing at the expression on the serious-minded, elderly, responsible French restaurateur's face. He persisted murmuring, "Would Monsieur le Général like perhaps some--" and then I don't remember what, some suggestions for very fine food. Pershing said again, not impatiently, but with a complete indifference, "Oh, you decide it. I don't care." So the discomfited Maitre d'Hotel went away and brought us back the most delicious meal I ever ate in my life. It took some time to prepare it, you can imagine, and some ~~time~~ ^{kind} to serve it, since French service is always very leisurely. And during that time, they all talked at the tops of their voices, General Pershing particularly addressing his remarks to me since what they were saying was new to me, about what they thought had been the magnificent conduct of the American troops under fire for the first time in Europe. I remember particularly Pershing's banging his fist down on the table and shouting out, "I am certainly going to jump down the throat of the next person who asks me 'Will the Americans really fight?'" They were all excited,

but there was very little drinking. A glass of wine with the food is not considered drinking, you know, by the Americans. But they had no cocktails and needed none to keep them up to a boiling point of elation. Pershing had been going up and down the military hospitals after the battle, and was moved almost to tears by their splendid spirit. I had never seen him emotional before, and felt very much touched myself. I hadn't seen an American for a couple of years, I suppose, before that. And I was rather excited, too, of course, by the proof that American troops could hold their own on the battlefield. There had been such doubts of that in the French people all around me.

I have one other recollection of him in wartime France. He had insisted on the Americans being kept together in an army of their own. But there ~~was~~ such disastrous results from that, that this decision was being sharply criticized. And on one of these dinner meetings when Pershing and his staff invited me to come in, he told me again with an emotion I didn't know he could feel, how terribly uncertain he had been as to the wisdom of his decision. And then he told of being in a chateau near the front where disastrous engagements were taking place, and looking out of the window and seeing Foch and the English commanding general, whose name I forget just this minute, standing on the driveway down below in front of the chateau looking very anxious and talking together with their aides behind them. He said, "It just came to me with an inspiration that I must change my decision at least for the present, if things were to be saved." So he told me, he went right down the stairs by himself without any aides near him (and he hardly ever stirred a step without an aide tagging along behind), walked right up to them and said, "I put all that America has at your disposition from this hour on." He was stirred in thinking about it, and I was deeply touched, but knowing that he knew practically no French and had to have an interpreter, and feeling on very familiar terms with him by that time, I asked him, "But how did you tell them, since your interpreter wasn't there?" He looked surprised and said, "That's so. What did I do?" and then added "Well, I just told them anyhow."

Then one more: He had made me feel so much like a younger-generation member of his own family, that on another day out of just idle curiosity, I asked him ~~the~~ question which, the moment it was out of my mouth, I knew could be taken very much the wrong way, "Who writes your speeches for you?"

To my relief he said with the utmost openness and, indeed, with an accent of surprise, "Why, I write them myself!" I thought that was rather magnanimous of him, too, not to resent my question.

Now one more memory. This time from my mother, who was in Lincoln at the time he was being received on his return from the Second World War. His sister lived there, I believe; this was after the death of his wife and children. They had some sort of big meeting for him at the armory or at some assembly hall, to which my mother went with Miss Pershing and the General. He ~~was~~ one of the world's poorest public speakers, and never, if it was possible, accepted any engagement where he was going to be called upon to speak. But of course he had to say something in answer to all the praise that was heaped on him at this

meeting. He spoke all right, my mother said, briefly and to the point and satisfactorily to everybody. The point of this recollection is that when he got into the automobile to go back to the Pershing home with my mother and his sister, he asked like an open-hearted boy, "Did I do all right?"

The last time I saw him was quite near our home here in Williamstown. He was to be given an honorary degree at Williams College, as he had received degrees from ever so many other colleges that June--I imagine it must have been the first June after he got back from France. We are only thirty miles from Williams College and he sent me a special invitation to go down. My father was a Williams College man of '68 so I am quite at home in Williams College and was glad to go.

Pershing was there in all his glory of immaculate uniform, perfectly tailored and perfectly fitting, and his pose with that firm erectness (not with the Prussian rigidity) of the West Point man. After the Commencement Exercises it is a Williams College habit always to have an alumni luncheon at which the receivers of honorary degrees say something. At that luncheon there were several very brilliant speakers, the kind who keep the audience laughing and cheering. I wondered what Pershing must be feeling about his own ordeal before him, but as we looked up at him at the speaker's table he looked perfectly calm and quite untroubled. When he was introduced, I understood why. The master of ceremonies gave him a long introduction full of praise and finally said, "I have the honor to present to you General John J. Pershing," at which of course the audience (this was immediately after the War) burst into loud and long applause. Pershing stood up, receiving this calmly, waited until it had completely died down and then gave the audience, silently, without a word, one of his most snappily executed West Point salutes and sat down again! And then you had better believe the audience applauded! They took the roof off, so to speak. After that we went to have tea with him (yes, tea, this was before the days when tea meant something alcoholic), and he told me that he felt awfully tired of all this going around to Commencements. He and his aide, who was there with him as always, told me how many they had been to, and it really was a record! But then he added with a sigh of relief, "Well, I have only got Harvard and Yale before me now and then I can go home."

He wrote me several letters, but I don't remember just now what was in them, with one exception. I think I have sent them up to the University of Vermont which is making a collection of all my papers. I do remember one thing that he said, because it interested me--I knew so little about military details and military life. He wrote that he had been invited to become a member of a law firm in New York, at a very high salary which would make his life financially entirely easy after he retired, and he was close to the retiring age. But he said something like this, "I don't think I would be capable of managing myself in civilian life in a real occupation. For so long I have an aide de camp right beside me every minute except when I was in bed, who saw to everything for me, that I don't believe I would be able to read a timetable, or get a train, and I know I would never remember to pick up my briefcase and take it along, because I have always had somebody for

so many years now look after all those details of life." So he just retired on his pension and whatever he had left from the fortune which came to him after his wife's death.

One of the things you asked was, did I ever know of any great change in his character after that terrible catastrophe. No, I don't think there was any. I think he was always all very much of a piece--a thoroughly trained, sound, professional military man--no more, no less.

Perhaps I might venture to make one more characterization of him, and that was that although in France he was thrown into a social situation entirely different from any he had ever encountered, and although he had no social training except what they get at West Point, and didn't speak any language but English, he managed very well to maintain his dignity and to represent the United States very acceptably. He did this largely by lack of personal vanity, and perhaps by lack of imagination.

There, I hope this will be of some use to you. Every good luck.

Faithfully yours,

Dorothy Sanford Fisher

DCF/v