READER'S DIGEST

50th Anniversary Treasury

A selection of the best of 50 years from The Reader's Digest

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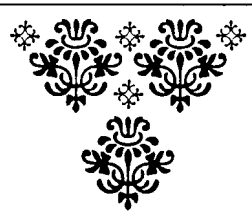

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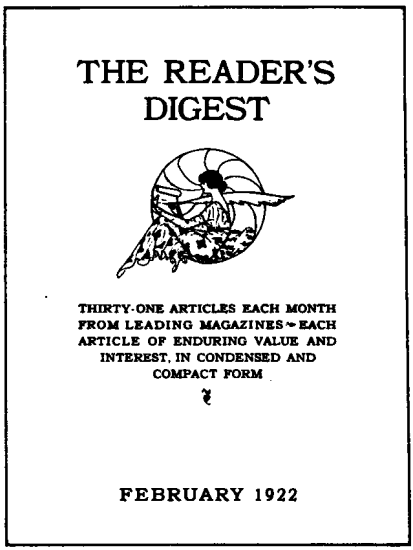

A "Swift Power to Illuminate"

By Edward Weeks
Editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1938-66

[Foreword]

DEWITT WALLACE, in creating The Reader's Digest, devised a technique to bring home unexpected truths, American humor and aspiration, science, faith-in-being, and the human adventure to the largest readership the world has ever known. It is an accomplishment for which every editor salutes him. His initiative and taste have shaped the character of this Treasury, which in its variety of

subject matter, in its liveliness and swift power to illuminate represents what is best in The Reader's Digest during its first half century.

To understand the originality of his technique one must recall the magazine world as it was when the 20-year-old Wallace was first experimenting. Editors took pride in being exclusive, and their readers were segregated. The intelligentsia subscribed to "the Quality Group": seven literary monthlies, some illustrated, of which only two, *Harper's* and the *Atlantic,* survive. The middlebrows, of which I was one, held a family loyalty to either *The Saturday Evening Post* or *Collier's,* rarely both. For women there were magazines of fashion and homemaking which featured fiction; for the quizzical reader, eager for muckraking, there was *McClure's,* while the *National Geographic* nourished those with wanderlust. Then there were the *Literary Digest,* designed for teachers and clergymen, and *Littell's Living Age,* which digested the foreign press and periodicals for a precarious circulation of 15,000 copies. That was the scope, in 1910, and no one knew how many millions it left untouched.

As a young and hungry reader Wallace kept a file of the magazine articles that interested him and with impatience penciled out the superfluous verbiage to get at the heart of the matter. After writing promotion for a textbook publisher in hometown St. Paul, he put his savings into a booklet, *Getting the Most Out of Farming,* an annotated guide to free agricultural bulletins. With this idea of serving the reader by making the best practical advice accessible—perhaps doing it for a general audience—he felt he was on the track of something good. The war decided him: in France in 1918 he spent four months in hospital recovering from shrapnel wounds received at Meuse-Argonne and reading every magazine he could get his hands on. By now his habit of cutting had become a pre-

cision tool. After his discharge, he printed on his own a pocket-size sample of 31 magazine articles, picked and rigorously cut to his liking, and this prototype of the Digest he submitted to a number of publishers. No one would even nibble; Hearst thought it too serious for a mass market.

So with no backers, during the depression of 1921, DeWitt laid out the first issue of The Reader's Digest on capital ($1800) mostly borrowed from his father and brother. To help him he had his bride, Lila Acheson—her outside job paid their rent that first year in New York. Since the first issue of February 1922, the Digest has been endowed with the faith and talent of them both. The growth from an initial printing of 5000 to a worldwide sale of 29 million copies a month, in 13 languages, is an achievement without parallel.

In the citation conferring the Medal of Freedom on both DeWitt and Lila Wallace, President Nixon praised them "for creating a feeling of idealism in this country and among people abroad." To the conservative Midwest philosophy inherited from his father, a preacher and president of struggling little Macalester College, DeWitt added his own priorities. He is an editor who believes, not doubts. He believes absolutely in the individual, and in the concept of self-help, or "one-man power" —that man is not a passive, helpless creature, but is capable of influencing his own fate. This belief is central in the Digest.

Insatiably curious about America and the world, Wallace has gone gunning for the problems that baffle us all. He avoided "the literary," bypassed poetry, ruled out the exploitive sex and melancholy which have obsessed much of modern fiction. He was confident that an expert's word would be accepted without tedious documentation. He enjoys action, biography and, pre-eminently, the excitement of new ideas. In the 1930s, with growing confidence and financial resources, the Digest itself

began commissioning articles, placing some, printing others as "originals," and drawing at greater length from books.

If in this anthology the contributions over the last four decades are of deeper perception and concern than those of the early years, it is because we as a people have grown more conscientious. Consider the circumstances of the inspiriting lead piece, "Bold Men, Bold Dreams," by Catherine Drinker Bowen. Invited by *Sports Illustrated* for an issue celebrating "bold sportsmen," it was written during the peril of the Cuban crisis and inspired by Bacon's phrase that Columbus had made hope reasonable: could the United States now sustain that hope? Consider "Racism in White America," by Whitney Young, the strongest statement by an American black the Digest has ever published: it could not have been taken seriously before the Decision of 1954.

It is not our desire to live dangerously, but we do. Which is why we must remember *Time's* tense, poignant reporting, "Death in Dallas"; why we must grieve over the mystery and the waste of "Hippie or Schoolgirl," which came straight out of the columns of the New York *Times* and was awarded a Pulitzer Prize; why we must "Pray for Barbara's Baby"; and why elders, denouncing the use of marijuana by their young, are brought up short by the probing of "Alcohol and Your Brain." No man in this century had so many lives depending on his judgment as Gen. Dwight Eisenhower in that critical hour when he ordered the invasion of Europe, a time for greatness so superbly recounted by Cornelius Ryan in "The Longest Day." Respond to the shock of "—And Sudden Death," which had its inception in Wallace's conversation with a wayside mechanic. It has proved to be the most quoted and I believe influential magazine piece of our time.

"One-man power" is most strikingly illustrated in this Treasury by a woman: "The Extraordinary Story of Helen Keller"

demonstrates a memorable triumph of spirit over physical disability. Faith-in-being, as I call it, comes from the excerpt from Winston Churchill's autobiography, in which the boy at the bottom of his class at Harrow blesses the man who taught him English; it comes from Eleanor Roosevelt recalling her not always patient submission to her mother-in-law; and from James Michener's "You Never Stop Learning"—the perfect blend for a commencement address, short but stirring.

The Digest seems to find at least one illuminating piece on health for every issue—an emphasis which at times has been parodied. Yet the magazine ranks as a pioneer of popular but responsible medical journalism. A prime example is "Facts Behind the Cigarette Controversy," the lead-off article in a 14-year series that brought home as never before the association between smoking and lung cancer. No other periodical has so altered the public's attitude toward cigarettes.

The science in this Treasury is in human terms. It begins with a description of man's first flight into lunar orbit, an achievement that thrilled earthbound television watchers with their first close view of the moon, and it ranges from Wolfgang Langewiesche's interpretive reading of each layer of the Grand Canyon, to "The Secret World of the Unborn," a woman doctor's beautiful clarification of life within the womb.

In this book home truths come to us from many directions: from an Air Force physician with his authoritative program for exercise ("How to Feel Fit at Any Age"); from John Gunther, one of the great fact-gatherers for the Digest, with his searching assessment of the Russian people; from Stanley High in "I Go to Church" and Donald Culross Peattie in "The Wonder of Wood"; from Charles Lindbergh depicting his sense of release and humility while walking in an Indonesian jungle; from the insight of William James on "Making Habits Work for You"; and in her wise charming way from Marya Mannes in "The

Power Men Have Over Women." Amen say I, let's keep it.

The naturalists here have a story to tell those who, like myself, are distressed about our vanishing wildlife. The revival of the Pribilof seals ("Seal Islands—Treasure Islands") sets an example which might save the Atlantic salmon. One shudders at the electronic extermination of leviathans (". . . And God Created Great Whales"), and in an ingenious Yellowstone National Park expedition we witness how and when the great grizzlies go to bed.

DeWitt Wallace has always remembered that people read for enjoyment as much as for enlightenment. Such Digest departments as "Life in These United States" and "Quotable Quotes" are funny because they are so true. So is that glorious characterization, "God and My Father," by Clarence Day. And from the heart out come "Corporal Hardy," that evocation of loyalty by Richard Ely Danielson, and "When Hannah Var Eight Yar Old," a classic from the days when many stories were in dialect. I prize that true-to-life affair, "84, Charing Cross Road"—and of all memorable characters in this Treasury I choose that Down East erratic of laughter and tears, "My Quicksilver Uncle" by Robert P. Tristram Coffin.

Wallace has said that "the Digest opens windows on the world." Yes, and what the world sees through them are people—striving, progressing, cheery, and, in the main, American.

Edward Weeks has long been a commanding presence on the American literary scene. He established himself with the Atlantic Monthly Press, in Boston, during the late 1920s as a brilliant book editor. Then for almost three decades he edited the august pages of The Atlantic Monthly, maintaining its prestige while giving it new breadth and vigor.

His own books include "The Open Heart," "In Friendly Candor," and "This Trade of Writing."

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Bold Men, Bold Dreams

Catherine Drinker Bowen

[July 1965]

THEY were bold from the first. A man stood on the shores of Portugal and looked westward, nearly five centuries ago. From the way the winds blew, from the seasonal steadiness of them and the direction, the man conjectured there might be land behind these winds. A mariner might sail, and by dead reckoning—by the log, by the compass—he might find this land.

A wild thought, a bold dream, yet it came true. The ships embarked, captained by freemen, adventurers. At the end of voyage, at the end of struggle, endurance and high gamble, a New Continent was found. On a perilous horizon America took shape, and was realized. Columbus had made hope reasonable.

The years passed, and the generations. Not Columbus now but America herself made hope reasonable. Put it in terms of government: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union . . . do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

Europe laughed. "We the people." What kind of phrase was that? A government erected on the proposition that all men are by nature equally free and independent? Preposterous statement, subverting the established order! Nor did Americans pause to argue it. They simply declared certain "truths" to be "self-evident." "*Novus Ordo Seclorum*," they wrote on their Great Seal: A new order for the ages.

Was ever a country, young or old, so brash? How serious, asked Europe, were these Americans? How long could they sustain this impudent program? Europe laid traps, offered bribes, hoping to divide these united states and bring them low. A federation so large, embracing such diversified regions and interests, would surely fail, disintegrate, slip and slide of its own weight in one quarter or another.

In the Old World only an occasional statesman saw into the future. Edmund Burke in the House of Commons said, "America, which at this day serves for little more than to amuse you with stories of savage men and uncouth manners, yet shall, before you taste of death, show itself equal to the whole of that British commerce which now attracts the envy of the world."

Threats from without only helped to solidify the Union. Ours was a country founded in a religious era by men of fierce fighting piety and dogma; religion could have divided us. But we had seen the religious wars of Europe and we were forewarned. From the first, Americans made a profoundly significant separation of church and state, giving citizens a scope and a hope which nowhere else were entertained. Thomas Jefferson, a man who could not put pen to paper without leaving a trace of fire, wrote the Virginia *Statute of Religious Liberty*: "Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free . . . our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics and geometry."

Nowhere had the documents and declarations mentioned "the individual." Yet by this government and this system the American individual was freed exactly as if fetters had been struck from him. The U.S. Constitution provided for neither class nor privilege. A man could move up or he could slip down. It was a wholly unprecedented departure. Neither the Declaration of Independence nor the Constitution claimed to make timid men courageous, lazy men active or stupid men bright. But these documents allowed bold men to be bold; they unlocked doors, let Americans walk through, each to his destiny.

Take it in terms of those men who opened up our western territory. Trappers, fur traders, Lewis and Clark, the Long Hunters and the Mountain Men. The Mormons carried fiddles