EIGHT DECADES

AGNES REPPLIER

E I G H T D E C A D E S

ESSAYS AND EPISODES
BY AGNES REPPLIER



BOSTON

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

The Ribersibe Bress Cambridge

EIGHT DECADES

BOOKS BY AGNES REPPLIER

K

BOOKS AND MEN POINTS OF VIEW

ESSAYS IN MINIATURE

ESSAYS IN IDLENESS

IN THE DOZY HOURS, AND OTHER PAPERS

VARIA

A BOOK OF FAMOUS VERSE (ed.)

THE FIRESIDE SPHINX

COMPROMISES

IN OUR CONVENT DAYS

A HAPPY HALF-CENTURY, AND OTHER ESSAYS

AMERICANS AND OTHERS

COUNTER-CURRENTS

POINTS OF FRICTION

TIMES AND TENDENCIES

UNDER DISPUTE

TO THINK OF TEA!

IN PURSUIT OF LAUGHTER

EIGHT DECADES



COPYRIGHT, 1904, 1908, 1912, 1920, 1924, 1931,1936, AND 1937, BY AGNES REPPLIER ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO REPRODUCE THIS BOOK OR PARTS THEREOF IN ANY FORM

The Riverside Press

CAMBRIDGE - MASSACHUSETTS

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

此为试读,需要完整PDF请访问: www.ertongbook.com

CONTENTS

EIGHT DECADES	1
HORACE	5 1
THE MASTERFUL PURITAN	71
THE PERILS OF IMMORTALITY	89
Town and Suburb	101
THE VIRTUOUS VICTORIAN	119
Living in History	181
THE DIVINENESS OF DISCONTENT	147
THE HEADSMAN	165
When Lalla Rookh was Young	181
Allegra	197
CRUELTY AND HUMOUR	223
What Is Moral Support?	237
The Estranging Sea	249
THE CHILL OF ENTHUSIASM	263
THE CONDESCENSION OF BORROWERS	275
The Grocer's Cat	289

EIGHT DECADES



EIGHT DECADES

1867

I am ten years old, and I can read. There does not seem to be anything remarkable about this circumstance, seeing that most little girls of ten have been reading since they were seven; but it was not so with me. Three years of intensive teaching have conquered the sluggish mind that could not be brought to see any connection between the casual and meaningless things called letters and all the sweetness and delight that lay between the covers of books.

And my nursery was rich in sweetness and delight. A big old-fashioned bookcase crammed with volumes — the best of them having been left behind by my half-brothers when they took their flight from home. 'The Arabian Nights' with double columns of print, and those 'small, square agitating cuts' so dear to Henley's heart. 'Popular Tales from the Norse' — wild reading that — and 'Robinson Crusoe' with many woodcuts, and 'Sandford and Merton.' Then came my own treasures; Miss Edgeworth's stories which I loved, and Miss Strickland's 'Tales from History,' which I loved better still, and Hans Andersen's fairy tales, and 'Undine,' and 'Sintram,' and Tieck's 'Elves,' and 'Paul and Virginia,' and 'The Nutcracker of Nuremberg,' and two sedate volumes of verse entitled 'The Schoolgirl's Garland.'

This bookcase held all that was lovely to me in life, and when an edict, wise, harsh, and menacing, closed its doors, I was left, a wretched little Peri, standing tear-drenched in an arid wilderness. My mother, pardonably tired of the long years wasted on the first steps in the education of a child who she knew was not a fool, gave strict orders that no one should read me a line. The world of reality closed in upon me, and what did the world of reality mean in 1867 to a little girl whose days were uniformly uneventful? A walk in the dull city streets, a skipping rope on my own pavement, and a patchwork quilt which I was well aware would never reach fulfilment. Amid these depressing surroundings I spent a few days of blank despair. Then I sized up the situation, surrendered at discretion, and quickly, though not easily, learned to read.

And because I was so late learning, I brought a tenvear-old mind to bear upon all I read. Ten is a wonderful age. So, too, is twelve, and possibly fifty; but there is a good deal of wasted time between. The first book I read when I realized that all print was open - though not necessarily intelligible - to me was Hayward's translation of 'Faust.' This was no nursery product, and I raided my mother's shelves in the library to secure it, being moved thereto by pure childish curiosity. A blessed custom of my infancy ordained that every living-room should be dominated by a good-sized centre table, and that on this centre table should repose those ponderous illustrated volumes for which our parents spent vast sums of money, and which we children were never tired of examining. The most attractive and the most bewildering book on my own table was Retzsch's 'Outlines of "Faust," 'Fridolin,' and 'The Song of the Bell.' The text was in German. My

mother told me the story of 'Fridolin' (it is the kind of story which is sure to be told to little girls); and 'The Song of the Bell' is so transparently simple that even my limited intelligence could grasp its significance. But 'Faust' is of a different order, and in the second part of that deathless, but not facile, poem Retzsch let himself go as far as mortal man has dared. Hayward's translation stopped short with the first part, and I was left to reconstruct the second, with such help as the 'Outlines' could give me—a big job for a child of ten. It took me a long time to get it settled, not satisfactorily, but in working order. Twenty years later I read Goethe's version. It seemed to me to lack coherence and continuity. My own painstaking interpretation remained firmly fixed in my memory.

In this year of grace, 1937, juvenile literature comes tumbling from the press as inexhaustibly as detective fiction. Consequently children, so I am told, read a book once as we read a detective story once (if at all), and turn naturally to something new. But of what earthly good or pleasure is a book which is read only once? It is like an acquaintance whom one never meets again, or a picture never seen a second time. In those joyous months which followed my conquest of print ('Bress de Lawd I'se free!') I read the books I loved best over and over again. A new one had crept in during my period of banishment. It was called 'The Young Crusaders,' and was a tale of the Children's Crusade. I read it from the first word to the last in a passion of pity and pain. When I had finished, I gave a long sigh, turned back to the beginning, and started anew upon its absorbing pages. Thank God I have been able to do the same thing in my old age, notably with Robert

Nathan's 'Road of Ages,' which I re-read instantly while its delicate loveliness was fresh in my mind and heart.

Until I had mastered print, my memory was abnormally retentive. There was nothing to disturb its hold. My mother taught me viva voce a quantity of English verse, sometimes simple as befitted my intelligence, sometimes meaningless, but none the less pleasant to the ear. I regret to say that I was permitted and encouraged to repeat these poems to visitors. Why they ever returned to the house I cannot imagine. Perhaps they never did.

One experience, however, remains etched clearly in my memory. A year or so before my tenth birthday, and while I was still steeped — not in ignorance, I protest, but in illiteracy — I was taken to Baltimore, and was privileged to recite 'The Guerillas' before its distinguished author, Severn Teackle Wallis. This gentleman was then at the height of his popularity, having been imprisoned fourteen months for inflammatory language anent the Federal Government. He was destined, like many another malcontent, to become an acquiescent citizen, and also a brilliant leader of the Maryland Bar; but when I was eight his great abilities had yet to be recognized. He was a rebel poet, the delight of rebel hearts. Therefore I stood upon a chair — having the shortness incidental to my years and one of my grown-up cousins smoothed down my little skirt, and whispered impressively: 'Now do your very best. This is the chance of your life to distinguish yourself.' I wonder if 'The Guerillas' exists anywhere today, save in my faithful memory. I wonder what Mr. Wallis thought of his lurid lines, falling from my infant lips. I wonder if their luridness was ever before so apparent to his intelligence.

And now with my tenth birthday safely past, and the conquest of print safely accomplished, I am going to be sent to boarding school. My mother, reasonably weary of my education, has resolved that it shall be continued as far as possible from her jurisdiction. She knows what depressing items of information it will include. Perhaps she sees in the offing those little imps called numerals, as difficult to master as letters, and leading up to nothing but sums, which are an inadequate compensation. With a sigh of relief she is shipping me off to join the hitherto unknown ranks of childhood, to make war, without being aware that I was making war, against my elders, to bear my part in 'the losing battle against arithmetic, good manners, and polite conversation.'

My own sentiments in the matter are of no interest or concern to anybody. In those serene days adults would have as soon thought of consulting a kitten as of consulting a child when the disposal of either was under consideration. If the kitten or the child were a normal product of its time, it acquiesced inevitably, and the current of its little life was changed. Mine was to be changed beyond recognition or recall. Solitude and story books were about to slide into a dim past. Little girls brimming over with a superfluity of energy would absorb my simplified emotions. To some of them my heart would go out in quick recognition of companionship. A few of them were destined (the Saints be praised!) to be my friends for life. All of them were to seem of infinitely more consequence to me than the immortal children I had left behind between the covers of books. If ever a ten-year-old was fitted for a communal life, I was that happy child.

And what about my education, which was after all the

reason, or the excuse, for sending me from home? What did the word imply seventy years ago? In my case a fairly fluent knowledge of French, unloved, but inescapable because universal pressure bore down all resistance. Snippets of history without continuity or the grace of understanding. Arithmetic — well, the average guineapig would have learned as much of that medley as I did. And finally, some years later, when I was halfway to another decade, and had begun to understand the possible pleasures of study, the humorous gods, who had neglected but not forsaken me, sent to my aid the most fantastic Latin master who ever jerked a pupil along the paths of learning. I never saw a Latin grammar, that sure and strong foundation. I never read Caesar's 'Commentaries,' about which I had a good deal of curiosity. In their place I was sent frisking along with Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' (a modified version), a dictionary, and a teacher whose pleasure in what he taught far exceeded his interest in the schoolgirl he was teaching.

To put the 'Metamorphoses' into French prose was my daily task. It was stiff work, and never done well enough to merit commendation. My teacher would wrinkle his brows over my neat pages and bald statements, shorn of every grace of diction. 'You have made it sound improbable,' he said once discontentedly.

'But it was improbable,' I replied, clinging to what I felt was security.

He looked at me, and then out of the window at the vast sky overhead. He shrugged his shoulders gently. 'Not to Ovid,' he said.

Great is my debt to that remarkable man, for midway in the first winter he promised me that I should read

Horace the following year. Moreover he pledged his word that no French should enter into the transaction; and by way of sealing the bargain he gave me (being, as I have said, unlike any other teacher in the world) a really beautiful edition of the poet. In those days all schoolbooks were as repulsive as publishers could make them. Their appearance went a long way in discouraging any intimacy with their contents. The costliness of my Horace suggested to me the propriety of covering it with paper muslin, a glazed and rattling substance much used for such fell purposes. This thrifty proposal was imperatively vetoed. The book, I was told, was to be looked at this year, read next year, and loved all my life.

'Suppose I don't love it?' I asked destructively.

There was no reply. A glance at the elderly gentleman sitting on the other side of the table told me plainly what he had in his mind; but as he was a highly paid master in a highly respectable school, he forbore to give it utterance.

1877

I am twenty years old, and I have begun to write. It is the only thing in the world that I can do, and the urge is strong. Naturally I have nothing to say, but I have spent ten years in learning to say that nothing tolerably well. Every sentence is a matter of supreme importance to me. I need hardly confess that I am writing stories — stories for children, stories for adults. They get themselves published somewhere, somehow, and bring in a little money. Otherwise they would have no excuse for being; a depressing circumstance of which I am well aware. Then one day

— an important day for me — I meet Father Hecker, founder of the Paulist order, and am taken by him around the great Paulist Church in New York. He is old, scholarly, and profoundly democratic, as the word was then understood. When we emerge from the church he asks me suddenly and disconcertingly: 'Why do you write fiction?'

I stare at him aghast. I don't know why. Perhaps it has never occurred to me that I had a choice.

'You are not equipped for it,' he continues. 'You have no knowledge of life and no power of observation. Of course you are too young to have any knowledge of life' (and me twenty!); 'but you are not too young to have some power of observation, and you give no indication of it. Your stories are unconscious reflections of books you have read. You are essentially a bookish person, and you must travel along your appointed path if you are going to get anywhere.'

'But what,' I ask bewildered, 'am I to write?'

'Essays,' is the brief reply.

'I don't know how,' I admit, startled into humility, and forgetting that there had been such things as compositions at school.

Father Hecker ponders for a moment. 'Who is your favourite author?' he asks.

'Ruskin,' I answer promptly. Seven out of ten 'bookish' young women would have made the same reply in 1877.

'Then write me an essay on Ruskin' (my companion had founded that admirable church monthly, *The Catholic World*) 'and I will see that it is published.'

So was I set on the right track, a track I was destined to tread painstakingly for a half century.

In my long life I have had but two words of valuable advice, and I have reason to be grateful for both of them. The first was Father Hecker's; the second came some years later when I was in New York helping Augustus Thomas and Francis Wilson to defend the stage child—a pampered and protected infant—from the assaults of Miss Jane Addams, who was striving with all her might to eliminate it. Perhaps this is the place to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to New York, for its friendly welcome when I was young and struggling, for its generous recognition of my long years of labour. I could not have kept upon the road if I had lacked this keen and kind incentive.

The theatre in which we were going to speak was a large one. I glanced at it despairingly. 'I shall never be heard, never!' I said. The chairman was about to murmur some encouraging fatuity when Augustus Thomas cut him short: 'Look after your consonants,' he said authoritatively; 'and your vowels will look after themselves.'

How simple are the great truths of life! Since that day long past I have been ever mindful of my consonants, and I have been heard.

One more incident of this eventful afternoon I take pleasure in recalling. The luncheon which was to follow the speeches was delayed. I was starving and said so. Francis Wilson, always sympathetic and benevolent, volunteered to forage, slipped into the dining-room, and brought me out a roll, a large and life-giving roll which I was glad to eat. When we went in to luncheon I perceived that he had discovered my place at table, removed my own roll, given it to me as an offering from the gods, and left me breadless and bereft. Moreover, being my next-door neighbour, and knowing my predatory instincts, he