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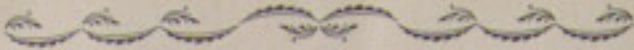
THE  
Reader's Digest  
OMNIBUS



FOREWORD BY  
H. E. BATES



THE READER'S DIGEST



## FOREWORD

THE present century has seen the rapid extension of five inventions – six, if you count the comic-strip – all of which offer pleasant temptations towards a life of easy illiteracy. These devices, telephone, dictaphone, cinema, radio and television, all offer aural and visual means of expression as substitutes for the printed page, and it is in fact an irony of our time that they have made it possible for modern man to run his business, enjoy his leisure, expand his social life and even to be in some sort of degree adult and educated without the tiresome necessity of having to read or write a word.

I do not suppose that, thirty years ago, the founders of *Reader's Digest* had any idea of counteracting such tendencies. They may well, in fact, have taken an entirely opposite view. It is possible that they saw before them a vast new literacy, expanding and unsatisfied. They may well have reasoned that as this literacy increased so the number of books published would also increase, with the result that man might choke himself to death with words. They may also have reasoned that the shape of the new century would be a bewildering kaleidoscope of new distractions, of which in fact film and radio were already part. Man would not only have more to read but less and less time in which to read it. He would be like a person entering a restaurant for a snack lunch and finding himself confronted with a table crowded with half a thousand hors d'œuvres. Somebody would have to help him select the tastiest morsels for himself and perhaps, in doing so – who knows? – whet his appetite for more.

Whether this was so or not it seems to me that, at the end of this thirty years, *Reader's Digest* might well claim that for every reader film and radio and television have killed or merely anaesthetised, it has created or kept alive another. The century

did indeed turn out to be widely, uneasily and, for about half the time, hideously distractive. It was the enemy of quietness. It was a paradox of people having more leisure to enjoy and yet less time, apparently, in which to enjoy it. There was always something else to do – even if it was only, for a good part of the time, keeping alive.

In such surroundings, it may well have seemed that books would be inevitable victims. In fact it was not so. If the governing emotion of man is fear, then it is pretty certain that his governing appetite is inquisitiveness. He wants to know more about himself; he wants to know still more about his neighbours; above all he hungers to know more about the affairs of the famous, the notorious, the aristocratic, the odd, the crazy, the adventurous, and the purely miraculous among his fellow men, both past and present, in worlds that he knows and worlds that he has never a hope of knowing. Why did Lincoln speak at Gettysburg? How did the *Titanic* sink? What is it like to be a young healthy girl one minute and a burnt wreck on a foreign hillside the next? What is genius? Does smoking really kill you? And what exactly is the Gulf Stream? Just as the novel is in reality a highly refined form of gossip – which is perhaps why the larger proportion of its readers are women – so *Reader's Digest*, the forerunner of so many followers, has existed to serve man's insatiable curiosity about other people. In effect it is probably the handiest, best-edited, and most catholic gossip-column in the world. Moreover, it differs from all other gossip-columns in that it has a philosophy, and it is that, I think, which is the secret of its character.

In the present selection of its better pieces, taken from its first thirty years, I have two favourites, neither of them concerning people. The first, which I have read many times before reading it again here, is the piece on Krakatoa – that fantastic and unearthly volcanic blow-up in 1883 that sent waves round the earth that were recordable eight thousand miles away, and a column of dust 150,000 feet high that coloured the sunsets of Paris, London, New York and Cairo for the better part of another year. The second piece is the one called *Lift Up Your Eyes to Marvel*. It concerns the stars we see, the stars beyond the stars we see, the stars we don't see beyond the stars we don't

see beyond the stars we don't see: a pattern of universes upon universes upon universes for which Miss Gertrude Stein's drugging repetitions of phrase seem almost the only possible kind of description to use. In particular it speaks of a star called *Alpha Herculis* - a body 'so fantastically huge that if it were in the position of our sun it would engulf the sun and extend beyond the orbit of Mars!'

Those readers who, like me, grow occasionally tired of new media of illiteracy, new demonstrations of atomic power and in particular of that specious catch-phrase of our time, 'the end of civilisation as we know it', will find, I think, a good deal of satisfaction in these pieces, both an expression of the *Digest* philosophy. They will like in particular the characters that appear towards the end of the Krakatoa story, most especially the Spider. To the Krakatoa story the Spider is as the dove was to the story of the Ark. I will not spoil the reader's pleasure by anticipating or by saying why or how. I will simply say: ponder the spider. The entrance of that tiny creature into the world of Krakatoa seems to me as historically, emotionally and spiritually dramatic as almost anything I ever read. When you have read it you will get, I think, a clearer perspective on little things like Bikini, on great things like Alpha Herculis and on altogether unpredictable things like spiders and ourselves.

For the rest, you will find something of everything here, including Mr Mencken. The piece by Mr Mencken is the exception to *Reader's Digest's* fairly general rule that it does not print fiction, except those everyday pieces of fiction like *It Happened on the Subway*, which appear in reality to be modern miracles of fantasy. Mr Mencken came from Baltimore, which is perhaps why his piece on the relative virility of American and British English is such a picturesque lie. Many readers - especially English readers - may like to amuse themselves by blowing a counterblast at Mr Mencken, beginning with a selection on the American side of a few words like *elevator*, *mortician* and *transportation*, and on the English side *lift*, *undertaker* and *carry*, together with a few good robust old-fashioned and new-fashioned ones like *soodle* and *stommack* and *horse-face* and *whittle-britches* and *you've had it* and *spiv*. Who ever heard of *anti-bounce clip*? Only, I assure you, Mr Mencken.

Volcanoes, stars, miracles, invasions, disasters, murders, acts



of God, adventures, heroics, un-heroics, men, spiders and Mr Mencken – there is probably not a facet of man and his extraordinary behaviour that has not at one time or another been discovered by the *Reader's Digest* microscope and magnified, to the pleasure of infinite numbers of readers, in its own particular, selective way. This, on second thoughts, simply cannot be true. If it were, *Reader's Digest* would fold up its shutters tomorrow and the new forces of illiteracy, armoured with plastic and chromium, might have advanced another step or two.

I do not think this is likely to happen: which is why I suggested, previously, that you should ponder the spider. For it is my impression that the spider is the most interesting character in this anthology, and that its editors, like myself, cherish a considerable faith in that creature.

H. E. BATES