

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
WILLIAM ALLEN
WHITE

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

NEW YORK • 1946

THE LAST TWO DECADES

BY W. L. WHITE



I HAD HOPED to tell the story of the last two decades of my father's life not in my own words but largely in his, making it a mosaic of the letters and editorials he wrote on the fast-changing scene, hoping that the contrast would not be too great between my selection and his narrative.

I find that this last hope is impossible. For in his account of the previous five decades he tempers what he then wrote and thought with that mellowness which only comes with the years, at some times because they had taught him tolerance, at others because time had drained off the emotion of the hour and he could look back with kindly detachment.

Often the value in what he said lay not in its permanence but in his saying aloud, in earthy phrases and with the terrifying frankness of a child, what many thought but few dared whisper.

So, for instance, with his epitaph of Frank Munsey, the newspaper proprietor whose consolidations had thrown thousands of reporters, editorial writers, and printers out of work. In the Gazette (December 23, 1925) he wrote:

"Frank Munsey, the great publisher, is dead. Frank Munsey contributed to the journalism of his day the great talent of a meat packer, the morals of a money changer and the manners of an undertaker. He and his kind have about succeeded in transforming a once noble profession into an eight per-cent security. May he rest in trust!"

So, also with his more mellow four-line epitaph on Woodrow Wilson:

"God gave him a great vision.

"The Devil gave him an imperious heart.

"The proud heart is still.

"The vision lives."

Early in the twenties, at about the time his own narrative leaves off, he fired the Gazette's first editorial gun against the inevitable rise of postwar prejudice:

so that I should not have to go clear to the station, and there Sallie met me. Her face was brave, and her heart was staunch; and when I kissed her I knew it was all right.

Bill came home from Harvard a few hours later. The day after the funeral I knew that I must write something about Mary. Sallie and I walked down to the Gazette office together, and I hammered out her obituary. We went over it together, and revised it three times in the proof before the type was put into the forms. I had said my say and felt eased in my soul.

The town was deeply moved by it. I could tell that. As I walked about I could see in the faces of people, even without their telling me, how the editorial about Mary had touched them. In a day or two, of course, the town forgot the editorial. Then the Kansas City Star picked it up. And Franklin P. Adams reprinted it in his "Conning Tower" in the New York Tribune. From there it went through the daily press of the country. And then a woman's magazine repeated it, then another and another. Christopher Morley was making an anthology and asked to include it. Alexander Woollcott put it into his first "Reader" and read it over the radio. Other radio entertainers used it and within a year it appeared in four books of reading for high schools and colleges.

Mary had been entered at Wellesley before her death; and in 1926, which would have been her graduating year, her class adopted her and dedicated the Wellesley Annual to her. She was carried on the rolls of the class of 1926 for many years. In the meantime, year after year, the piece appeared in innumerable anthologies. We kept tally on it for twenty years and it had been in more than forty of those school readers or anthologies of Americana, in the best of them and in the humbler ones. It has been a comfort to her mother and me to know that for a decade, at least, Mary will survive. She would now be in her forties. If the article never appeared in another book, she would survive in the hearts of youth well into her fifties. Hardly a day, never a week, passes that boys and girls in high schools and colleges do not write to me about "Mary." Teachers often write, and whole classes sometimes join in a letter to her mother and me about her. The youth of today will remember her well into their maturity. She has a certain extension of her life in the lives of others. She survives, I think, as she would like to survive—in the hearts of her kind, high-school and college students. It is a strange immortality. Probably if anything I have written in these long, happy years that I have been earning my living by writing, if anything survives more than a decade beyond my life's span, it will be the thousand words or so that I hammered out on my typewriter that bright May morning under the shadow and in the agony of Mary's death. Maybe—when one thinks of the marvels of this world, the strange new things that man has

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