

**THE MARBLE HOUSE
AND OTHER POEMS.
[NEW YORK-1921]**

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ELLEN M. HUNTINGTON GATES

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By
Ellen M. Huntington Gates



G. P. Putnam's Sons
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The Knickerbocker Press
1921

W. H. D.



PREFACE

My mother was the eleventh child of William and Elizabeth Vincent Huntington, and was born in the town, then a village, of Torrington, Connecticut.

As she grew old her mind, as always happens with old people, was much occupied with her childhood and early youth. After she was eighty she began to write down some of her earliest memories:

"We were very patriotic in those days. At home we heard so much talk of George Washington that he seemed like a demi-god, and we used to weep when we heard of Lafayette's visit to this country. In many of the houses of our town there were old scarlet coats, with gilt buttons, which had been taken from the Hessians.

"These made a gallant show on Independence Day. I remember that one was spread over a chair on our front porch and that the whole town was gay with them."

She wrote, too, about the first school she went to; when she was four years old:—"an infant school kept by Miss Sybil Eggleston. Of my

education in that school I can only recall that she taught us the names of our five senses.

"We stood in a straight row, with our toes on a crack, and repeated the names of our five senses loudly and earnestly. When we said 'feeling,' we brought our right hands down upon our left hands with great force. The school-room was at the top of a tall building, probably the Town Hall, and if I stood on my tip-toes and leaned far out of the window I saw the tops of the trees where birds builded their nests and sang their happy songs. Under the trees was the insect world, ants and grasshoppers, and slow, crawling worms went back and forth on their various errands, and their world was much larger than they knew, or than we ourselves could even dream."

The little girl of four, standing on tip-toe and leaning "far out of the window" to discover beauty and wonder must already have been what my Mother remained all her life. For it was always mystery that called to her most loudly; the mystery of elemental things: fire, light, and air, the sea and the clouds, the mystery of the puzzling, alien life in birds and beasts and plants. But, far beyond these, dominating, indeed, all her poetic thought, was the mystery of death.

In her deeper self, in her moments of inspiration, she seemed always to be pausing and lingering at the entrance of that Marble House,

listening wistfully for some whisper from within it, straining her eyes to see through its shadows.

She was of a generation which read poets to-day neglected, but which derived its literary culture from older and nobler sources; from the Old Testament, John Milton, Bunyan, Addison, and Pope.

The spirit of New England, its reticence in personal emotion, its flaming conscience, breathed through all she wrote. In her daily life she was fun-loving, full of originality, whimsical often, but, in her work, she belonged to her race and her age, and so seemed, at times, to be like some delicate shell reverberating with the mighty rhythm of thoughts remote from her individual thought.

When she was in her tenth year, and after she had moved, with her mother, to Oneonta, New York, to be near her brothers, Solon and Collis Huntington, who were established there, she wrote her first verses, an acrostic on "Affection." She used, laughing heartily, to quote the first lines:

*"Affection is of peerless worth
Fain would I worship at its hearth."*

But I think she was prouder of her early attempts as an artist when, as a pupil "at Miss Lavinia Herrick's school" she was taught to embroider, to draw, and to paint in water-colors.

"We painted slowly and carefully, and our wonderful pictures of cultivated and field flowers were the pride and delight of our homes."

When she grew to be a young woman she was sent to what was known as the "Female Seminary" at Hamilton, New York, and used to tell how she left one morning before it was light—"I wonder that I was allowed to do so!"—and by stage-coach, as there were no railways then in that section, and how she delightedly recognized in a fellow-traveler, her old friend, Loomis Campbell (how quaintly these names echo now!) who was on her way to Madison University, also at Hamilton.

The University and the Seminary furnished the Society of Hamilton—"Our leisure hours were filled with parties and social gatherings in the hospitable homes of the village," she wrote. "The President of Madison University at that time was Dr. George W. Eaton, and at his beautiful home, 'Woodland Heights,' all the young people were frequently entertained." It was an idyllic time in her life—these years at Hamilton. She had one particularly dear and haunting memory of the trailing rose branches that Mrs. Eaton drew in over the low window-sills to adorn her drawing-room.

Among the students at the University were the two brothers Oliver and Edwin Gates; the latter, seven or eight years later became her husband.

While she was still at school her first poem "Your Mission," was printed in the *New York Examiner* and the *Cooperstown Journal*. It was widely copied, set to music, and sung at many concerts.

Abraham Lincoln heard it sung by Philip Phillips at the Congressional Hall in Washington and wrote on a slip of paper (long carefully preserved) "Ask Mr. Phillips to repeat 'Your Mission.' Do not say that I asked for it." This, in spite of the ambiguousness of the last half of the message, was fame, indeed, for a school-girl.

The poem was translated, it was said, into seven languages, but its author used to protest, with charming humility, "*that seems hardly possible!*"

The first ten or twelve years of her married life were spent in Wisconsin, and there she watched the State troops departing for the Civil War.

But the great tragedy of all that tragic epoch must have been, for her, the murder of Lincoln, for it was on that her mind dwelt, most, in her memories, and that which inspired the one poem she wrote of the War: "Lincoln Has Fallen."

In the '70's she returned to the East and from then until her death her home was either in the vicinity of New York or in New York itself.

Her married life was long and of unceasing affection, she had many devoted friends and,

especially in her old age, took among most of her kinsfolk a place of almost consecrated leadership; but, in spite of all those human ties, her inner mind, I think, was most concerned with its visions.

Much of the talk that went on in her presence seemed, after a while, to become irksome to her; one saw her sitting, by preference, a little apart from the others, with her eyes closed and a look of serene detachment on her beautifully cut face.

It was at such moments, perhaps, that her fancies about Light and Dark, about Time and Space and Eternity came to her.

Her short-sightedness, I think, added to the sense of strangeness which she found in many of the things in nature. As she saw them only cloudily she became more concerned with their inner meanings than with their outer aspects.

Adventure, quests among mountain-peaks, wide seas, and unimagined lands called to her until the last.

When she was eighty-four she said in a letter:

"I am perfectly well and strong; I could go anywhere, I could go to the Himalayas."

And with this same eager courage she faced death.

Though, at the end, it came to her swiftly and in all unconsciousness and peace, she had written only a short time before it: