

THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

MRS. WIGGIN'S "GARDEN OF MEMORY"

By Honoré Willsie Morrow

Mrs. Morrow's review is the twelfth of a series of longer book reviews to be published each month in THE BOOKMAN. The books discussed will not necessarily be new nor will they be books which have never before been reviewed in the magazine. The aim of the editors is to present, in the selection of volumes and reviewers, articles which shall constitute solid pieces of criticism.

I OPENED the book with a feeling of sadness, of reverence and of tenderness. How else could one feel toward the posthumous autobiography of the mother of Rebecca, of Patsy, of Timothy and Lady Gwen, of Penelope, of the Ruggles family? And having opened the volume in this mood I read it as one always has read and always will read Kate Douglas Wiggin; with laughter and with tears and with a conviction no less firm because it was intangible that life after all might be a thing of beauty and rightness. For so this brilliant and lovable woman found life and so she made her readers see it.

The biography is intrinsically interesting. I mean that had I never read Mrs. Riggs's books, had I never known her personally, still this story of her life would have delighted me. It is filled with more adventure than is contained in all her other books put together. She herself led a life more varied, more poignant, more replete with romance than did any of her heroes or heroines. The story of her kindergarten experience in San Francisco alone would have made a wonderful novel. I wish she had written it! The account of her first tour of

Europe is more exciting than any of her stories about Penelope's travels. The description she gives of the crushing of her finger in the door of a train in which she was traveling from Gratz to Innsbruck has all the makings of a melodramatic motion picture scenario. No, more than that. Of another novel with Dr. Ben's history as the central theme and the Hungarian countess as the heroine!

But there is far more than mere adventure in this book. There is a progressively interesting account of a human being's life work, of the growth of capacity for toil, of the molding and remolding of a plastic, delicate, earnest mind into form fit to withstand the buffetings of anxiety and poverty, overstrain, oversensitiveness, too great giving of self to others.

There is the account, all unconscious, of the emergence of a clean cut New England philosophy from a manysided frame of mind that might otherwise easily have developed into a mere habit of giving out wit and sympathy because people so loved these qualities in her. But delicate as was her talent, there was a curious quality of rugged morality in all that Kate Douglas Wiggin wrote; and af-

ter reading her autobiography one understands how this came to be.

Adventure, romance, work, and philosophy in this book, but more than all these, an accounting of friendships by a woman who had genius for making friends. She began, characteristically, by scraping up an acquaintance with Charles Dickens when she was about ten years old. The English novelist was on a train going from Portland to Boston. The small girl was taking the same trip with her mother. Even at this age saturated with Dickens lore, Kate crept shyly to the great man's seat, told him how she loved "David Copperfield", and the deed was done. The two talked together for hours.

From Charles Dickens, her friendships spread as the years went on until literally they encircled the earth. Kindergartners, slum mothers, actors and actresses, teachers, philosophers, poets, statesmen, novelists; the great, the wise, the foolish, the brilliant, the eccentric, the beginner, the finished success. She gave to them all of her wit and sympathy and they returned the gift to her in love.

Yes, above all else this is a book of friendships. Extraordinary! How could one person in a life all too short compass so much of that greatest of all gifts to a world too devoid of gifts! "Friendship"—as that friend of her youth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, said—"that select and sacred relationship which is a kind of absolute and which leaves the language of love suspicious and common, so much is this purer and nothing is so much divine."

The answer is not far to find. It is clear to read between the lines of this book. Partly were her friendships due to the world wide popularity of her stories. But only partly. The

greatest of them were made by personal contacts, and that is where the extraordinary aspect of the matter appears. For one of the saddest things about meeting most authors is that one wishes one hadn't met them! Poor things! They put all the interesting and beautiful parts of themselves into their books. There is little left to make human intercourse with them thrilling or even interesting! Mrs. Riggs's stories were the spontaneous outpourings of an artist with great wit and a great love for her fellow beings. She might easily have stopped with the friendships made by her books and have accounted herself unusually successful. But she did not stop here. Choice as are her books, Mrs. Riggs was far more choice, herself.

Loveliness, kindliness, a power of brilliant conversation, yes; but also she had — Pshaw! Why hesitate to use an overworked word? She had the kind of charm that goes only with lovely character, and people when they met her never forgot her and wished to be with her again and yet again.

I recall vividly my own meeting with her six or seven years ago. I was editor of "The Delineator" and I wanted a Christmas story from Kate Douglas Wiggin. As a young girl, I had read and loved everything she had written. A few years before I should have been glad of any excuse that would have made it possible for me to meet a writer whose work I so loved and admired. But my editorial experience had made me wary. I wanted to keep a few of my old illusions, therefore I avoided meeting if I could authors whose works I particularly admired! And so I didn't care to meet Kate Douglas Wiggin.

But if I wanted the story I knew I'd have to make the getting of it a

personal matter. Mrs. Riggs was not well, was writing little fiction, and was giving all the time and strength that she could to her biography. So I went to her New York home to see her.

I have a vague recollection of spacious rooms filled with books, flowers and sunlight. And a vivid remembrance of a woman crossing the room to meet me; a woman whose trailing dress made her seem tall, a woman with a delicate, tender face in which there were lines of pain and of laughter and of—of liking! I was a stranger but she was going to give me my chance and begin by liking me.

We talked for a long time, for the most part about story writing—the art of it. She was modest about her work. She might have been at the very bottom of the literary ladder. She spoke of her “little trickle of talent”, of her weariness, of her desire to get on with her work, of her admiration for authors without a third of her ability. I cared for her immediately. I wanted to stay with her. I wanted to chuckle on and on at her inimitable flavor. I wanted to tell her the story of my life from the moment I cut my first teeth. But most of all I just wanted to be with her.

Charm! That uttermost gift of the gods to a human being.

And into this biography she has

managed with entire modesty to weave a staccato history of her contacts with an endless number of human beings who obviously felt toward her as I did. It is remarkable that she could be so unassuming and that a simple biography could give so much of her subtle attractiveness.

She was too soon withdrawn. In a literary world full of sex and sordid details, such books as hers are like a ray of sunshine that lights one corner of an otherwise somewhat damp and sour smelling cellar. She should have been allowed to stay with us for many years, if only as a delicate and ennobling light toward which strange bleached sprouts in the literary basement might lean all unconsciously and from which they might imbibe warmth and health. But she had toiled tremendously. She suffered much pain. Perhaps for her it is better so. And for her the paragraph with which she ended her autobiography has come true:

“I am at one with the little invisible beings in the air—they who had begun as blue Flax flowers. The song is more joyous in youth, fuller and stronger in middle age; it quavers a little as the years go on and on; but the song itself is never ended.”

My Garden of Memory. By Kate Douglas Wiggin. Houghton Mifflin Company.