THE MAGAZINE IN AMERICA

BY ALGERNON TASSIN

PART VI—SOUTH AND WEST—ATHENSES THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

THE activity of the little towns in publishing magazines at the beginning of the nineteenth century was only paralleled toward its close by the countless imitations of the *Chap Book*. And for the same reason. Their proprietors wanted to express themselves and had no other way to do it. In this respect the early crop of editors was not as mistaken as the later, it is true, but the recorders of their aspirations were as brief. Few things are more surprising in the history of our magazines than the number of inconspicuous villages which attempted even ambitious ones. So it had been in New England, and in the Middle States; so it was in the Southern States; and so it was to be in the West. No one guessed, in a new and rapidly growing district, which way the cat was going to jump. Any village court-house might some morning find itself an Acropolis; and the printer a place side by side with Franklin and Thomas among the achieving pioneers! The States were full of such visionary villages, and of printers who willingly if not gladly went down into their own pockets for the cost of publication.

The first magazine in Maryland, in 1798, was such an acorn from which an oak was to have grown. In the course of two months, said the proprietor in closing, we will resume in the form of a monthly if five hundred subscribers can be procured. But where could so many be found in Frederick Town? The editor of *The Hive,* published in the village of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, might have informed the editor of *The Key* that their towns were too near together for each to become an Athens, and that Lancaster was clearly marked for the favoured one. The *Child of Pallas, Devoted mostly to Belles-Lettres,* published in Baltimore in 1800, guessed better than either of them as to the future greatness of its dwelling-place, but the growth proved commercial rather than spiritual (as an Athenian might say). Sparks, in his article on Baltimore in the *North American,* 1825, which practically introduced the city to the North, said that the enterprising spirit of its people was much more energetic in its combined and continued action than that of any other city of the United States. But though the centre of Roman Catholic wealth and culture (so much so that the *Metropolitan,* a Catholic monthly, styles her in 1830 the Rome of America), Beatrice Ironsides thought she cared more for her pocket than her mind and her soul. The editor of *The Companion* (a mere man!) had given up his hopeless struggle for five hundred subscribers, but Beatrice, who had been his assistant, announced that she would continue the journal herself under the name of *The Observer.* (Note how the gentle intimacy of the former title gives way to the emotionless alertness of the latter—can this be a forecast of feminism?) Beatrice the energetic thus taps Baltimore over its acquiline nose with her lively pen:

> Oh, that mine enemy were editor of a Baltimore Miscellany, and were he anything less than *iron,* how quickly would all my wrongs be avenged. The attempt of a female to promote the cause of taste, literature, and morals would, it should seem, have been cherished with respect and forwarded with assistance and encouragement. But alas! luckless Dame, not long were the illusions of thy fancy to deceive thee. Do the sheets of the *Observer* contain only dissertations on morality and selections from

the best authors, however judicious, every one exclaims how dull, how insupportable; on the other hand, does Beatrice endeavour to enliven the page by using the arm of ridicule to combat folly, a thousand divinities suppose themselves pointed at. Every illustration of character that Beatrice has used has, by the folly of some and the black malignity of others, been appropriated to persons far from her imagination. If Beatrice refuses to embellish the *Observer* with the sublimities of the sons of the dullest of dull prose who forcibly scramble up Parnassus, they become her sworn and inveterate enemies. Thus is poor Beatrice assailed in every quarter; every weapon is raised against her, except wit; and of that, Heaven be praised, she has no very heavy cause of complaint. Oh, that mine enemy were editor to a miscellany in the liberal, the enlightened, the polished city of Baltimore!!!

Yet, in spite of this delightful Beatrice, Baltimore was for the first quarter of the century the only literary centre, such as it was, south of Philadelphia. During that period it published at least twelve magazines; and it had a literary club, The Delphian, which issued a periodical, the *Red Book,* and numbered among its members Neal, Sparks, John Pierpont, Francis Scott Key, and William Wirt; and, lastly, it made the Athenian attempt which distinguished, at one time or another, all the Northern triplicate of cities—that of capturing every household by an attractive union of politics and fashion plates. Thus it had decided claims to recognition. Its chief enduring claim, however, was of so pedestrian a nature that it has generally been overlooked. Yet *Nile's Weekly Register* was an extraordinary achievement. It was published from 1811 to 1849! Once, in the prime of its long life, it migrated to Washington for three years; and it retired to Philadelphia for a nice quiet place to die in (and during its final year there it was only half alive since its animation was suspended for three months of that period!). "Containing political, historical, geographical, scientifical, statistical, economical, and biographical documents, essays, and facts, together with notices of the arts and manufactures and a record of the events of the times"—you would scarcely suppose that its editor would have found the spare moments for a series of humourous essays entitled Quill Driving (although you may guess the title was not entirely an inspiration) and a book of importance on the Principles and Acts of the Revolution. So important did his generation find the *Weekly Register* that a General Index to the first twelve volumes was published in 1818; and so valuable did a succeeding generation find it as a contribution to American history, that it reprinted the first thirty-two volumes. Well might two American towns be named in honour of the father of so monumental a record! Beatrice Ironsides ceased to issue a weekly repertory of original and selected essays in verse and prose ere Niles could record her as one of the events of the times, but the year 1806-07 glitters more brightly for the scribe who places this wreath on her unknown brow than all the period covered so painstakingly by his stupendous register. Did she make much ado about nothing when she smartly berated Benjamin Bickerstaff, for saying that the sun of *The Observer* had set when he left its pages in a huff—he, the oracle of most of the little misses of the town? Operabouffe Boadicea amongst those forgotten beaux and belles, and first of editresses, hail! Not many stars in your pamphlet era were dancing like that one under which you were born.

It was thirty years after in time, and a whole century in style, that another Southern woman followed her example. But Mrs. Anne Royall inaugurated a new kind of paper—the *Town Topics* of its year—when she established a weekly devoted to gossip of the sayings and doings of men and women of her day. It was not inappropriately named *The Huntress,* and the Washington of her time afforded her an abundance of prey. So relentlessly did she stalk it that John

Quincy Adams called her "the virago-errant in enchanted armour," the latter part of the phrase referring doubtless to the immunity which chivalry was fancied to dictate. No fire-eater fought any duels with Mrs. Royall, it is true; but, on the other hand, while her censure was no more vindictive and personal than was most men's of the time, her praise had a saccharinity which would have stumped even the most grandiloquent masculine pen.