

Reginald Ainsworth's biography

By Lucy W. Wates

Eldest of a family of six whose parents possessed little of the world's wealth, a condition of affairs which lasted through his boyhood, Reginald William Ainsworth was born in his grandmother's house in Bath on July 7th 1882

This house in Bath, 8 Walcot Terrace, was the business premises of Willways, dyers and cleaners, and had been run by his grandmother since the death of her invalide husband, James, in Australia in 1860.

In this home she had brought up with devotion and considerable sacrifice, her five children – the eldest Lydia, Reginald's mother being only 9 years old on the death of her father.

Grandmamma was small frail and delicate but of indomitable will and her influence over her children was such that no important step was ever taken by them without her advice, even when her two sons and three daughters and reached middle age. In times of trouble she was always their refuge.

She liked to be with them in illness and so it came about that Reginald's mother was in her old home when the baby was born. It was a terraced Georgian house. Its windows at the back looked out over the valley across the river Avon to the hills beyond and the bedroom with curtained bed was peaceful enough in spite of the business being carried out on the floor below.

Reginald, or Reggie as he was called when a child, was born into a circle of admiring aunts and uncles. He was fair and blue eyed with a clear white skin. "He is sweetly pretty" his Aunt Bessie said in one of her letters.

In those days there were no cars or buses. All vehicles were horse drawn and a little horse drawn tram ran from Grosvenor to the Old Bridge every half hour, a tinkling bell round the horse's neck warning passengers of its coming.

Bath was a pleasant faded city as it lay drowsing peacefully in the valley of the Avon, dreaming of its past glories, and unspoilt by overcrowded streets, traffic jams and jerry building. To the sophisticated it was shabby and dull, but it was peaceful and beautiful to those who loved peace and beauty. The Roman baths had not yet been adorned by pseudo Roman statues and the quiet 'abbey churchyard' had its queue of bath chairs with their ancient attendants

Primroses grew in the hedges of Greenway Lane, and in the Englishcoombe Lane, when Reggie walked and scampered with the old dog, were occasionally to be found white violets amount the ivy in the banked up hedges. Only one or two cottages were there. Wellsway had houses only on one side and on the other side a wall edged the fields of the farm which extended to what is now Alexandra Park

Some years of Reginald's early childhood were spent in Bath as our father was in business there with an elderly uncle, a coal owner and speculator in South Wales, and

for a short time lived at Penarth. Uncle Humby's speculations were a failure and came to nought when the family was living at Claveston View in Wellsway, and our father went to London to look for work there. This resulted in a move to London where for a short, but unhappy time for our mother, they lived in East Dulwich

By that time Reginald had a sister Lucy, who writes this, and a brother Bertram was born in December 1886. Our beautiful aunt Bessie, our mother's sister, being much of an invalid, was obliged to spend long periods at the seaside and on several of these visits she took Reggie. In her letters she speaks of his prettiness and lively endearing ways. His happiness on the sands romping with his Uncle Theophilus, her brother, is the theme of many of her letters. Once when she had a photograph of him sent her by Theophilus his grandmother says in a letter: "You would have thought it was Bessie's own little boy by her expression of delight. She took it to Eden House and they were all delighted with the picture, then she brought it home and put it in a frame on the shelf"

His grandmother also was exceedingly fond of him and also was anxious to help his mother by having him to stay with her in Bath. She knew that business was difficult and that our father's income was very small. Our father's financial affairs were always in a perpetual state of uncertainty. She says in one letter to our mother "I dream about you and the children by night and think of you in the day"

Later, when our father's position improved a little (He was then manager of a branch business run by Mr Idris of Soda water fame and a friend of his father's. It was a process of extracting essence from beef which was called Viking Brand) the family moved to 2 Millbrook Villas, New Southgate and was there for several years, but much of that time was spent in Bath with his grandmother, Aunt Mercy and Uncle Theophilus in a kind but strictly religious atmosphere.

He was taken regularly to the Baptist Chapel in Manvers Street and rarely to any other church but it seems that on one occasion he was taken to Argyle Chapel as his grandmother writes in 1885, Feb 7th "I took Reggie to Argyle this morning. He was very good, but fell asleep a little while, so he was bright this evening and did not go to bed till late. All the evening I have shown him pictures and told him stories. He listens with such wondering eyes. The other night he said he was 'fayed' so I told him he had asked Jesus to take care of him and he never went to sleep. He said 'not in a bed, but in a ship'". As Reggie was only 2 ½ years old this remark showed how well grounded he was in the story of the New Testament and what a familiar book the Bible was to him at that early age.

Another letter from his grandmother, "I love Reggie and feel that he is almost one of my children so that nothing I do for him ever becomes a duty

He always alluded to himself in the third person – "He wants someone to play with him", "He doesn't like it" and his playthings were mostly improvised and great treasures, such as an old cotton reel and penholder which was called 'pen-a-poke' and which was taken everywhere, even to bed with him, for several years.

One winter he had an attack of bronchitis which persisted and, on the advice of the doctor, the family took rooms in a cottage in [Wellas - ? Wells] where we lived for some months. It was there that he first showed his propensity for collecting things that

interested him and for searching in hedges, poking with a stick to find them. A dead grass snake was to him a thing on interest and he would carry it on the end of stick for the whole of a walk.

In 1889 when in New Southgate he and I went to school. It was a small private school at the other end of the road. There Reggie, being quick to learn, found plenty of time for mischief as well as lessons, and many were the scrapes he got into, I then being of an age to admire, aid and abet.

He was kind-hearted but passionate little boy, acutely sensitive to an embarrassing situation. At the time when he was promoted from the petticoats worn then by little boys into the knickerbockers which his age of 7 demanded, he was so shy of appearing in something new and strange that he retired under the table for a large part of the day – a day of depression for the whole family.

He learnt to read with some difficulty. Perhaps it was that ‘Tot the Cat’ did not appeal to his literary taste. In after years he became a voracious reader and would pore for hours over the Encyclopaedia Britannica or any book of general knowledge. There were few subjects on which he could not converse with knowledge and intelligence.

At Millbrook Villas we had a series of nursery governesses. One of these ladies was reported to have been seen somewhat the worse for drink when in charge of the children on one of their daily walks. She was dismissed with much sorrow on the part of her pupils as she was a clever and interesting teacher. Another, a Miss McFee used to bring white mice to the house and, on several occasions, they were hung in a wire cage from the chandelier during lesson time. Her drawings on a slate of incidents in the history of England impressed her small pupils to such an extent that one of them at least always sees the battle of Hastings fought on a slate in white chalk.

There was Congregational Church near by which the family regularly attended and where a friendship was started which with some intermittence has continued until the present day – that of the Barfields. Mr and Mrs Barfield were friends of our parents, Nina, their eldest, being about the same age as Reggie, and there were two younger boys.

There was a small garden attached to Millbrook Villas in which we three spent many hours of play, play which was often very mischievous such as ‘posting’ bogus letters, mud pies etc in the red letterbox which was just in front of the house. These letters had a purpose as they were sent to a familiar spirit called by Reggie Mr Cuttsey.. This imaginary person lived in East Dulwich, possessed a very real personality and provided a theme for many stories, some of a very thrilling nature told by Reggie to his sister and brother.

During school holidays Grandmother often had he and I to stay with her in Bath; and sometimes for very long periods when we went to school there – probably at the time when the family moved from London to Swindon. This was a school next door to the ‘dye works’ in Walcot Terrace. Our grandmother and aunt spent the greater part of their time there, taking the children with them in the morning from Shirley Villa on Beechen Cliff and returning with them at night.

There was plenty of interest for children in the dye works - the large room behind the 'shop' littered with pieces of cloth, trimmings and cuttings from the unpicking; the old sideboard at one end of the room in which was the 'till', sometimes containing very little money, hardly enough to pay the wages of the workmen at the end of the week; and the large table in the centre of the room round which and under which a child or children were always playing in spite of the busy business life that was going on around them. There was a basement kitchen and steep narrow stairs led to it, on which one hesitated to hear the crickets chirruping in the walls

The garden was hardly worthy of the name, but it had sparse patches of grass, a few vegetables and, at one time, some fowls. On either side were low wide walls on which it was possible to walk if one could avoid the eyes of Miss Barker, the schoolmistress next door, and a vigilant grandmother of aunt looking from the vine covered balcony windows of the 'shop'.

The Dye House (now pulled down) was a solid stone building on two floors. On the upper one worked an ogre, Parker the presser, in an atmosphere of oppressive moist heat which was always unbearable. It was a temptation to plague him by throwing small pebbles through this window and escape by the skin of one's teeth from the enraged Parker who, armed with a flat iron, threatened with dire punishment the fleeing boy

The dye was in great steaming vats and had to be stirred with long sticks or poles and the materials dipped and lifted until they were well permeated with the dye. These huge black vats, the dark steam enveloping figures of the men and the acrid smell of the dye gave a Dantesque impression to the scene, and it was with a somewhat awesome feeling that the children entered into it.

A newly installed wringing contrivance was used to extract the moisture from the dyed or cleaned articles by centrifugal force. When not in use this was regarded as a toy by venturesome children, but the use of it for that purpose was not regarded with favour by the foreman in charge.

Beyond the dye-house was the bank of the river and the dye ran into it through pipes or channels staining the river water with wonderful eddies of swirling colour.

Across the river was the 'Garden', a plot of land which had been in the possession of the family for many years and in which grew fruit and vegetables and straggling old-fashioned rose trees. This supplied the family with all they needed in garden produce and was reached by crossing the Clevedon Bridge at the cost of 1/2d per person or a 'season ticket'

The dog Toby was a great companion for Reggie. 'She' was an animal of intelligence as mongrels often are and they had many good times together.

Literature in the Bath household was mostly limited to books of a religious nature and by the time he could read easily Reggie had exhausted many of the simpler ones, and would explore further into such books as 'The World of Wonders' and Fox's Book of Martyrs. There was also a child's periodical - The Little Gleaner.

The coming and going between the two house, the little villa on the hill and the business house at Walcot Terrace, occupied a considerable amount of time and flavoured life with a sort of nomad atmosphere which was very stimulating.

Shirley Villa had a pleasant garden which opened on to Beechen Cliff with its magnificent view of Bath. The little low stone wall which edged the cliff was amusing to children as it was composed of uneven coping stones making mountainous hazards for a venturesome climber. Also from the vantage point of one cliff path it was fun to hurl fallen apples with a strong over arm throw, such as Regg always had, into the gardens below, and on the end of a stick they could be catapulted even into Holloway, causing pedestrians much surprise, though never injury. In spite of his mischievous nature Reginald was never cruel and was careful not to cause harm.

In the corner of the garden there was a small glazed 'summerhouse' built on a raised brick foundation so that it was possible to get a good view of the city over the heads of people walking on the path below. This contained the old family rocking horse, for long a favourite with the older grandchildren but later discarded as being too dilapidated. Reginald, having been scolded for clipping its mane or tail, reassured his grandmother by saying, "never mind, Grandma, it will soon grow again." In its heyday it was a good beast with shiny mahogany 'coat', a well-carved body and head and with outstretched legs galloping on real rockers. Portions of its anatomy were found in the Shirley Villa garden after the 1942 blitz in Bath, its remnants having been stored in the attic of the house itself.

Fowls were kept in this garden and were sometimes allowed to run loose. This was too great a temptation to Reginald and his younger brother Bertram and they chased them with sticks and whoops of laughter (though with no intention of being unkind) for the fun of seeing their queer antics as they ran, squawking hither and thither.

Reginald had a keen sense of the grotesque or the whimsical and his ways of amusing himself were often original and odd, such as rolling the dog Toby in an old sheet and then making the postman's rat-tat at the door. The dog would make frantic struggles to rid herself of the wrappings in order to reach her enemy – the postman – and in doing so would roll from top to bottom of the stairs barking and yapping and looking quite ludicrous, trailing ends of sheeting after her to the intense enjoyment of us all.

He had a most infectious laugh and would chuckle over a book he was reading until one felt bound to join in and laugh too.

In those days there were very few games organised at the day schools. The children were home for tea about 4.30 and afterwards, except for homework which took from an hour to two hours, time was to kill, either reading or inventing some mischievous scheme for amusing oneself.

There was rarely a period in the lives of the Ainsworth children when one or another was not living with the patient grandmother and aunt at Bath and going to school from Shirley Villa. Sometimes two of us were there at the same time. In our very young days we were sometimes accompanied by Minnie Brown, a precise young woman with her hair in long dark plaits who was a sort of general help.

Walks were to Coombe Down, Englishcoombe Lane, Lyncombe, Hampton Rocks and Sham Castle and sometimes, when on shopping expeditions, Grandmamma might give each child 2d and let them loose in Victoria Park. At that time there was a little rustic kiosk in the park where one could buy for 2d a good bowl of curds and whey with a large spoonful of clotted cream, and sit on high stools and eat it. This was a great treat.

Reginald had a more than usual propensity for collecting things and on one occasion his Aunt Bessie made a list of the articles found in his pockets by grandmother in 1890:- 12 Chestnuts, 3 latchkeys, 1 marble, 1 old bootlace, pieces of twine, whistle, 2 splints of wood dyed purple, old pencil case, 9 peas, a bard pointed leaf, an Indian coin, 2 pieces of candle moulded into marbles, some small old envelopes, 3 pieces of whalebone, 1 nail, a lead button, cork, a piece of charcoal, old bit of India rubber, a piece of gutta-percha, a piece of wood cut out for a gun carriage, a very small piece of mirror glass. Ordinary toys were few and expensive ones hardly ever possessed and indeed rarely longed for

Christmas time was spent in Bath at Shirley Villa during all the early years, until the effort of organising became too much for grandmother and the children too big to be stowed away to sleep in anybody's bedroom where there was an odd corner to be spared. These Christmases were a high spot in our lives. They seemed usually to be snowy Christmas card Christmases and the windows of Shirley Villa were sometimes sash deep in drifts of snow, making the interior of the room with its blazing fire dim and mysterious.

Into this room on at least two occasions a real Father Christmas came, red cloak and hat and a sackful of toys over his shoulder. He came through the front gate, which rang a little bell as it opened, and walked slowly up the snowy path. Four or five little heads peered excitedly, somewhat awesomely, over the snowdrifts and then ran to the door to welcome him. He was a personality in the eyes of all children as he loved them and had a magical way of commanding their attention. (He was Mr Fred Spear and had been Reginald's father's best man at his wedding, his great friend, a man of great generosity and kindness and a near neighbour)

Later at Christmas time Grandmother and aunts and uncles joined the Ainsworths at their house Summerville in Swindon, and great was the excitement on their arrival; but the magic of these earlier times always remained in the memories of the children to be carried far into manhood and womanhood.

Parties were rare and invitations to them were received by Regg with nervous apprehensions. He objected on one occasion to a rather formidable party at the Spears' house but he was persuaded to go and his aunt in a letter says "he did enjoy it and was afterwards invited to a party at Mrs Sydney Bush's for little boys only"

This was about the year 1894 when the family was living at Swindon, Reginald's father being the manager of the Wilts and Berks Canal, which was navigable at that time and used a good deal for transport. There was a rather dilapidated houseboat kept for the use of the manager, and the elder children spent many happy hours in it, among the reeds and other water plants that grew by the side of the water.

The family went to Swindon in 1892 when Reginald was 10 years old and his parents were thinking more seriously and definitely of his education and that of the rest of the family. At first a governess was employed and a room in 2 Brunswick Terrace was designated as the "schoolroom", but Regg very soon outgrew the governess stage and was sent to a school kept by a Mr Snell, a private school in the same road as his home.

The standard at this school was not very high and he found the work easy, the other boys often coming to the house in the evenings to ask for his help in their homework. They sometimes called him 'Brain killer'.

He was a good cricketer especially as a bowler as his eye was accurate and his action powerful. He had broad strong shoulders, a well-balanced body and became quite a champion swimmer, but at this time there were few opportunities of following what became to him in later years a favourite sport in which he excelled.

It was at this school, with a room at the back in which lessons were done and a square asphalted playground, that Regg found one or two friendships that were to prove lifelong; but on the whole he was not a gregarious soul and was exceedingly discriminating in his choice of friends. Also he was quiet and uncommunicative, sensitive to ignobility and insecurity.

One of these friends, Frank Longland, son of a grocer in the town, a sunny adventurous boy, became afterwards in the course of a missionary career in the Congo a Commissioner in Tanganyika. He was perhaps the only lifelong friend. Stephen Pugh, the quiet, studious, motherless son of the Baptist Minister, was perhaps the originator of any interest Regg took in the science of engineering. He too became a missionary and a doctor and started and ran a large hospital in Darjeeling in India for many years, retiring to Wales as ordinary practitioner and dying in early middle age. Bramal Williams, son of a Congregational minister, tall and lanky, died of TB in his early twenties.

There were other lesser stars in his small circle of friends but these were his principal companions in games, in the garden, or on Saturday expeditions to the wonderful Wiltshire Downs which always loved, as did his wife also in later years.

The long dusty roads not yet adapted for motor traffic, winding up to the bare lonely hills patched with shifting cloud shadows, and dotted by clumps of gaunt trees were to the thoughtful nature loving by an escape from the school routine, and gave him a taste of that life of romance and adventure for which his soul longed. Then they might plunge into the wood fringing these uplands, copses which lined the sides of the coombes cutting into the hillside, full of strange and sometimes rare plants, butterflies and birds, wild and very little frequented except by the farm workers or boys bent on exploration and discovery in pleasurable terror of the game keeper

These foothills and coombes were happy hunting grounds for botanists and entomologists and it was at this time we started our collections of flowers, butterflies and moths. In a few years Reginald had a good collection of the latter and could be found on summer nights, with a lantern and net peering (he was always short sighted) into the garden borders and fruit bushes, shaking them to make the moths fly out.

Liddington and Chislehurst and villages nestling at the foot of the Downs were the haunts of the adventurous.

But the chief place of interest was Coate Reservoir, a sheet of water, almost a lake, lying in a cup of the hills about two miles out of Swindon. It was originally conserved for the supply of the Wilts and Berks Canal and was under the control of that company of which Reginald's father was the general manager. The Ainsworth family was therefore allowed to enter freely and many were the picnics and skating excursions made en famille to this spot. As an objective for the boys it was ideal, conker chestnuts in the autumn, swimming in the summer or rowing a boat if funds would run to that, and in the winter, which seemed long and hard in those days, skating. The very hard frost of 1897 made the ice so thick that an ice gala was held on it, and during this period daily pilgrimages were made to it, the whole family walking the two miles dangling little wooden skates. One sat on the icy verge of the lake or, if lucky, on a chair provided by an attendant and had them screwed on to the soles of ones boots.

Proof of his excellence at school was illustrated by an incident which happened on one of the family's excursions to Savenake Forest, a very favourite spot. His aunt writes in letter to her mother, "We met his (R's) schoolmaster and Lyddie (R's mother) asked how Reggie was getting on – 'He is a bright boy and top of his form; was the answer' He was winning the good opinion of all his teachers and it was advised that he should try for a scholarship to the Swindon Technical Schools. He won this easily and from that time on his education cost our father nothing.

Science was his subject although he was equally good on the classical side and at this period began to read voraciously. Although he complained of a bad memory all his life, his mind was a storehouse of knowledge on a great variety of subjects.

It was about this time, when he was thirteen that something occurred which affected his whole future life. - the coming of the Willway family to Swindon. Mr and Mrs Willway were Congregationalists and it was at a meeting connected with the Free Churches of Swindon that our father met him, our father being a Baptist. Our mother was quite excited when told that a member of her family had come to Swindon and plans to meet them were made.

Mr Henry Willway was a younger member of an older branch of our mother's family, he being our mother's father's (James Willway's) first cousin. He was a fine good looking intellectual man, inclined to be stout and wearing a small beard. His wife was short and also inclined to stoutness, very active, businesslike and house proud, and also very proud of their daughter Margie, the youngest of their family by 12 years

Margie was 13 and extremely pretty, tall for her age with a mass of brown curly hair worn with a full fringe. Her eyes were large and violet blue, her nose straight and a cupid's bow of a mouth described by a girl friend as most "kissable". She was not only sweet to look at but of a sweet disposition and the Ainsworth family fell for her at once. By an almost imperceptible act she was received into the family and from that time forth has not departed from it.

She joined us in our walks on which we were accompanied then by the shy Reginald who shirked walking with the family on ordinary occasions. He even attempted an entertainment for her by making quaint shadows on the wall in the gas light with his hands, and on one occasion he thrust a small bunch of lilies over his shoulder from behind being too shy to present them in the orthodox manner.

He was sensitive to a degree of intense shyness at times, but was never known to overstep the mark of propriety in his contact with others. He began secretly to resent the attention other boys paid to his cousin, especially a certain set of which he did not approve and asked his sister not to introduce her to one boy who was particularly anathema to him.

He was becoming a very studious schoolboy with a scientific inclination, getting much pleasure from his work in experimenting with various chemicals especially, in the early days, with explosives. The devices which he, with the aid of confederates, invented to alarm the neighbourhood were numerous and astonishing. Pellets of lead enclosing home made explosive and catapulted into walls, bombs buried in the earth with fuses attached were the sort the sorts of menaces with which these boys employed their spare time, but although, on one occasion, burning his eyebrows and front hair off, Regg never came to any serious harm

It was about the year 1900 when we moved to a larger house, Summerville, in the same road but further from the shops, where the houses were larger and more modern. This was a semi detached house with a shady garden of about $\frac{1}{2}$ acre, and here we lived for about 20 years

A little later Mr and Mrs Willway moved to a house next door but one, and between the two houses was the private school at which Margie became a teacher, but was at first a pupil.