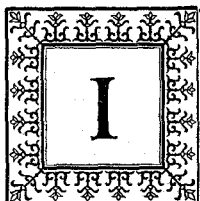


# Mrs. Denton Gets Off

BY LEIGH MORTON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY REGINALD BIRCH



I had never occurred to Mrs. Denton that her children did not owe her a debt for having brought them into the world. On the contrary, she was of the opinion common to most women that they owed her a debt that they should spend their lives in paying. Not only had she launched them in this vale of tears, but she had sacrificed the best of her youth to the care of them. For this they should pay her with sacrifice in kind. She had never once put her theory into words even in her own mind; it wasn't necessary to do that, for the theory was a part of her; a belief, inherited and accepted, like her belief in God. She didn't know she believed it; she just lived it.

There were three of them, whose bodies and souls and lives she believed she possessed. They were all grown up now; indeed Buddy, her baby, had graduated from Harvard a year ago. She had spoiled his class day for him with the beaming completeness that is customary for mothers to indulge in on that great day in a son's life. She had arrived upon the scene with the first, bringing with her a sister and two boarding-school nieces. It was expected that Buddy should be in attendance every minute of the hot day that he was not, of necessity, marching about with his class. Buddy fulfilled the expectation after the manner in which he had been trained. Four plates of ice-cream and strawberries, four glasses of punch, he fought for at every spread they attended. If, lost in the crush of black-gowned seniors about the refreshment-tables, he was heard to mutter, "Ain't it hell?"—or worse—to fellow sufferers, fighting fodder for equally to-be-taken-for-granted and superfluous mothers, he returned, smiling and polite, to the family

circle, hypnotized, as it were, by the fact that that was what his mother expected of him.

On this day of all others, when a boy reaches the last mile-stone of boyhood and steps out into a man's world, Buddy, like nine-tenths of his class, toiled as the slave of his mother, who, in accordance with custom, had come to see him graduate. She didn't enjoy herself: it was too hot; it was too crowded; she had outgrown that kind of a time. She would have said that she had come because, of course, Buddy wanted her to come; but she would have said it solely from habit of mind, and with not one particle of intelligent thought wasted on the subject.

For Buddy didn't want her. He didn't want Aunt Edith or the cousins. He had a girl of his own that he wanted to impress with his man's estate, on that day of all others. A girl of his own age and temperament and capacity, and he saw her for just one half-hour at eleven o'clock that night, after the family had retired from the field. His glory was wilted by that time; he didn't look impressive or feel impressive.

At the last spread of all, they carried two camp-chairs into a clump of lilac-bushes, and sat down, away from the dancing throng.

"Lord, I'm tired!" Buddy said. "I've tried to get a moment with you everywhere. But the family has been at my heels all day—I couldn't shake them!"

"Oh, I knew you were chained," she sympathized, "I understood."

"Why do they come, I wonder . . . families?" Buddy muttered, in his fatigue. "If they gave it half a thought they'd know a man didn't really want them. . . . It's all sentimental bosh. . . . Oh, well . . . this will take the taste out. . . . My princess, you look a queen to-night! How do you manage to keep so fresh . . . and—and *dry*! Will you let a mere graduate of Harvard hold your hand?"

He kissed his girl good-by that night—romantic kisses as the lights went out, to show that class day was over. He wasn't much given to kissing, but he was sailing for France in two days, to be gone indefinitely at the Beaux Arts.

"It will have to be good-by now, dear," he said. "I can't get in to-morrow, for mother will expect me to spend my last evening at home."

She did—oh, yes, she expected it. She expected all those little things of her children, so instinctively that she seldom gave it a separate thought. It was her belief at work in her; the belief that they owed her last evenings and things, in return for the evenings she had spent by their whooping-cough bedsides years ago. In the same way it never entered her mind that they wanted to do any other thing. Buddy, for instance. He had a silly girl, she knew, but that didn't count beside the fact that he was a loving son, and loving sons quite naturally want to spend last evenings with mothers.

And he spent it with her—cheerfully putting it through, with his heart elsewhere; hypnotized by his training and his decency, out of any thought of possible revolt.

They were all like that. "Well-brought-up children" they had always been called.

Elise had come first; then Henry; and, some time later, little Charles, known lamentably as Buddy. This was because of Charles Denton, the elder, who had, incidentally, survived many years of fatherhood, with a laugh for the problems they brought. He found nearly everything amusing. He laughed heartily at Elise when she was born. Looking at the wizened little creature:

"Great Scott, Amy," he said to his wife, "what have we produced!" and his mirth had to be hushed.

But his was genial, well-to-do laughter. His wife liked it, for in spite of it he was right there when she needed him, and he acted as a balance-wheel to her cares. Her cares, from the first, had been the trumped-up cares of the fortunately situated in life. Charles Denton had let her worry over a choice of summer places, of evening gowns, of new automobiles, much as you let a baby cry for the good of its health. It amused him to hear her say,

with the nurse standing by, that she could not possibly go out with him, as Henry had a temperature. He knew that she was a good little mother, but she amused him. He watched her play with the children, study with the children, plan for the children, with no insight as to what it was all preluding. He demanded of the children himself, as instinctively as did his wife, respect, obedience, manners. One does, of course. If he had lived after they were grown up, he would have continued to demand, undoubtedly, since he knew no better, and seldom thought; only laughed. But influenza intervened, and there was one less unwittingly tyrannical parent in the world.

Mrs. Denton had aged at that time. Previous to it she had felt as young as her children; never realizing that they did not feel as young as she did—at least, not at the same moment—or something. At all events, there was a discrepancy; but she didn't know it. In sweater and skirt, a slicker over her arm, she was off for a sail with Henry and his friends on the roughest days of the summer. The boys were expert little navigators at fourteen, and knew quite well the danger they were all running in a racing knockabout with more canvas than she could well carry. When the horizon darkened with swift summer storms and a green shadow sped toward them over the roughening sea, *they* knew. And they knew that, if the boat did not weather it, then they had mother to save. Henry's nerve broke after one hairbreadth escape, when the vision of saving mother, in what might as well have been mid-ocean, had come too ghastly near to reality. *He* could have swum, *he* could have clung, *he* could have climbed to perilous safety on the upturned keel, if need be; so could his friend. But mother was no swimmer. She thought she was, but she wasn't. Mother's arms had no muscle fit for a life-and-death struggle with a slipping, rolling keel and sucking waters. Henry saw what might be in one shocking instant when the storm hit them. He felt twice as old as mother then, and for a very bad hour to come. She was splendid; she was brave as could be, but she shouldn't have come! He'd never take her again, he vowed, and he never did. Whenever she asked it of him



In sweater and skirt . . . she was off for a sail with Henry and his friends.—Page 518.

he felt, for a second, both old and weak, and hastily invented another engagement.

Mrs. Denton was wont to say that Henry had been very proud of his mother that day, and continued to feel as young as he.

She had aged, however, during her period of mourning for her husband. That

was now eleven years ago; she had been forty-six at the time. Elise had come out the year before; Henry was a junior at Harvard; and Buddy still a little school-boy. During the enforced retirement from society she seemed to lose her enthusiasm for much that she used to enjoy, and she never danced again.

She began to be reminiscent of her gay youth. Only the winter of Elise's début she had been an ardent dancer; not that she had pilfered her daughter's partners—she had plenty of conventional dignity—but, since Charles Denton did not fox-trot, she used Henry as an escort unscrupulously.

"We have such good fun," she would say laughingly. "Helen Lothrop and I make the boys take us to the hotels for tea and dancing on Saturday afternoons. They love it. They say we dance as well as any of the buds."

What the boys said to each other on their way back to college was another story that their mothers never heard.

"She's all right with her feet, but, Lord, she's heavy with her arms," Henry would muse, with a grin. "I wonder why older people always bear down on you so hard?"

"They don't follow as the girls do," the Lothrop boy would complain. "I'll be darned if I'll get caught this way again on a perfectly good Saturday afternoon."

Yet they did—many times. They could seldom seem decently to avoid it, and Mrs. Denton reminisced of those days with blind delusion.

She moved out of town in her widow-hood. Buddy was at boarding-school in the country, and she bought a house in the quaint old town near by. Then Elise married and went to live in New York, and Henry, on graduating, entered the law school.

He found it pleasant enough, during those years, to run out to the country for his week-ends and vacations, but when it came to commuting daily to and from the city, he swiftly grew to hate it. The trains, cold, halting, and late in winter, hot and grimy in summer, bored him with a sickening irritation; the smell of them never left his nostrils. His mother, unfortunately, in the course of those five years, had made her nest in the country for good and all. When Buddy entered college, Henry suggested, without avail, an apartment in town for the winter months. He admitted that he detested the travelling back and forth, and yet he couldn't leave his mother to live alone. He thought he couldn't, at least, when she half-heartedly offered him the chance;

and the compensations that she suggested he found sufficiently convincing to buck his spirit for a time. They were quite sufficiently convincing to eliminate any suspicion of selfishness from her own mind, though her triumph reacted against her six months later. It was distinctly at the bottom of Henry's marriage—and then she was left alone.

Love stifles a multitude of compunctions. Henry married, subconsciously, in order to stop commuting. The thought struggled up through his consciousness on the first hot July night of his married life, but he didn't recognize it. Eagerly he walked from the office through the sweltering streets to his own little home on top of the city's hill. His wife of a month ran into his arms as he entered the door, and they held one another in a damp embrace.

"It's a hell of a night, darling," Henry chanted jubilantly, "but I couldn't tell which thought made me happiest as I left the office—the thought that I was coming home to you, or the thought that I didn't have to take a train."

Theirs was six-cylinder love. They rented a home, but owned a car. They dashed about in it, up the north shore and down the south shore, over every week-end and holiday during that first summer, until gradually, insidiously, it was borne in upon them that their Sundays and holidays were not primarily their own. It seemed that they owed them to Mrs. Denton. After that it was only by hook or crook that they could avoid payment. They weren't the only ones, of course. Elise paid regularly at Thanksgiving or Christmas, and with a month each summer. She came at first bringing solely a husband, and then she added baby George, and then to George she added baby Jeanne. Elise loved her mother, but the pressure made for arduousness. It brought her to the point of saying, "We have to go home for Christmas," or "I've got to spend August with mother"; and the year that Jeanne arrived, when they skipped Thanksgiving, she found herself chorusing with her husband: "Thank Heaven, we can stay at home for once." Yet she wrote a penitent letter which Mrs. Denton swallowed whole, and answered to the effect that she was counting the days until Christmas.





*From a drawing by Reginald Birch.*

"I couldn't tell which thought made me happiest as I left the office—the thought that I was coming home to you, or the thought that I didn't have to take a train."—Page 520.

Henry and Marianna felt that pressure bearing down upon them from a mere distance of thirty miles. Very early in their married life they attempted to manœuvre it, until one or the other would succumb to the old decency.

"Oh, I suppose we must go—it means so much to *her*."

And they were so bright, so gay, all of each Sunday; Henry and Buddy played golf and were so enthusiastic over dinner; old friends dropped in and made the afternoons merry.

"Good-by, dears," Mrs. Denton would speed them finally. "Don't we have lovely days together? . . . I look forward to them all the week."

Oh, fatal wagging of foolish tongue! By a word one is bound; for the lack of a word one goes free. Given freedom to go one's way—and nine times out of ten one stays—or one returns whole-heartedly.

The summer that Buddy graduated and sailed for France, Mrs. Denton presented, indeed, a sad and bereft picture. There was great flocking to her support. Like many another cheerful, sane, and social person, she insinuated a definite sense of dependence. People rallied round; not only friends and neighbors, but all of her family and in-laws. Henry and Marianna barely escaped a winter in the country—the menace of it filling Henry's nostrils with a half-forgotten stench. Fortunately Elise came to the rescue, bearing her mother away to New York and leaving Henry and his wife so free that they, on a great rebound, began to plan guilelessly for still further freedom.

It was all arranged by spring. They broke the news to Mrs. Denton the very first Sunday after she had returned to her house in the country. Their passports were actually in their pockets, they told her, and they were sailing for six weeks in Europe at the end of June. Imagine Henry's tact and fortitude in gouging six weeks' vacation out of the firm, exulted Marianna. Oh, they were going to have such a time! They had lived on hope and anticipation all winter long, but the day was drawing nearer, nearer—little more than a month now! They would catch a glimpse of Buddy, too; he had written that his holidays began in July.

Mrs. Denton was all delighted excite-

ment and sympathy. She threw herself into eager discussion of every detail, financial, sartorial, *modus vivendi*—everything! When they left her alone that evening a surging crowd of thoughts kept her company. She wandered afiel with them for an hour and then turned, practically, to the study of her bank-books.

That was the great moment in Mrs. Denton's life. None other had compared in portent with that moment in which, in her still, lonely house, she fell to studying her bank-books. Yet, though on the cards it would have been marked "psychological," she never realized it.

She would have marked a day quite two weeks later—a Saturday afternoon on which Henry and Marianna came out to the club for golf; she would have marked the moment itself as that in which she—through with her game of bridge, and having seen Marianna run up-stairs for a probable shower—followed to suggest that they all stay and dine together, and on entering the dressing-room was met, halted, transfixed, by the sound of her daughter-in-law's voice as it issued from the seclusion of the shower-bath:

"I suppose you know the shocking, appalling thing that's happened to us, don't you?" it called extravagantly to an unseen auditor.

"No, I don't—what on earth do you mean?" came an answering shout from a farther bathroom.

"Mrs. Denton's going with us to Europe!" stated Marianna, at the top of her lungs, with dramatic terseness.

"Oh, Nanna!—No!—It's not possible!" responded horror-stricken accents.

"It is possible! . . . She's started about her passport. . . . Did you ever know anything so ghastly mean!"

"How *could* she? . . . Did she ask if she might? . . . What *did* she do?"

"She just said . . . confidently, you know, 'How would you like it if I went with you on the twenty-fourth? . . . I could be with you till you left, and then take a little trip with Buddy in his vacation, and come home later.' . . . Well . . . you *know* . . . what could we say?"

"Oh, Nanna . . . dear . . .!"

"Henry and I were simply knocked out . . . we were speechless. . . . Our trip,

Conny . . . that we'd been so utterly crazy about . . . just the two of us . . . round!"  
 neither of us had ever been before, and we "Why, in heaven's name, can't older



.She was met, halted, transfixed, by the sound of her daughter-in-law's voice.—Page 522.

wanted it just together. . . . And Buddy, too! . . . Poor Buddy! . . . His first vacation for a year . . . his first chance to chase about with the other boys and see something . . . walking trips and things they take, you know, . . . and to have *her* come butting in to spoil it for

people realize that they're not wanted!"

"That's what *I'd* like to know, too. Older people ought to play with each other—we younger ones have our own lives, and they act as if their ideas had stopped functioning, and all that's left for them is to fasten to us and be carried

along. You just can't get free of them. I hope I learn *my* lesson from my mother-in-law, and have my own resources when I reach her age. . . . Oh, she's all right, of course . . . there aren't many women more attractive. . . . She could have a whale of a time still, if she had any initiative . . . but she doesn't know her place."

Mrs. Denton at least knew that her place was not the spot where she now stood. The voices kept on—in her own head *how* they kept on—but she crept away, down the stairs, across the veranda, along the drive . . . stumbling a little, she escaped.

That was the moment *she* would have marked "psychological." Rather a long moment, while she stood paralyzed, unable *not* to eavesdrop. A long moment with very long results—lasting over a period of ten years, as far as we can tell, though they may have continued even in heaven.

Needless to say that Mrs. Denton did not go to Europe. Needless to say that, being a woman of the world, the reason given to Henry and Marianna was not the true reason, nor was it given at all until some time had passed. The shock that she had received sickened her. For weeks she was dazed and sick with rage. She was enraged with youth; with the whole of Henry's and Marianna's generation. Her first reacting impulse was to get back at them.

To start with, she allowed her own particular young people to arrive, next day, for their weekly tryst, and, looking white and ill enough to support her loving, penitent words, sent them away again, dinnerless. Then for a space she withdrew from them and remained sick. Her passport was returned to her; she gave it one glance and tore it up. At length she told Marianna, over the telephone, that her neuritis was rampant, and that she had almost decided not to go. She saw neither them nor herself clearly; she was actually hysterical. She wanted, in this state, to torture them. So she dangled them on her indecision until the last possible moment. While they were away she meant to formulate her great revenge. Nor was Elise to be exempt. Undoubtedly Elise and Buddy regarded her, for all their fond

pretense, just as Marianna did. Henceforth her own fondness should be all pretense, likewise.

She acted it for the first time in the few interviews she permitted Henry and Marianna before they sailed. To them she appeared perfectly natural, but racked with pain, while actually the pain was the only thing about her that *was* natural. Practically every woman is an actress of the first water in real life. It's only on the stage that so many fail.

And Mrs. Denton was normal; and rage is terribly akin to tears; and hate is terribly akin to love.

While her son and his wife toured Europe with her other son that summer, Mrs. Denton passed through many normal stages of reaction to shock. She sat herself down to formulate a great revenge upon those she loved best. She meant to exclude them from her life, and to watch them regret their great loss of her. But once she had added Elise to the wholesale exclusion—once she had written to put off their annual summer visit—she sat there and knew that she was a lonely old woman. And then she wept. And then she hated awhile, and then she came to know that she loved.

Those she loved were right in this crisis. It was she who was wrong. She thought back over the years of her youth, when the old—no, the middle-aged—seemed so very old—so often in the way. Had she been like that?

Oh, horror! . . . She had!

Women should keep their perspective . . . it was the easiest thing in the world to lose. . . . Mothers should remember that years mean manhood in the eyes of the world . . . only mothers never see with the eyes of the world.

They *should*!

Neither do they see themselves with the eyes of the world . . . and they should. . . . They should . . . as Marianna said . . . know their place. . . .

They should know where they "got off." Thus Mrs. Denton.

Her next stage was combined resource and initiative. By the time her children returned she was intensely busy working up resource and initiative. It helped her out with them, she found, for she felt desperately shy of them now, and uncertain





"But, mother—mother dear, it's *not* true," she protested.—Page 526.

of her new steps. But she had taken up golf, which she played only with her contemporaries, and she had bought a car with the money that her bank-books had once told her that she might safely expend upon Europe. The car whirled her out of her country town and into the city, where she joined a woman's club. It gave her great independence. No more

crawling into town by train, and begging—yes—begging a lunch from Marianna.

"Why, I'm in another world—another skin—I'm a totally different person," cried Mrs. Denton to her soul one night.

She lay and thought it all over. It had its drawbacks, this forcing oneself into a new skin. One wanted Henry and Marianna at home on Sundays, rather than a

whirl down the north shore on a make-believe visit to Helen Lothrop; one wanted Elise and the children, and all of them on Thanksgiving, rather than an inconveniently planned trip to Buffalo. But it was right—what she was doing—and perhaps in time it would feel right. She had found it all out so late—very nearly too late. She wished that she might help other mothers to find it out long, long before it was too late. She lay there thinking.

It was in early November that she telephoned to Marianna one day. Her voice quavered strangely while she proffered a mysterious invitation:

"I want you to come to lunch on Thursday, Marianna dear," she said. "Please say you can. I want it so much. It's really very . . . well . . . important. . . . Oh, that's awfully sweet of you, dear . . . I know, we haven't seen much of each other lately . . . no—it's not a party—not at all. . . . It's—I mean . . . we're just going on to something afterward. . . . Perhaps it won't interest you, but I . . . want you . . . this once. I won't ask you ever again."

She laughed and rang off, and her hand shook as she hung up the receiver.

Marianna found herself, that Thursday afternoon, guided by Mrs. Denton to the house of a neighbor. Merely that; at three-fifteen. The room that they entered was crowded with women of all ages, for the meeting had been called at three, and Mrs. Denton and her daughter-in-law were fifteen minutes late. That had been intentional on Mrs. Denton's part. She could not possibly have come on time, and waited, for she had a paper to read to this Mothers' Club, and she was consumed, absolutely consumed, with fright.

"It's a *message* that I have to give you," she told these women a few minutes later, as she stood and faced them. And everywhere she looked she saw only Marianna. "A message," she repeated, for somehow the word steadied her. "It's about the family . . . first of all. . . ."

It wasn't very well written—what she had to say—but it had one arresting quality. She never said "I think" or "It seems to me." She stated everything, as if an authority. She said that the family was a group for a very short period; that

each child, as it matured, became an individual and split apart from the group. That this was a human fact, if not an established scientific fact, and should be recognized. That children were seldom born of high ideals; they were born of love or of wantonness, and for that reason, above all others, the parents forfeited their claim upon them once they had become individuals. That family claim became dissolved of itself at that time save for one shred, which remained with the child as its birthright, forever. For the parents there remained forever—duty. Just duty and love.

This was her message, she said; the message of the true family law, which she saw transgressed so constantly; which she herself had so grievously transgressed, through ignorance.

Then she went on to give examples. She cited all the usual and obvious relations between mother and child; all the errors of judgment that she, herself, had committed as far back as she could remember. She cited the recurrent friction between generation after generation. Apron-strings at the bottom of it all, she said; false claims. Mothers and fathers might offer guidance and assistance, as part of their duty, even until their children come of age. After that they should wait until they're asked. What is more, they should wait until they're . . . invited.

And then she explained what women should do with their lives when their children *have* come of age; that they must cultivate resource and initiative, and must be content to play with one another. She spoke of everything that she had learned to be true in the last four months.

It wasn't very well written—what she had to say—but she certainly told the Mothers' Club where they "got off."

Marianna was the first to reach her as she finished speaking and laid her paper down. There were tears in her eyes and a sob in her young voice:

"But, mother—mother dear, it's *not* true," she protested.

"Think again, Marianna," Mrs. Denton said, smiling.

It didn't escape her that this was the first time that Marianna had ever called her "mother."

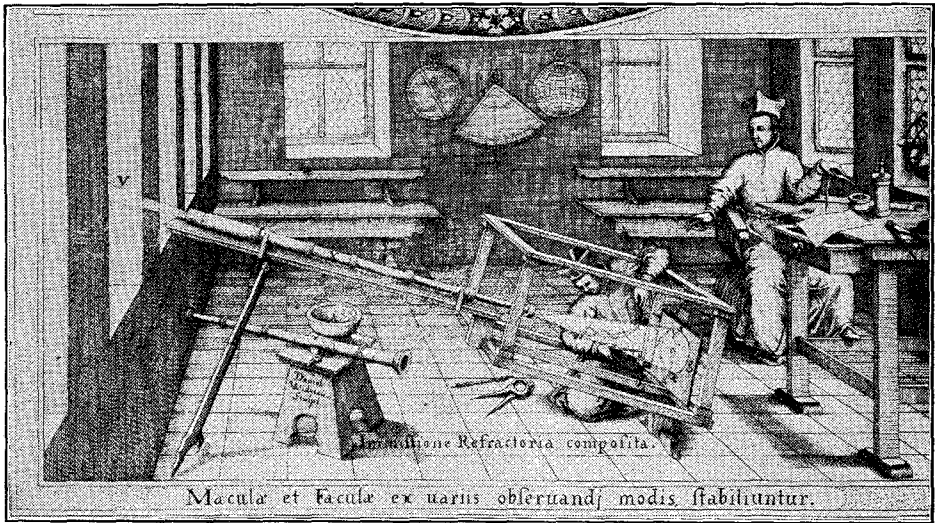


Fig. 1.—Small telescope used by Scheiner.

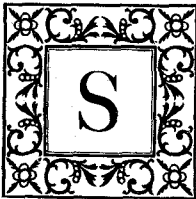
This illustration, copied from Scheiner's "Rosa Ursina," published in 1630, shows how sun-spots may be observed by projecting the solar image on a smooth white surface.

# Sun-Spots as Magnets

BY GEORGE ELLERY HALE

Author of "The Depths of the Universe," "Barnard's Dark Nebulæ," etc.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PHOTOGRAPHS AND DIAGRAMMS



UN-SPOTS have been known since the third century of our era, though the western world held its belief in an immaculate sun until the invention of the telescope. The first

edition of the great Chinese encyclopædia, published in one hundred volumes in 1322, contains observations of forty-five sun-spots made between A. D. 301 and 1205. In spite of our meagre indebtedness to China in the field of scientific research, there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of these observations, as the largest spots are easily visible to the naked eye when the brightness of the sun's disk is reduced by smoke or haze. It is strange, however, that their existence was not recognized in Europe.

It is also an odd coincidence, though certainly nothing more, that the phe-

nomenon of magnetism, now known to be an invariable attribute of sun-spots, is said by many authorities to have been first recognized in China. In the second century B. C. a Chinese author wrote of "magnetic cars," which he claims were given more than nine hundred years before by the Emperor to the ambassadors from Tonkin and Cochin China, to guide them on their return journey across the desert. These contained a natural lodestone, floated on water, which pointed toward the south. According to this version, the magnetic compass, used also in China for the orientation of temples, was subsequently adopted by Chinese navigators, from whom its use spread to India and thence to the Mediterranean.

Whatever the facts—for the Chinese made no scientific study of the sun or of magnets—our knowledge of the nature of sun-spots may be said to begin with the observations of Galileo and his contem-