

THE DOCTOR LOOKS AT BIOGRAPHY

By Joseph Collins

STORIES of individuals' lives have the fascination for adults that fairy stories have for children. Biographies recount successes. Possession, the other name for success, is what we are all after. Men who make failures of their lives rarely write their biographies. It is to be regretted; they would be very helpful. We learn more from our mistakes than from our ten-strikes. Strangely enough, some of our most interesting fiction is the biography of failure: Papini's "L'Uomo Finito" (published in English under the title of "The Failure"), W. B. Maxwell's "In Cotton Wool", W. H. Wright's "The Man of Promise", and Cyril Hume's "Cruel Fellowship", for example.

Biographies engender a variety of emotional states: most of them are pleasurable and consequently beneficial. When we come upon one that excites anger or disgust or anything approaching that, there is no law or convention that compels us to continue reading it. Next to poetry, biography is the most satisfactory reading for all ages: instructive to youth, orienting to maturity, solacing to old age.

We have made greater strides with our biographic than with our fictional literature. During the past year a score and more excellent studies have been published. Biographies, like golfers, may be put in four classes: A, B, C, and the unclassifiable. Mr. Seitz's *Life of Joseph Pulitzer*, Mr. Beer's *Life of Stephen Crane*, E. P. Mitchell's "Memoirs of an Editor", and Mark Twain's autobiography are in Class A.

Mr. Firkins's *Life of William Dean Howells* and Maurice Egan's "Recollections of a Happy Life" are in Class B. Mrs. Dorr's "A Woman of Fifty" and Mr. Bok's "Twice Thirty" are in Class C. The unclassifiable are frequently pietistic gestures, lives written on order from a widow profoundly appreciative of her departed husband's virtues and attainments, or from children or colleagues who would have their benefactor's virtues perpetuated. Some of them are definite contributions to personality studies, such as George Herbert Palmer's "Life of Alice Freeman Palmer". Others are permanent historical documents, such as "The Life of Olive Schreiner" by her widower.

In a measure, undoubtedly, it was with some desire to meet an obligation, to discharge a debt, that Mr. Seitz set to work to write the life of his chief, Joseph Pulitzer, whom he calls for some unknown reason the *Liberator of Journalism*. For many years he was called the *Libertine of Journalism*, and worse than that. He deserves the one as richly as he deserved the other, no more so. The biographer, like the witness in court, should state facts, not conclusions. Joseph Pulitzer was an unusual man and he had an extraordinary career. Hungarian emigrant, without background or adventitious aid, he acquired within a quarter of a century power and influence that were felt not only through this country but throughout Europe. Politics was his passion, property his possession, and power his ambition.

He was vouchsafed twenty years of public influence; he molded minds, shaped opinions, conditioned decisions, germinated ideals; and they were twenty years of personal misery and decrepitude. Dying, he perpetuated his name by the establishment of the School of Journalism at Columbia University. It can scarcely fail to be interesting to learn about such a man. Mr. Seitz, with the instinct and experience of the expert journalist, gives the information in the first chapter, which he entitles "Characteristics". He molds the clay, then animates it. As he hurls virtues into the receptive mass, he calls out loudly their names; as the limitations and defects steal in, he whispers or remains silent. Joseph Pulitzer was saturated with belief in liberty, equality, and opportunity; he was generous, indulgent, and just; but he was also vain, arrogant, domineering, verbose, bulimious, unjudicial, self sufficient, personally hypersensitive but insensitive to others' feelings; and he wore a mask that fell off on the slightest encounter. He had acquired a dexterity in regaining it which often prevented adversaries from seeing that it had fallen. The sea of life for him was always turbulent. When he was on the crest of the wave, his speech and conduct were hypomaniac; when in the trough, he was taciturn, unapproachable, uncommunicative, inert. He had a firm intellect and an infirm temper; firm energy and an infirm body; a keen æsthetic sense and a contempt for his fellow man because he would not make himself in Joseph Pulitzer's image. "I have no friends", said he to one of his secretaries. "And this was in a great measure true", adds his biographer. He has now, and he will have more in the future; Mr. Seitz's book will make hundreds for him, and the institutions he founded, thousands.

No American under thirty should fail to read the book; no one over fifty who can buy or borrow it will fail to read it.

When I read Mr. Mitchell's "Memoirs of an Editor" every page made firmer the conviction that I was companionship a great mind and a kindly heart. I recalled something that Mark Twain said of Anson Burlingame: "His outlook upon the world and its affairs was as wide as the horizon, and his speech was of a dignity and eloquence proper to it. It dealt in no commonplaces, for he had no commonplace thoughts. He was a kindly man, and most lovable. He wrought for justice and humanity. All his ways were clean; all his motives were high and fine." That is Edward P. Mitchell if I may estimate him from his autobiography. If he has any fault, it is that he is too affable. He is a tiny bit too polite. There have been proprietors of the New York "Sun" within the memory of man who did not have *all* the virtues, but no one would suspect it from Mr. Mitchell's book. The "Sun" that he writes about most entertainingly and instructively is the "Sun" for which Charles A. Dana got all the credit. Mr. Mitchell does not hint that the credit was unjustly allotted, but no one can read the chapters "How I Went to the Sun" and "The Newspaperman's Newspaper" without being convinced that it was. The "Sun" could not have been what it was in the days of its ascendancy: a beacon light of newspaperdom, a stimulus and a joy to thousands, a scourge to scores, had it not been for Francis P. Church, Fitz Henry Warren, and William D. Bartlett.

But it is not the story of the "Sun" that Mr. Mitchell set out to write. His colleague Frank M. O'Brien did that, and anyone who believes he could

improve on it would be as daring or demented as the artist who believes he can improve on the "Mona Lisa". It reflected the spirit of the newspaper as that portrait reflected the soul of her who reminded Pater of Leda. However, Mr. Mitchell for a half century was devoted to the "Sun" and he could scarcely tell us of himself without telling its story too.

The volume is replete with personality studies of sages and cranks, philosophers and buffoons, experts and amateurs. Anyone interested in the spirit of the Puritan, the pioneer, the pathfinder; anyone who is intrigued by guessing at the truth, will be helped by reading the pages on Goldwin Smith. Anyone who would like to clarify his hazy notions of paranoia will be aided by perusal of the pages on George Francis Train; anyone who would make the acquaintance of a critic of letters to whom his countrymen should have accorded the esteem that the French accorded Remy de Gourmont and the British George Saintsbury, should read what Mr. Mitchell says of Mayo W. Hazeltine; anyone who would learn of the forces that did more than anything else to deliver us as a nation from the spirit of parochialism should read his pages on Bunan-Varilla, the French engineer who made possible the Panama Canal.

It is a book for a rainy day and a starry night; a book to be read in Watchapey and Washington; to accompany one on Lake Louise or the Atlantic. The author's wish has come true. It was that here and there some kind friends unknown might find in his book something as interesting for them to read as it was for him to remember. If he had as much pleasure in writing it as they have had reading it, Edward P. Mitchell is a giant joy-creator.

William Dean Howells said that

Mark Twain was the Lincoln of literature. That is the apogee of praise. The more facets of his personality we see, the more richly does he seem to deserve it.

The immortality of Poe, Whitman, and Mark Twain would seem to be assured. Other names have been on the roster long enough to make it fairly certain that they also will be chosen, but Hawthorne's reputation wanes as Melville's enhances. Edwin Robinson a generation hence may have greater renown than Longfellow, and William James may be quoted when Emerson is forgotten.

We long for a great emotional writer as the Jews long for a Messiah, and the fact that Mark Twain was vouchsafed us encourages me to believe that our chances are greater than those of the Jews. We have never had a really great poet unless Whitman was one, and not even an approach to a satirist, and Mark Twain is our signal contribution to humor. He had also the capacity to convey it, and an unawareness of the supremacy of either gift. With it all he was a philosopher, a man of culture, and fundamentally a poet.

His was the antithesis of the Messianic complex. He had a simple heart, and an intricate soul. None of his writings reveals it as does his autobiography. It is as unlike the customary autobiography as Mark Twain was unlike the average man. It does not begin with a tedious narrative of his forebears, and tiresome descriptions of their environment. Nor does it dwell upon his mental prodigiousness and moral sufficiency, followed by the enumeration of the obstacles he surmounted owing to his health, holiness, habit, and his unusual possession. It does not end with a verbal portrait provocative of memories of Dr. Munyon and his warnings.

It is the picture of a man, happily not a one-hundred-per-cent-American, who lived during the second most important epoch of this country's history, and who from early childhood was a close observer and from his youth a faithful transcriber of his observations. He began to write his autobiography in his teens and continued to write it nearly to the day of his death. "Roughing It", "Tom Sawyer", "Life on the Mississippi", "Innocents Abroad", are just as much description of his life as his autobiography.

Mark Twain's conception of how to write biography was to start at no particular time of life, to wander at will over his life, talk only about the thing which interested him for the moment, to drop it when its interest threatened to pale, and to turn his talk upon the new and more interesting things that intruded themselves into his mind meantime. He realized that it is not given to one man in a hundred millions to write a real autobiography. Cellini and Rousseau are the only ones we know who succeeded, and no one knows with what scrupulosity they described their acts and reproduced their words. Marie Bashkirtseff who wrote, "Not only do I put down what I think, but I have never for a single instant dreamed of dissimulating anything which I thought might show me in a ridiculous or disadvantageous light", she who dreamed of writing "everything, everything, everything in its exact, absolute and strict truth", despite her apparent frankness did not succeed in writing a wee portion of her thoughts, determinations, and acts.

It is not alone the picture of Samuel L. Clemens that one gets with the autobiography. There are little masterpieces of his brother Orion, of his daughter Susy, of his wife and of his mother, and there is one of General

Grant that should add to his fame as a generous, kindly, bighearted, forgiving man.

Did anyone ever describe an amiable person so well as he describes his fellow schoolboy John Robards; and did anyone ever succeed better in conveying the handicap that excessive amiability puts upon its possessor? But the kohinoor of this tray of jewels is his description of his brother Orion. Mark Twain may not have succeeded in writing an account of his own life that was satisfactory, or that he considered revelatory, but the description and analysis of his brother's personality is a real contribution to psychology and biography. It is possibly the best description of a human chameleon in all literature. It may never become as familiar as that of Colonel Sellers, for Mark Twain did not put him *au naturel* in his fiction. Orion Clemens was fifty-fifty optimist and pessimist. Aside from the fundamental endowments of honesty, truthfulness, and sincerity, he was as unstable as water, as inconstant as a weather vane. He had an unquenchable thirst for praise. You could dash his spirits with a single word; you could raise them unto the sky with another. He was a Presbyterian one Sunday, a Methodist the next, and a Baptist when the fancy seized him. He was a Whig today, Democrat next week, and anything fresh he could find in the political market the week after. He invariably acted on impulse and never reflected. He woke with an eagerness about some matter or other every morning; it consumed him all day; it perished in the night; and he was on fire with a fresh interest next morning before he could get his clothes on. He literally took no thought for the morrow, and it was inevitable that his illustrious brother should have to support him during his waning days. Psy-

chologically, he was a splendid example of adult infantilism, manic-depressive temperament; and these possessions are nearly always associated with genius. The outline and the penumbra of them all are to be seen in Mark Twain. He was emotional, impulsive, explosive, avid of praise, subject to depression and exaltation, and unprovident. But he was lessorable and his eldest brother was not; experience taught him and environment influenced him, but they had no more effect upon Orion than headache has upon a drunkard. Above all, the possession that distinguished Samuel from Orion was humor. There is much inquiry these days whether man has ceased to progress, and biologists ask themselves if evolution is at a standstill. From the standpoint of intellectuality it has apparently ceased. We have had nothing the past two thousand years that compares with the eight hundred years of unfettered thought which the human race enjoyed while Greek philosophy was supreme. That progress has ceased from the standpoint of emotionality is not so apparent, and this is the ray of hope that reaches us; for if it has not ceased, we can confidently look forward to a new code of ethics that will be livable, a new dispensation that will allow the sheep and the goats to pasture in the same field and sleep in the same shed, a new religion that will be reconcilable with science.

It transcends understanding that so much attention is given to the intellect and so little to the emotions. It is the latter, together with articulateness, that distinguish us from the beast, and approximate us to God. Humor, its production and appreciation, and love are the two most precious emotional possessions. Mark Twain had them, and none of his writings reveals them

more conspicuously than his autobiography. Orion's adventure at the house of Dr. Meredith, his own description of how he caught the measles, how he found the fifty dollar bill and the thoughts that it engendered, how he was temporarily cured of the habit of profanity by his wife, testify the former; and his accounts of Susy, of his wife, of Patrick, testify the latter. The burglarization of his house, the interview with President Cleveland's wife, the potato incident at the Kaiser's dinner party, the illness and death of his little boy, and the testimony of his family and intimates show how enslaved he was by reverie.

One of the many things that make this autobiography so delightful is its revelation of how human Mark Twain was in his sympathies and antipathies, in his loves and hatreds. His words about Susy and Livy are as tender as anything I have read in a long time, and his account of Patrick makes one regret that the juggernaut Progress has eliminated the coachman. In the jargon of the day, Theodore Roosevelt "got his goat"; and the things he said about those who sought to crush him after they had brought about his financial ruin would not be considered printable in the Victorian era.

Mark Twain was in deadly earnest about many things he said "in fun". I choose to believe that when he wrote, "I intend this autobiography shall become a model for all future autobiographies, and I also intend that it shall be read and admired a good many centuries because of its form and method", he meant what he said. Whether he meant it or not it is true, and his country, proud of him, should be pleased with the account he left of himself to be published posthumously. It is ideal though it is not adequate. Those who would know what sort of man Mark

Twain may find out by reading it; those who wish to learn what he accomplished, how he did it and where, may learn from Mr. Paine's biography of him.

Mark Twain was a spiritual composite of Patrick, the coachman and gentleman, of Mr. Burlingame whose ways were all clean, whose motives were high and fine, of Dr. John Brown who immortalized his own name with "Rab and His Friends", and of his brother Orion, as they are described by himself. The best of Hermes was beaten up in the mixture. Joe Miller and Miguel Cervantes alternated as batter beaters.

Bliss Perry, whose reputation for sanity, soundness, and penetration as a literary critic has long been established, says that Mr. Firkins's study of William D. Howells is a great biography. I feel as a pariah should feel when I cannot share an authority's conviction and sentiment. But there is a discursiveness, a pretentiousness, a highfalutin tone about it that distracts me, and a papal atmosphere about it that I do not breathe easily or invigoratingly. Little annoying flaws of grammar and construction obtrude themselves while one reads it. "I will set down briefly the migrations and occupations of the family." "The style has a pre-existence in the psychology, is in essence the ingress of that psychology into language." "When an incident of travel reaches its probe into the sensitiveness of the author's profoundest and saddest convictions", etc.

Self forgetfulness, it has been said, is the beginning of happiness among books; and it is because I cannot get lost to myself that I have found less pleasure in Mr. Firkins's book than in any save Mr. Bok's. When I read "the curious strengthening of the position of the amphibious Balzac in

our day", I immediately begin searching for the justification of "curious" — and why "amphibious"? Then there darts into my memory chamber a line from an "Essay in Criticism" by Robert Lynd that I read two or three years ago in "The London Mercury": "All criticism from one point of view is an impertinence." Stuart P. Sherman, reviewing Mr. Mencken's latest book, recently said he was determined to conclude his review with a gesture of amicality. I am equally determined to say that Mr. Firkins's book would not have received such universal praise from the reviewers had it not deserved it.

The relation of merit to praise is an interesting subject; and much could be written about it. What I shall say here of it is anent Mr. Bok's "Twice Thirty", which might have been entitled "The Annals of a Self Satisfied Man". I have never read a book more redolent of self appreciation. Mr. Bok is proud of his country, proud of his ancestors, proud of his fearlessness, and proud of his conduct. *Noblesse oblige*. He was once a stenographer to the urbane and cultured gentleman who edited "Scribner's Magazine" before the present incumbent. Mr. Burlingame always arose when Mr. Bok entered the room. As a self advertiser, the late P. T. Barnum was a piker compared to Edward W. Bok.

It is natural enough that editors should like to talk about their doings. They have been compelled to be impersonal so long that they are impelled to gambol and frolic, to shout and sing, when they burst the barriers of their sanctums and do not have to return to them. John St. Loe Strachey has not ceased to be editor of "The Spectator", but then he was never impersonal. The volume devoted to himself, published a year or so ago, called "The Ad-

venture of Living", amply testified it. Now he has published a new volume about himself called "The River of Life". He does not give a portrait of himself, and he eliminates as far as possible enumeration of facts, positive statements, sequence, logical or chronological, and conclusions. His diary is of the sort that might have been written for the pleasure of the soul and the contentment of the heart, with no further idea of publication. He tells of his likes and dislikes, as they are brought to his mind by travel and reading; he does not indulge in ratiocination or in plans for the future. He is content to see life as a river, flowing constantly, everlastingly the same, everlastingly different, and his diary leaves the impression of a walk through a flower garden. One stops at interesting points, picks here and there a flower which will be kept as a memento, and which, being seen again, will recall a pleasant day.

In an antescrypt, Mr. Strachey writes: "If I am not careful, some votary of the New Psychology will get busy on my Diary and prove that I am suffering from an inferiority complex." Not a chance of it! A lot of derogatory things about the Freudians may be said; yet though they are deluded, they are not imbecile; they are priority fanatics, but not blind. They know a superiority complex when they see it.

Mrs. Dorr's "A Woman of Fifty" is the most objective autobiography I have read in years. It is about as introspective as an account of a very active king in a chess game might be. It is, in truth, an account of feminism poured into an autobiographical mold by a clever reader of the trend of the day toward that form of literature. There is much in it that is personal, no

doubt, but certainly the motive is in the direction of a "movement" rather than toward an analysis of individual reactions to that movement. If Mrs. Dorr's purpose had been unmixed self revelation, I have the feeling she would have done it in a more up-to-the-moment manner; in the hair splitting, soul dissecting fashion of the hour.

As biography, I don't think it holds water. As a summing up of the struggle of women toward recognition as entities, it is vigorous, rather dashing, well put together with a perception of essentials, and valuable as a record. The reader likes the writer better as he progresses through the book, but he is satisfied that fate has not made his and her paths cross. At times, he wishes she would either get out of the picture or add something vital to it. She has made a "go", but at the same time, in trying to write a double header, a so called personal narrative with a purpose that is far from personal, she has now and then failed; the individual gets in the way of the subject up for discussion — feminism. But I fancy the average reader will find the book very readable. That is a good deal to say for a book.

It is a matter of profound regret that exigencies of space do not permit me to say some of the things about Maurice Francis Egan's autobiography that it so richly deserves. A book so charmingly written, a life story so modestly told, a narrative so impregnated with wit and laden with wisdom, a document so redolent of culture and kindness, merits analysis and summary, comment and commendation. I am convinced that his friend Dr. Henry van Dyke was characteristically temperate when he wrote of it: "It is a delectable book, sure of a high place among modern autobiographies."

(This is the last of three articles — the first of which appeared in March — on contemporary biography and autobiographies.)

THE LONDONER

Plays and Dramatic Critics—"Sanditon"—"The Adelphi" and Some Other New Monthly Reviews—Cliché, with Contributions by a Nurseryman—An Advertisement of W. B. Yeats.

LONDON, April 1, 1925.

THE latest London scare, as I write, concerns the production by a private society of W. J. Turner's play, "Smaragda's Lover". A universally irate press has decided that the play is a wicked affair, and that these societies which exist for the production of wicked plays should be forcibly exterminated. Where, the press has asked, is the censor? And so on. The fuss will all die down again in a few days, and no more will be heard of it for months more. Then there will be the same fuss about some other play, and we shall have the same angry comments from those who produce the plays, and again there will be placid calm. But the press has had a very severe time over the theatre this year. It has decided by a majority (the majority is as far as I can see a unanimity) that five of the plays shown in the first two months of the year are the worst that have ever appeared. These five plays are—first, one that was produced at the St. James's Theatre (I forget the name of it) by an unknown author from the Stock Exchange, in which play a woman undressed behind a screen upon the stage. This incident provoked controversy with the Lord Chamberlain because that gentleman was very anxious that the screen should be guaranteed solid and not likely to blow over at an inconvenient moment. You can see what kind of play that was. It ran for a few days only. The second

was "Camilla States Her Case", by George Egerton, a naive play for feminists who believe that women have a very rough time in a man ridden universe. The third was a really terrible affair, produced by "A. Keeper, Ltd.", called "The Monkey House". The fourth was Arnold Bennett's "The Bright Island". And Mr. Turner holds fifth place.

Now it is no part of my work to draw attention to the weaknesses of critics; but it should be apparent to all that men like Mr. Bennett and Mr. Turner do not write works of the inept incompetence of "The Monkey House". They may write plays which for them are less than good (I do not say that they did so in the cases of "The Bright Island" and "Smaragda's Lover", neither of which did I see); but whatever such men write is quite clearly upon a different plane from the wretched "un-idea-ed" stuff (as Dr. Johnson might have called it) contained in the three other plays. I do not wish to be snobbish, but merely to state a fact. We know that a play by Mr. Bennett will contain amusing lines, we know that it will result from his own very characteristic view of mankind, and we know that it will sin, if it sins, from deliberate choice upon the part of the author. Even those who dislike Mr. Bennett's work will admit that the author is not a fool. The same applies to Mr. Turner, although Mr. Turner is younger than Mr. Bennett and for that reason may