

Editor's Easy Chair.

IN literature, Voltaire said, all the kinds are good except the kinds that bore, and of all the kinds that do not bore, usually, autobiography is one of the kinds that bore the least. An autobiography must be very ill conceived indeed not to interest, not to please, not to delight. It may do so even in the absence of every quality in the writer which would personally take the reader's liking, if he and the reader were confronted. There is a charm in the very fatuity which ingenuously presents itself, and the iniquity that deals frankly with its own sins is sometimes more attractive than the virtue to which the gates of paradise fly open. Few lives are in the extreme, however; they are only measurably dull or wicked, brilliant or good, and their level is that easy ground which we explore for ourselves in the affairs and characters of our neighbors when our neighbors do not invite us to join them in it. The course of autobiography is therefore commonly not much above or below that of the ordinary lives of men. In fact, the greater part of the extraordinary lives of men keep the common mean, and perhaps that which fascinates us most in the self-portraiture of a distinguished man is the strong family likeness between his features and our own. There may be a peculiar expression, a certain look, in which he differs from us; but eyes, nose, mouth, and forehead, they are much the same as those which endear us to ourselves and our kindred. It is so largely the eyes, nose, mouth, and forehead, with the contour of the cheeks and chin, which self-portraiture is concerned with, that many observers will not note the distinguishing air; and many readers of a famous man's autobiography will go through it to the end with a flattered sense of having their own stories told in all the essentials. So they are told in these, and they would have been told in all the rest, but for the accidents, the whimsical and malicious caprices, of fate, by which we fail of being all famous men. It is by such accidents, such caprices, that so many of us especially fail of being famous authors, for there

is the potentiality of an important book in the make-up of every man and woman, of which they are more or less aware, and in the defect of producing it they feel themselves more or less ill-used by fortune. They may be right or they may be wrong, but when they read an author's story of his life—and it is mostly the author-men who tell the stories of their lives—they feel themselves intimately confided to the public in the confession of his aspirations and endeavors, and are at once consoled and revenged by his successes. No other theory can account for the pleasure we take in such stories, for, considered in themselves, the authors are very much of a piece in the eventlessness of their careers, in the tame and spiritless nature of their few adventures. One good, stupid, romantic novel contains more thrill and movement than the collective annals of all the men who write such novels. But the dear, simple-hearted, thick-headed public never distinguishes between an artist and his material, and reads into the stagnant narrative of the author the eager career of his hero. It puts a passionate faith into the notion that the man who writes an exciting and absorbing story must have lived an exciting and absorbing life, such as the reader himself would have lived if he had been in the writer's place. But for this fact the unpicturesque records of authors' lives could not have the charm they have now, and they would be the least, instead of the most, attractive of the autobiographies.

I

It is for the vast majority of readers who delight most in autobiography to decide whether we have not of late been having rather too much of a good thing. The question is not of the nature of this good thing, but of whether the autobiographers have been overworking their public or not. That, however, is something for the public and the autobiographers to settle between them, and we will not enter into it further than to say that as soon as autobiographies

cease to find acceptance they will cease to be written, or at least printed. Meanwhile, much may be said in praise of the general cheerfulness of their effect. They differ in this from biography, to which they are otherwise akin. That is of a depressing character because it does not end well, or as the friends of ending well prefer to say, it does not end up well, though why a thing should end up, any more than it should begin up, we are at a loss to know. Biography suffers from the tragical close which involves the death of the protagonist, while autobiography is a melodrama which, whatever disaster it drags him through, at least brings him off alive. But there is not only this essential difference, there are differences of temperament in the two sorts, which are mostly favorable to autobiography. The life of a man which is written by some other man is supposed to be done with impartiality and sincerity, but really it is not done so. If the man is recently dead, it is undertaken at the instance of his family or his next friends, who, if they do not remain looking over the shoulder of the author to see what kind of likeness he is getting, give him such a sense of their exacting presence that he cannot work freely. Whether or not, or whether he knows it or not, he is all the time working up to their ideal of the subject, and not his own, and if he does not realize it, they let him share their disappointment. Or, if the subject of the biography has so long passed away that all his near and dear have followed him, he has lost interest for that larger public which likes to get its instruction in the nature of news; and the biographer has to recreate the waning interest in a story already more than twice told. He has to take one side or the other of the question which grows up about Brown, Jones, or Robinson, as soon as his memory is cold, and inevitably he has to deal with it as an advocate, rather than a judge.

The autobiographer, on the other hand, may write of himself as he pleases, without fear of his wife and children, or his uncles and cousins; if he has any faults he may be trusted to deal with them in that tolerant spirit which more closely allies mercy than justice to wisdom. He may mean to be perfectly

frank about his faults, and he may actually be so, but at the same time he will feel bound to show that these faults have so much to be said for them that they can hardly be thought blemishes in a character otherwise so exemplary. They end by being a sort of virtues-in-error under his lenient touch, so that the reader almost wishes to have them, and contentedly searches his consciousness to see if he has not at least something like them. Then, the spirit of the autobiographer is wholesomely optimistic. He is, to begin with, not dead, as we have intimated, and if he has had sorrows, sicknesses, and troubles, he has outlived them, at least in so great part that there he is, cheerfully telling the story of his past, and prepared at the close to shake his reader by the hand, and wish him a farewell which shall have the hopefulness of an actor's last appearance. Rarely does a man sit down with the sense of ruin or defeat to recall his experiences of the past. It is at the worst in the hope of better treatment from the future that he confides himself to the reader in the intimacy which is never one-sided, and which is so flattering to both. Neither age nor pain shall quite take from him the cheer belonging to some part of every man's memories, and the cheer of these, and not the gloom of the others, shall dwell with the acquaintance he has made his friend. Even if he declares with Goethe that in his whole life he has not known fifteen minutes of continuous happiness, or with Tolstoy that only in the remotest consciousness of childhood has the sense of utter gladness been with him, still he makes the reader somehow believe that those fifteen minutes were enough, as he recalls the entire bliss of some dim childish hour of his own.

II

The "Recollections, Personal and Literary," of the poet Richard Henry Stoddard are of a prevalent mood with which our theory of the prevalent cheerfulness of autobiography will reconcile itself only through strenuous urgency, for here is the story of a long, distinguished, and not unsuccessful life told with a certain impatience, almost a certain irritation, expressive of the moods left by its most harassing and humiliating incidents,

rather than that brilliant gayety, that courageous buoyancy which was characteristic of the man, and that enabled him to confront and to overcome more than a common share of human sorrows, until age broke his dauntless spirit. It is rather a pity it should be so, and yet, the thing being done, it would not be easy to say how it should have been done otherwise. Here, for once, however, the reader may declare that the biographer when he comes, as he will be sure to come, may tell a cheerfule tale than the autobiographer has told, though he must round it with the fact of his death.

What we can say of the book is that it is the expression of a temperament to which the things done, no matter how great they were, must always seem small beside the things meant to be done, and the things suffered, no matter how little, were of an effect as sore as that of the heaviest afflictions to the sensitive nature of the poet. For poet Stoddard was, and poet most essentially if not most singly. He did other literary things besides poetry, and did them very acceptably well. He was for long years the reviewer of books, as for some years he was an iron-moulder, and for other some an office-holder; but for all the days of his years, as far as he could remember, he was first of everything a poet. He loved his art with a devotion which will seem even stranger to this Philistine time than it must have seemed to the earlier Philistine time when he was giving his whole soul to the building of the lofty rhyme, and putting that work before every other task, duty, and pleasure. He lived his whole verse-a-day as well as work-a-day life in New York, and his life was a proof of what might be done by a poet to keep his faith pure in a community and in conditions as unfriendly to poetry as any that have ever been. If the environment had at last its effect, and resulted in the sort of not ignoble disdain which is so often the note of his autobiography, it would not be nearly so strange as the fact that there is nowhere a murmur of complaint or a cry of self-pity.

In certain aspects there was no unusual reason for these. He married the gifted woman he loved. He had children whom

he adored. His needs were cared for not alone by his work but by what may be accounted his luck, and he was never face to face with the wolf that has so often besieged the poet's door. But he lived long enough to be acquainted with such griefs as rend the heart, and to feel such bodily afflictions as often break the spirit; and though his narrative is not carried to the point when the heaviest blows fell upon him, it seems to have been begun at the time when he indeed still sang at his work, but no longer hoped in it. It was after these papers were written that the blows fell, when he and his wife followed to the grave that idolized son who died, just when he had given such brilliant promise as a dramatist, and who was an artist and poet, of such quality as was known only to the fewest of his friends; and again when the aged husband, left childless, and with the gathering infirmities of his years upon him, groped his almost sightless way to the grave of his stricken wife. He still sang, wandering and broken airs, to the end, but even such hope as had haunted the time when he was merely old, and half-blind, and in pain, could not have visited him with the fittest gleams.

Stoddard had not apparently a happy childhood, such as the poorest often have. He remembers with a sort of exasperation the years which are the tenderest and sweetest for most men, and there seems no remotest period in which he can verify a perfect gladness, no matter how many quarter-hours of happiness he knew later. But perhaps this is partly the effect of a characteristic evident everywhere in his recollections. He was of a modesty for the thing he had done which was enhanced and intensified by the honor and reverence in which he held the thing he wished to do, and this modesty would utter itself in his mockery. But so far as he felt himself representative he demanded his full due. Sometimes, we think, he imagined it withheld from him when it was really not withheld. He imagined that the great New England group of poets failed in entire justice to the New York group which he was proud to be of; but that this was largely if not entirely an illusion, his own memories bear witness,

for none of them testify to a truer appreciation and sympathy than those which relate to Longfellow, to Lowell, to Whittier, and to Hawthorne most of all. If ever he had wounds from these men he does not say, but we may be sure they were faithful, and given in behalf of the same ideal as that for which he would almost have laid down his life.

We know that we go a little outside of the record in touching upon this point, for Stoddard himself does not touch upon it, but the excursion seems necessary in adjusting the perspective for the right seeing of his self-portrait. With some such arrangement from his future biographer this autobiography of his will be found a most striking likeness, and we could wish that when another comes to write his life, he might write it around his reminiscences, which, in and by themselves, fail of imparting a due sense of his personality. One aspect of him this book does not give at all, and so far it is unjust to him. His disdain was for his own sufferings and disappointments, but for those of others he had only compassion and succor, and his generosity was quick in acts which have no record from his hand. He was a man of strong feeling, and when his feeling was embittered, it was apt to issue in pitiless animosity, but probably no one came to Stoddard in a moment of disheartenment, of distress, of baffled aspiration who had not some comfort from him. If help could avail, the help was gladly given, and Mr. Stedman was not the only author whom he brought face to face with a publisher, and abetted in overcoming him with a first book. He was equally the ally of the poor intending contributor, and what influence he had with editors was freely always at the service of the young author who thought he had done something good, and wished to have it printed. He does not mention these things; he could not; but his supplementary biographer will signally fail of his duty if he neglects to do so. To Stoddard we may well leave the magnanimous silence with which he passes over his good deeds, and the apparent slight with which he treats his own literary achievements; he could safely leave these to time, which will judge them, and keep those worth keeping.

III

In coming to Mr. J. T. Trowbridge's "Story of my own Life," we enter an atmosphere as different from that of Stoddard's recollections as can well be. Here everything is bright and cheery and hopeful, as if the past were before rather than behind the man of seventy-six years who sits down to recall its facts. He was of as tireless industry as Stoddard, and the great bulk of his work was in fields as far from poetry, yet we think that it is as a poet that he will be likewise remembered. He was, however, a poet who lived always by authorship, and was one of the first, as he was one of the few, Americans to earn his bread by his pen. His blithe spirit plays through the whole record, and rests as delightedly in the tale of each success or achievement as Stoddard's sadder soul turns from it. Mr. Trowbridge is of that race of autobiographers like Alfieri and Goldoni, who treat carefully of each of their works, telling the how and where and why of it, as if it were an incident or a character meriting the analysis, for the reader's amusement and edification. But we always skipped those self-criticisms in Alfieri and Goldoni, and if we cannot boast of having skipped them in Mr. Trowbridge, still we can truthfully say that if we had been having him write his life solely for our pleasure, we would have had him replace these by a minuter narrative and a fuller psychology of his formative years.

As it stands, Mr. Trowbridge's own story is much more than his own story; it is the reminiscence of many contemporary facts and figures whose interest invites the autobiographer out of himself, and will entertain the reader if they do not entertain him so much as they entertained Mr. Trowbridge, or as Mr. Trowbridge himself would entertain us if keeping more strictly to himself. So far as the figures are concerned with his own career, they fitly enter into his story, but the facts are another affair, and they might well have been resumed in a very brief statement with advantage to the book. What we wish first and last and most of an autobiographer is himself, and this he cannot give us too freely or fully. We grudge the moments which he

yields to others, except as they distinctly help to characterize him and explain him. A book of reminiscences is one thing, and the author's own story may more fitly enter into that. This is the censure which we found passing itself upon Mr. Trowbridge's book, and concurrently formulating itself with the sense of our pleasure in all that he says of other men and other things. Our pleasure in this was always less than our pleasure in what he says more directly and entirely about himself. The early chapters of Mr. Trowbridge's book telling of his backwoods boyhood in western New York, and his starting out in the world, and his first experiences as a writer in New York and Boston, are not only much more vital, but they are much more important than those which record his impressions of Emerson, of Lowell, of Alcott, of Walt Whitman, of Holmes, of Longfellow; they are even more so than his accounts of his different books, in which he returns with the infectious zest to the days when they formed part of his struggles and victories.

But Mr. Trowbridge is always a wholesome and breezy companion, and in his presence one cannot be long depressed with any question. The doubt we have felt in reading his very entertaining book concerns him less than it concerns the true office of the autobiographer, especially in the hands of the literary autobiographer. We incline to the belief that it cannot too closely and exclusively deal with the events, experiences, and feelings of the author, and that he will do a fatally erroneous thing whenever he curtails the record of these in the interest of a supposed modesty. If he is not of sufficient interest in his own eyes (an incredible thing, really) to justify him in keeping his narrative strictly to himself for its subject, why write his autobiography at all? Why not rather write the biography of his friend, or his enemy? How glad we are, in returning with any of the great autobiographers from an excursion away from themselves, and getting back to that precious intimacy in which we are so entirely two that we seem only one, and we ourselves are rather more than one than the author! If we think of the most charming auto-

biographers we must perceive that our delight in them is chiefest when they are most themselves, and least the historians of other men. Benvenuto Cellini, Goethe, Franklin, Marmontel, Alfieri, the Margravine of Baireuth, Thomas Ellwood, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Gibbon, Leigh Hunt, Kenelm Digby, Rousseau, Kotzebue, Cibber, Mrs. Chard, or any of the like: we are never impatient of them except when they seem to tire of themselves, and wish to take us afield in chase of people that seem intruders upon the delicious intimacy which we have been enjoying.

IV

Of course we go a little beyond in asking the autobiographer to be solely himself, and we have already hinted that this is impossible for him. But we are quite serious, or as serious as we ever like to be, in maintaining that autobiography, as a species shall keep itself as unmixed as possible. Let there be reminiscence proper, and autobiography proper, and let the mixture of the two be regarded as measurably improper. We have history, and we have biography, which we keep fairly well apart, and which are as naturally allied as reminiscence and autobiography; but the autobiographer still indulges in the story or study of others, and so far the story or study of himself suffers.

We are of course not prepared to prove this, though we are so ready to say it, but we believe it is susceptible of proof, and we should like to have some one else prove it. If what we have been saying should be the means of rousing the intending autobiographers, of whom there seems to be an increasing multitude, to a true sense of their office in its highest effects, we shall not be sorry for what we have said, though some grains of chaff shall be found in our bushel of wheat. Never was the proper study of man so apparently the proper study of mankind as at the present moment, when man seems to be getting so much worse, or better, than he was; and if all wisdom centres in our knowing each one himself, we cannot too urgently remind the historians of their own lives that autobiography, like charity, begins at home, though, unlike charity, is best when it stays there.

Editor's Study.

I
THE man of letters is usually at some time in his career called upon to choose between a quiet life and the dress parade. We assume that he at first entered upon his career with a predilection for it over any other; that he was moved by a compelling purpose, amounting to a passion fed by inspiration rather than by ambition. We assume also that he has surmounted the difficulties that generally beset the young writer in the first stages of his adventure. Always there must be the difficulty incident to the enterprise itself—as inevitably incident to the literary art as to any other. This is the main burden, all other difficulties being merely accidental—fatally such they may be in cases of dire necessity, but when they do not paralyze they stimulate. There is indeed no surer indication of great genius than supreme success gained in spite of worldly good fortune.

It is to those writers who inherit wealth and social position, or who by patient struggle have gained an economic and social leverage, that the dress parade presents the liveliest temptations. Often it takes the form of an obligation even when it is not an allurements.

In every generation there are many men and women who fall into the stately and picturesque procession as a matter of heritage and wear the formal habit easily, as part of an automatic régime rather than of a consciously adopted discipline, though they are not wholly without a sense of responsibility as the natural guardians of a traditional ritual and custodians of its sacred symbols. These do not constitute the real social aristocracy, whose procedure is not so ostentatious or so perfunctory, and whose support of culture is not merely patronage, but a genuine expression of an inbred taste; a social order to which we owe many of our most brilliant publicists, orators, and statesmen, a few elegant historians, but only here and there a great poet, novelist, or artist.

Those who creatively initiate culture—the great writers and artists—do not

usually belong to the leisurely class; and they are fortunate if they achieve the leisure necessary to the perfection of their work. Whencesoever they come, it is what they do that concerns us, not their social station or their pedigree. They constitute an aristocracy which, if not in the simplest terms natural, is at least of a wholly unconventional order.

II

Literature as a profession, whether a bread-winning industry or a chosen avocation, very usefully and worthily concerns itself with the activities of the busy world; but literature as an art demands for its highest excellence the quiet life. This is only another way of saying that it demands devotion and is jealous of any rival. Whatever the native genius of the writer, he cannot attain supreme distinction in letters and at the same time conduct an important business, perform the duties of an exacting profession, or seriously undertake diplomacy or statesmanship. He cannot habitually be a diner-out or the devotee of pleasure. All his contacts with the world at large must be incidental to his master-purpose.

Even his seclusion must be thus incidental, not sought for its own sake, as it is by the recluse. As the ardent lover is the better poet, so the social person is the more genial writer, and the full enjoyment of domestic happiness and friendly companionships deepens feeling and imparts homelike warmth to an author's appeal. More than any one else the great writer gains by an impressionable sensibility, by openness of heart and mind; but more than any one else he loses by active participation in worldly and social affairs beyond what is required of him by a normal conscience and a generous spirit in full sympathy with his kind.

We know that Oliver Wendell Holmes was a physician, but who shall say that he would not have gained greater distinction as poet, essayist, and novelist if his training had been less special and he had been free from the demands of his Harvard professorship? On the