SEVEN BOOKS OF THE MONTH

I

"Life and Letters of E. C. Stedman"*

The *Life and Letters of Edmund Clarence Stedman,* by his granddaughter Miss Laura Stedman and his friend Dr. George M. Gould, is something more than the ordinary biography.* It is almost as much of an autobiography as a book of confessedly that character, for there is quite enough of what Stedman has written, in letters and diaries, to tell the story of his life from its early days. He began writing when he was seven or eight years of age, not only prose, but verse, and besides this he wrote copious notes on his own life which are reproduced in these two stout volumes. To me the book is of much more than ordinary interest. Mr. Stedman was one of the first men of letters whom I knew intimately, and from the day that I first met him until the day of his death he was my literary guide, philosopher and friend. When I first met Mr. Stedman he was economising by living on the outskirts or at least not in the densely populated part of Newark, New Jersey. He was in Wall Street at the time, but still doing literary work. He had had great misfortunes in his business, and he gave up New York life to live in the suburbs, where rents were cheaper and where there were fewer distractions. I remember his Newark home well, and what appealed to me the most about it was the books that met you on every hand. In the little library that he used as a workroom, they were piled to the ceiling. Many an evening I have climbed up the hill to Mr. Stedman's house and talked about his writings and my aspirations until he must have wished that I was anywhere but where I was. But never by sign or look did he show that I was encroaching on his time. Now I know that I was, and his time meant money to him, for it was only in the evenings that he could do his literary work.

*The Life and Letters of Edmund Clarence Stedman. Edited by Laura Stedman and George M. Gould. New York: Moffat, Yard and Company.

Mr. Stedman's life was not only pathetic, it was tragic. It seems incredible that so many unhappy things could have happened to one man. In the first place he was virtually deserted as a small child. His mother, after she had been a short time a widow, married a diplomat, the Hon. William B. Kinney, and went to live with him abroad. Mr. Kinney did not like children, and, according to this book, he made this plain to his new bride, so she left little Edmund and a brother in the hands of relatives in this country while she went to Italy to live. In Mrs. Stedman's defence it may be said that she had a pretty hard struggle to support these two children and an opportunity to make a good marriage tempted her. "My earliest recollections," Mr. Stedman has said, "are of my young mother writing poetry for the magazines with her two half-orphan children sitting at her feet." Even to-day the writing of poetry for the magazines would not be a very paying occupation, and in those days, when there were only the *Knickerbocker, Godey's* and *Graham's,* and poetry "a drug in the market," there was not enough for bread—much less butter. Perhaps when she consented to become his wife she thought that Mr. Kinney would allow her to have her children with her, but he would have none of them.

That Mr. Stedman felt the separation from his mother is recorded more than once in his letters. Among some notes that he made about his early life he says: "It is a bad thing to separate a child from his mother and from his natural *habitat.*" In these same notes he writes: "From my earliest remembrance I made poetry, all of the Cleveland blood do—bad cess to them! I was a natural writer, an insatiate reader—especially of fiction, adventure and poetry."

Mr. Stedman was only fifteen years of age when he entered Yale College, and he paid more attention to fun and frolic than he did to study. Perhaps if he had had a home and the influence of a mother it might have been different. In the end he was expelled from college, but later

after he had proved himself, he was invited back to Yale, where a degree was conferred upon him. The past was forgotten, and Yale was now proud of the man of letters and affairs who had once been one of her naughty boys. Writing as late as 1907, in answer to an inquiry about his college life, Mr. Stedman said:

I was literally heartbroken. I was an imaginative and excitable boy and became rather reckless; fell off in all my studies; cut prayers, etc., and excelled only in English composition and in reading. . . . My nights were spent with beer, whisky-skin, skittles and howling around town. How I lived through it, I don't know. At the end of sophomore year I was arrested one night with some older men and taken before the local Dogberry. The others gave false names, paid their fines and got away, but I was recognised by my long hair and other eccentricities, and reported to the faculty; was rusticated to Northampton, where I passed a summer under the charge of Professor Dudley, a famous Greek scholar, who had a private seminary there. The institution was full of a wilder crowd than I had met at Yale, and I joined with them in painting the town red, getting in love with the Northampton girls and into trouble generally.

Mr. Stedman's guardian wanted him to become a lawyer, but he decided to be a printer, and before he was twenty he had a printing office of his own at Winsted, Connecticut. Hard times were with him from the start. He was willing to work and did work, but there was little money in a country newspaper. That did not prevent his falling in love with Laura Woodworth, who was the sister of one of the young men in his employ. This young lady's family were in straitened circumstances, and she was to have been apprenticed to a milliner, but instead of this being accomplished, and rather than have her begin her career in a milliner's shop, Mr. Stedman married her; he was twenty years of age and she eighteen. He wrote his mother that the young lady was not quite his intellectual equal, but that associations with him would make it all right, and it did. Mrs. Stedman was a devoted wife and mother, and I know for a fact that he was very glad in later life to have her criticism of his literary work; but in this letter to his mother he wrote at the time:

I think Laura has all the education of manners which girls brought up luxuriously possess. I know she has more tact and *intuitive* knowledge than one woman in ten. This latter quality renders her conscious that she does not possess those literary, scientific and scribbletary accomplishments that superficially adorn most ladies. She feels this most keenly, and recognising your superiority in correspondence, etc., is too sensitive to write you—in fact to write any one—preferring you should see her face to face and love her for her *Nature* and not for her *Art*.

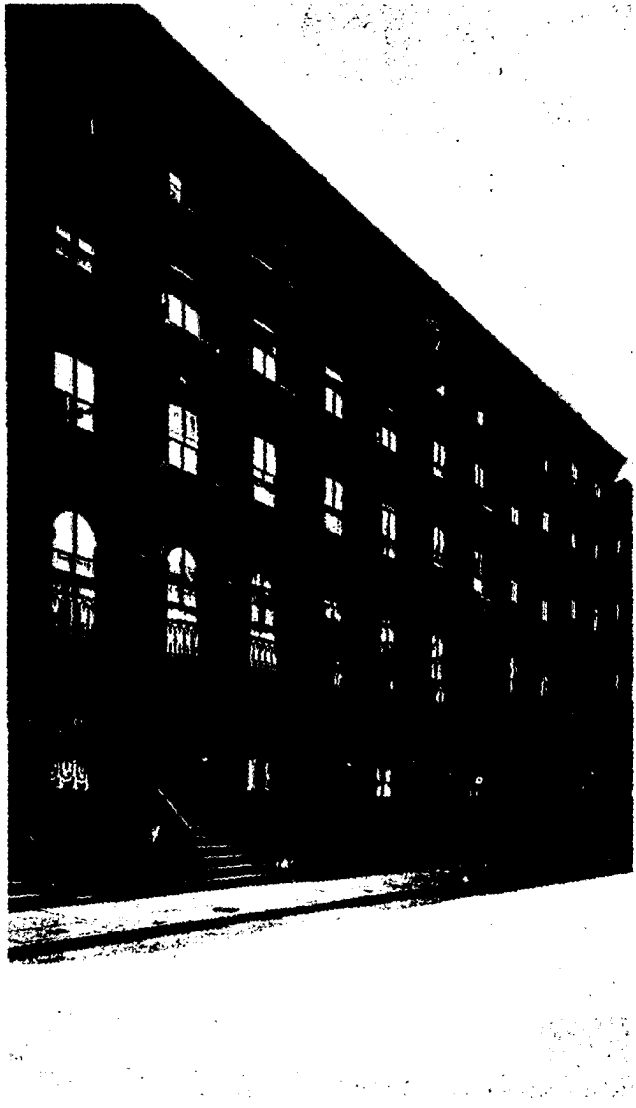
Then he adds:

I always went on the theory that I had enough literary education for the family—that I needed in a wife a resting-place, where I could be *nursed, comforted* and *loved*. Laura has been all this—and, like the wife of Schiller, understands me if she does not my books.

This was the writing of a bumptious boy. Later he learned to appreciate his wife's qualities, and realise that while she did nurse, comfort and love, she had a pretty keen insight into things in general, and a natural instinct for what was good and bad in literature.

In 1855 Mr. Stedman came to New York to seek his fortune as a real estate and general office broker. Ill luck pursued him and never let go of him through his entire life. In the first place he was a delicate man and yet he was obliged to work overtime to make enough money to keep his family alive. All his creative work was done at night after a hard day's work in an office. For his "Diamond Wedding," the poem that when printed in the New York *Tribune* made him famous, he received nothing. His salary on that paper, after he became connected with it, was eight or ten dollars a week. As he could not make ends meet with this pay, he accepted an offer of twenty-five dollars a week as editor of the *Evening World*. Finally, he drifted into Wall Street. He was twice bankrupted by his dishonest associates; when he moved into the country to save money, burglars entered his house, chloroformed Mrs. Stedman, and stole everything they had which was of value. At another

time he was bitten by a dog which was supposed to be mad, but for a wonder it was not. In later life, after he had passed his sixtieth year, he was still working hard in Wall Street, and while his fame was great as an American man of letters, his bank account was smaller than most. His associates in the "Street" used to compliment him on having other means of support besides that of his business as a broker, but what he made out of literature was little or nothing, usually nothing. He bought his seat in the Stock Exchange for eight thousand dollars and



A LITERARY CORNER OF OLD NEW YORK

Mr. Stedman's house in East Tenth Street was one of a row occupied by men of letters.

sold it at least twenty years later for forty thousand dollars, but it was only a few weeks after he sold it for forty thousand dollars that the price went up to seventy thousand dollars. After leaving Wall Street, Mr. Stedman devoted himself to literary work, and making notes for these reminiscences in which he was assisted by his granddaughter, Miss Laura Stedman, who for several years acted as his secretary. The greatest tragedy of Stedman's life was, as recorded in this book, when he found "that his son, whom he had trusted, through mistaken judgment, brought failure upon the firm." He was so shaken by this that his Wall Street days were numbered and I imagine it was more because of this than that he wanted to continue his literary work uninterruptedly that he sold his seat in the Stock Exchange.

Not only is this the story of Stedman's life, but it is the history of American letters a generation and more ago, and in this book will be found intimate allusions, in letters and otherwise, to his close friends, the Stoddards, Aldrich, Lowell, Bayard Taylor and others, who were then struggling along with him, whose names are now household words. I want to quote here some lines that Lowell wrote Stedman in a letter criticising a recent poem by Swinburne:

I have not seen Swinburne's new volume—but a poem or two from it which I have seen shocked me, and I am not squeamish. . . . I am too old to have a painted *hetaira* palmed off on me for a Muse, and I hold unchastity of mind to be worse than that of body. Why should a man by choice go down to live in his cellar, instead of mounting to those fair upper chambers which look toward the sunrise of that Easter which shall greet the resurrection of the soul from the body of this death? *Virginibus puerisque?*

Why, indeed!

In conclusion let me say that Miss Stedman has done her work exceptionally well. She has never obtruded herself, and has let her grandfather tell his own story whenever possible. The book is very frank and some may lament that certain criticisms of his contemporaries were not omitted from Stedman's letters, but, after all, does not their publication make this biography the more valuable?

Jeannette L. Gilder.