

BITS OF VICTORIAN HUMANITY

By Gamaliel Bradford

THE traditions and memories of a great publishing house are here set down. Miss Ticknor has gathered from family documents and recollections and from her own observation a pleasant assemblage of letters and anecdotes, which well illustrate the interesting and varied group of distinguished persons associated with the name of Ticknor and Fields. But the material drawn upon in this case is not to be compared with the rich resources available to Mr. Howe in the papers bequeathed to him by Mrs. James T. Fields, and Mr. Howe's judicious and effective handling of that material makes a book of singular charm and value.

It may safely be said that no writer is a hero to his publisher. However dignified, remote, and austere an author may seem to worshiping readers, whatever airs of distinction and detachment he may assume through the rosily refracting atmosphere of publicity, when he enters the publisher's office or drawing room he becomes thoroughly human. His humanity may be sad or glad, may be sportive or wheedling or greedy or exasperated; but he well knows that the publisher strips off outside, superfluous reverence and sees him as home sees him, as wife and children see him,

sees him as he is. Mrs. Fields, who, with a trifling excess of harmless vanity, was a shrewd and clever woman, reflects this human aspect of her authors with sincerity and depicts it with precision, as in the touch she quotes from Longfellow about Hawthorne: "I wish we could have a little dinner for him, of two sad authors and two jolly publishers."

Both Miss Ticknor's and Mr. Howe's pages are rich in these bits of humanization, so excellent for the memory of figures who are getting a little stiff and formal and forgotten on their lofty pedestals. Mr. Howe quotes Lowell's advice to Fields—"Be sure and don't leave anything out because it seems trifling, for it is out of these trifles only that it is possible to reconstruct character sometimes, if not always"—and profits by it. How just is Mrs. Fields's remark about Lowell: "He is a man deeply pervaded with fine discontents." How characteristically whimsical is the saying of Hawthorne: "Why has the good old custom of coming together to get drunk gone out? Think of the delight of drinking in pleasant company and then lying down to sleep a deep strong sleep." Or again, there is Hawthorne's brief phrase, so illustrative of Lowell's advice quoted above, "No, no, I never brush my coat, it wears it out." Equally characteristic is Miss Ticknor's response of Mark Twain to his publisher's laconic message, "God be with you, for I cannot": "Dear Ticknor:—He didn't come. It has been a great disappointment to the whole family. Hereafter, appoint a party we can depend on."

It is the fashion nowadays to abuse the Victorian period, whether American or English (by the way, Mr. Strachey would have prized the remark of Dolby to Mrs. Fields, "You

know in England we call her 'Her Ungracious Majesty' "). Those poor Victorian people are said to be stiff, superficial, artificial, to have no breath of life in them. Well, any age is like that, if you take it so. Perhaps a day may come when the pretty, nude radicalisms of our own sprightly time may seem to have their artificiality. But stick a pin into a man and his response is pretty much the same in all ages. Publishers are always sticking pins into their authors, and the author's squeal thereat is amazingly human and universal. Books like these, which strip off formality and show bare flesh under it, keenly sensitive to pin pricks, help to bring all ages together.

Glimpses of Authors. By Caroline Ticknor.
Houghton Mifflin Co.

Memories of a Hostess, A Chronicle of
Eminent Friendships. By M. A. DeWolfe
Howe. The Atlantic Monthly Press.