



THE Happy Profession

BY ELLERY SEDGWICK



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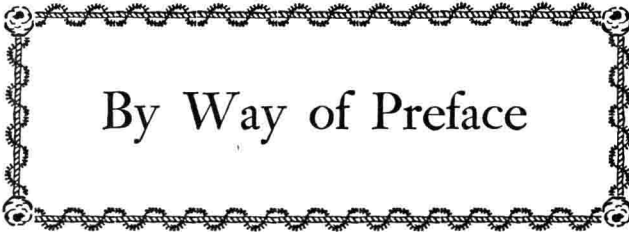
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TO
THE OLD HOUSE IN STOCKBRIDGE
IN HAPPY REMEMBRANCE OF
ASPIRATION, HOPE, AND FAMILY AFFECTION
SHELTERED BENEATH ITS ROOF
SINCE 1785

The power of writing one fine line transcends all the able-editor ability in this ably-edited universe.

— EDWARD FITZGERALD



By Way of Preface

LET NOTHING," says the immortal Churchill, "interfere with the rancour and asperity of personal opinion." I am a mild-mannered man, but I have sought to abide by that counsel. Dislikes and irritations are behind me, my enthusiasms have a more enduring flame. There is nothing in this book but is set down frankly, without the ardor of a votary or the wry charity that cloaks a writer of obituaries. The truth as a man sees it, I hold to be the truth.

No one who has gone right on living in the face of the Psalmist's warning can fail now and then to ponder the meaning of the long effort. In understanding the Big Show, one difficulty is that too many people are crowded on the stage, for the records the actors leave behind them are wont to be so many justifications of parts they have played, so many libels on the parts of others. A truer impression can come from the audience. Thirty years spent in conducting the *Atlantic* has given me a comfortable seat on the center aisle and some experience in interpreting the merit of the performance. Mine has been an old-fashioned ambition. For me the good life has been the contented life and, were I to live mine over again, I should aim at the same goal.

Content does not mean smugness. I admire the great but have no importunate craving to join their company. My phi-

By Way of Preface

losophy tells me that while pebbles in the stream bed may twist the current this way and that, the river goes its own way in spite of them. It takes a boulder to alter its course but boulders are few and sometimes portentous.

The happiness of my life has been my friends, and if in this record I have set down little concerning them to whom I owe most, I hope in another to deal with them more generously.

I wish to express gratitude for the conveniences and unfailing assistance extended by the Atlantic office throughout the preparation of this book, and to acknowledge, in addition to a hundred other services she has rendered, the gentle admonitions of my secretary, Miss Madeline Goddard, restraining me from speaking with unforgiveness of those few persons who in the past have despitefully used me.

ELLERY SEDGWICK

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Boston*



Contents

By Way of Preface	ix
I The Importance of Omitting Chapter I	3
II Happy Valley	6
III The Hill and the Plain	21
IV The Old Familiar Faces	31
V Old School Ties	46
VI Omitted from the Curriculum	67
VII The Metropolis Against Me	86
VIII Alarms and Excursions	105
IX Yellow	116
X Friends and Crooks	124
XI A Tornado or Two	136
XII Sunny Weather	148
XIII Manners and Customs in the Hub	166
XIV A Hero, a Heroine, and People in Between	178
XV Faraway Women	197
XVI Men of the Species	216
XVII Friends and Rascals	229
XVIII Pure Prejudice	243

Contents

XIX	An Opalescent Chapter	252
XX	The Borderland of Genius	267
XXI	Home without the Bacon	276
XXII	Satisfactions	286
XXIII	Adventures by Proxy	306
XXIV	Pictures in the Night	321
	Index	333

The Happy Profession

CHAPTER I



The Importance of Omitting Chapter I

THERE is no question about it: autobiographies ought to begin with Chapter II. Luckily for you and me, this is not an autobiography in any accepted sense; that "terrible fluidity of self-revelation" against which Henry James warns us will be quite absent; but so basic a rule of criticism should stand in any record of one man's life. Pick up the nearest biography. Chapter I tells a thrice-told tale. It is about a race before it starts, and, maternal testimony notwithstanding, babies are like as biscuits in a pan. There is one pattern of life for every one of them. Their individual histories, if you can call them individual, should be confined to the family circle, which alone can appreciate the shade of distinction which divides any baby from our baby. However, one generalization should be made and I will pause long enough to call the attention of beginning fathers to one interesting and significant characteristic of babies, biographied and unbiographied, whether or not there is a flicker of difference between them. Hardly has the breath been spanked into the infant by nurse-ritual in the first ten minutes of existence and the child laid on its back to recover when, with its first gasp, *it* (the neuter gender habitually covers the first two years) stretches out its newborn hand and clutches at the universe, closing its fingers in a determined grip. That gesture

The Happy Profession

means but one thing: "What is mine is mine and nobody else's." It is Nature's protest against socialism, the primal affirmation that the world was made for individuals, whatever politicians and evangelists have to say to the contrary.

Of course, there may be something in the first chapter beside chronicles of universal babyhood. The biographers of Hercules are perfectly correct in recording the strangling of twin serpents in his cradle: that was an exceptional incident. And of course grandfathers are worth mentioning, and some grandmothers, too. My own family ascribes our cross-grainedness to one great-great-grandmother, our engaging qualities to direct transmission from the charming and accomplished spinster who was our great-aunt. These postulates are probably quite as accurate in one case as the other. I do not impugn this theory altogether, for scientists say inheritance comes from strains not individuals, but I do know, quite as well as biographers, that the dance of genes and chromosomes is of a very lively and intricate nature, that it has been going on for a long time, and that to trace its evolution in any given instance is merely to be wise after the event. One of the infinite complications of physical inheritance is the vast difference it makes to the child, not only what qualities are inherited but what is the just balance between those qualities. Too much molasses may spoil a pudding. One pinch of salt may not be quite enough. But I will let the geneticists take on from here.

Another preoccupation of that first chapter which ought to be omitted deals with descriptions of the place of birth. Very occasionally a birthplace is interesting; for example, the pinched little room where Calvin Coolidge was born, which still looks for all the world like a Tract on the Penurious Instinct. But in this country, where the face of nature changes overnight, birthplaces have commonly lost their consequence.

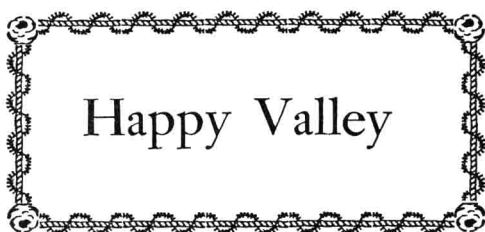
The Importance of Omitting Chapter I

Things of this sort matter more in England where they keep straw stacks on the same spot year after year and for generations the same antimacassars fall over the same chair-backs in the farmhouse parlor. There, the reader of the story can have a picture of what has been and there the growing hero or heroine of the biography is influenced insensibly and powerfully by the comforting illusion of a fixed spot on this whirling globe. They love it and call it home. But in America, getting on in the world means getting out of the world we have known before.

I was amused the other day by an instance of this. My wife and I were dining in a comfortable little restaurant carved out of a brownstone house in West Forty-eighth Street in New York City. As I looked at the menu the address at the top struck me and I exclaimed, "By Jove, one day in 1872 I was born here!" I called the waiter. "Where is number seventeen?" I asked. The waiter pointed across the street. "That is where the Music Hall of Rockefeller Center is." A Music Hall, I thought. What an appropriate memorial to me!

Reader, have no fear! I say once more it is not an autobiography you are in for. I and my contented life are simply the standing ground of the photographer snapping the pictures of a lifetime which has at least proved vastly amusing to me. These pictures have little enough to do with the writer but they carry the record of many scenes and many people not without interest, and if the prints have not faded, the album may be worth a few hours of idle time.

CHAPTER 11



AERICAN born, I followed American fashion and number 17 West Forty-eighth Street was a memory before memory began. Within a year my father moved his family to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, but curiously enough in that migration he did not break with tradition but caught up with it. Even in that remote era Sedgwicks had lived in Stockbridge for a century or so, and it was in the house of my father's grandfather that we finally installed ourselves. Stockbridge is a village of little importance, but it is ours if love can make it so. It is seven decades at least since Tom Appleton, the wit who had the inspiration of tying a shorn lamb to a Beacon Street fence so that God would temper the wind there, chatting of the natural history of Stockbridge, used to maintain that "even the crickets there say nothing but Sedg'ick, Sedg'ick, Sedg'ick." The sixth generation is now growing up in the dear old house. This mansion house of happy memories replaced a wigwam; for it was built in 1785 on land purchased directly from the Indians. The last of the tribe, an ancient squaw known as Elizabeth, has given her name to an adjoining field, still, in family nomenclature, the Elizabeth Lot. Elizabeth had another name for it. In her day it was *Manwootania*, meaning "middle of the town." The

Happy Valley

town itself is six miles square. Elizabeth and the Sedgwicks too once lived in the heart of it.

Through all the country round the scant history that could be recalled had drifted into legend. The Yankee tongue is not good at a double twist and Indian names screw it into contortions. *Awestonook* became Housatonic. Grateful as we may be for that, it is interesting to remember that in Indian times the name *Awestonook*, meaning "over the mountain," was given not only to the river but to the entire valley. The little brook that goes sparkling through it bore a name more easily assimilated and remains Konkapot Brook, but when it came to the mountain which frames the valley to the north, guardian of Stockbridge simplicities against the sophistications of Lenox, the native *Takeecanuck* made too large a mouthful, and there was no transliteration. Rattlesnake Mountain it became. Now *Takeecanuck* means "the heart," and apparently stood as a kind of memorial to some friendly interchange between red men and white, but Rattlesnake has a sinister meaning. Behind such a transformation there seems to lie some story of treachery, some bloody drama forgotten these hundred years. It was also simply the impossibilities of linguistics which translated *Masswassehaich* (the euphonious name for "nest") into Monument Mountain.

Wherever I am, it is always from the windows of the old house on Main Street that I look out on the world and take a Stockbridge-eye-view of it. Ours is not a great house nor a beautiful, but it is delightful and built to endure. The ground plan follows the best of all designs for family living — an ample square, with four generous rooms, one at each corner, and a broad hall running through the center, opening on the view of Monument Mountain, which is the hallmark of the village. My great-grandfather had a family suited to his day, four sons and four daughters, but it was customary for the

The Happy Profession

sons to offer their wives the protection of the paternal roof-tree and guests in unbroken succession were collectively quite as permanent residents as the family. In the absence of inns, any traveler with a letter to introduce him could find a night's lodging there, and humble wayfarers were invariably provided with a shakedown. Hospitality was endless and boundless. By what magic the four walls could have contained such a company mystifies the present generation. How could the less contain the greater? In my father's day a substantial wing was added for the accommodation of a much more moderate household, and I doubt whether my children would think it physically possible to find room for a company less by a third than my grandparents considered normal. Nowadays a guest or two alter the pattern of family life. It was different then. Guests simply enlarged the domestic circle.

From the beginning the Sedgwicks loved their house. It was part of them, almost the dearest part. My old Latin professor at Harvard taught me once for all that *domus* was a house but not a home. And I well know the distinction. But our Stockbridge house was certainly different from the other houses on the village street. Perhaps I can find what the difference was by quoting from a letter of a Sedgwick three generations back.

"I came down," wrote my Great-aunt Catherine in 1844, "to pass a few days at the old homestead — my only home — the only place on earth where forms, common and mute to others, have to me soul and speech; where voices linger in the walls of the rooms, and make their secret and by-gone cheerfulness and tenderness ring in my ears in the dead of night; where the stems of the old trees are still warm with the hands that once pressed them; where, in short, the dead are *not* dead."

Life with its joys and heartbreaks, death "with its train of infinite hopes," there they abide together.