

MRS. JOHN F. DILLON.

MEMOIR PREPARED BY HER HUSBAND.—HER LIFE AND LETTERS.

ANNA PRICE DILLON, Memoir and Memorials, Being Chiefly Selections from her Letters, with an Introductory and Connecting Narrative, Collected and arranged by her Husband. New York: Not Published, but Printed for Distribution among her Family, Relatives and Friends. MDCCC.

Friends of Judge and Mrs. John F. Dillon have recently received copies of a beautiful memoir Judge Dillon has written of his wife. Mrs. Dillon's tragic death with her daughter, in the sinking of the French steamer *Bourgogne* on July 4, 1898, came to public knowledge with painful force, and the memory of it will not soon cease to be a source of regret and horror. Judge Dillon has had 300 copies printed—an unusually large edition for any privately printed book, and still larger for a private memoir—but, with the wide acquaintance he and Mrs. Dillon have had in the East, as well as in the West, there must remain many persons who, failing to possess a copy, will be glad to have some description of its character and contents.

The volume comes from the DeVinne Press, of New York, which for a quarter of a century has been recognized as the source of some of the most beautiful examples of the art of printing that this country has seen. It is printed on a fine quality of hand-made Holland paper, from large open type, with ornamental head and end pieces, and comprises somewhat more than 500 pages, including an index. It contains seventeen illustrations, some of them being etchings, some photogravures, and among them are four portraits of Mrs. Dillon at different periods in her life, the frontispiece being an etched portrait from a three-quarter length photograph, made in Nice in 1883, showing Mrs. Dillon to have been a very handsome woman of striking presence and gracious bearing. Other portraits give her father and mother, her sons and daughters and her husband. There are also views



of her several homes in Iowa, New York City, Saratoga and New Jersey.

The volume largely comprises Mrs. Dillon's own letters addressed to her husband, her children and her friends, covering a long period and ending only a day or two before her death. Judge Dillon has written an introductory memoir of about fifty pages, and then follow the letters, grouped into chapters under headings and dates, each chapter having a brief introduction setting forth facts essential to an understanding of the letters that follow; the final chapter giving in detail the circumstances in which Mrs. Dillon and her daughter perished at sea. By this method Judge Dillon has permitted Mrs. Dillon in large degree to become the narrator of her own biography. His decision to give the memoir in this form proceeded, as we see, from careful observation of success for this method as employed in recent biographical writings. His own reading in English literature has been wide and critical. The works of Landor, Taine, Lowell, Browning, Chaucer and Spenser seem as familiar to him as those of Blackstone or Coke or the Revised Statutes. This familiarity has an interesting illustration in an anecdote he records as an example of his wife's skill in repartee. One day at home, after looking in vain for a favorite traveling rug, he found that Mrs. Dillon had permitted one of their sons to take it with him on leaving home, and quietly remarked how Taine has observed that a woman cares little for her husband after her children have grown up. Mrs. Dillon's response was: "Judge, I did not think you would ever reach the stage where you could not even scold without citing authorities."

By using this method in preparing the memoir Judge Dillon follows a custom that has been fast passing into general use, since Carlyle rehabilitated Cromwell by printing his letters with intelligent comments upon them. In no way can the true character of any man or woman be made so understandable. Mrs. Dillon, of course, never wrote these let-

ters with any thought that they would reach other eyes than those to whom they were addressed. They are therefore the spontaneous and unconscious, as well as the charming, revelations of her nature—the nearest possible approach to the woman that she was that could be obtained. Indeed, it may be said that in some way these letters give a clearer insight into character than personal acquaintance could have done, unless that acquaintance had chanced to be very intimate.

Judge Dillon has been much impressed with the value of letters as he has read them in the best memoirs of the times, and remarks how eminent writers, such as Lowell and Carlyle, have insisted on their surpassing value in any estimate even of great geniuses—a value to which no formal writings meant for the public can possibly lay claim. In letters, indeed, we have indexes to character and personality that can be rivalled only by conversation and daily association—sources of knowledge in their very nature evanescent and impossible of adequate description from those possessing it.

Mrs. Dillon, whether she was addressing her husband, her children or her intimate friends, always wrote from the heart. Chesterfield has remarked that letters disclose the character, not only of their writers, but of those to whom the letters are addressed. We instinctively take toward others an attitude prompted by our relations to them, and thus never write to one person in the same way we would write to another. There is a difference, not only in the form of the address, but in every thought and line,—in the degree of freedom shown, or the degree of restraint; and in the freedom as in the restraint there are variations in degree.

No reader can fail to see this quality in Mrs. Dillon's correspondence—that fine quality of adaptability that was hers. We can see where there was intimacy and where not,—where complete understanding existed and where only partial. Her range in these matters was wide and the fine variations of it show, not only the woman (in which sex those variations are always so much more exquisitely phrased

and tuned than in man) but a woman highly endowed. Her force of character is constantly manifest—her capacity for action, her grasp of details, her confidence and poise; and yet to these qualities were joined sympathy and tenderness as deep and warm as life itself, consideration for others, with touches now and then of that child nature, that simplicity of heart, which would be found ever present in the strongest natures could we but be permitted to observe it. Mrs. Dillon loved not art alone—not simply the objects which make a spacious home beautiful, that fill the eye and delight the cultured mind. She loved nature even more than these—forests and meadows, streams and glorious skies, flowers, plants, cattle, birds and dogs.

Judge Dillon's experience in life, his professional distinction, the widely-varied fields in which that distinction has been gained, the honors and rewards that have come to him, the blessings he has been able to bestow upon his family, scarcely set this record apart from the experience and understanding of men and women in general. Elemental human nature is much the same in all times and in all environments. We are men and women first and always: we are highly gifted or highly successful afterwards; so that, in the things that make for domestic felicity, the things that promote activity and beneficent usefulness in life, the sources for us all are essentially the same. No man can read this book and fail to understand that Judge Dillon's place in the world could never have become what it is had the influence and support of Mrs. Dillon been wanting. Of that support what evidence may not be found everywhere in these pages? Years ago Judge Dillon gave public recognition to it in that beautiful dedication to his wife of his "Yale University Law Lectures." We see it everywhere recorded in this volume,—it may be in the complete mastery she is shown to have had of every detail in the housekeeping, so that the smallest items among thousands were known to her and could be specified as to the places they were in when she was in Europe; it

may be in her solicitude for her husband's every comfort; it may be in assisting him in the printing of his books; it may be in the professional work that absorbed his time and engaged her interest also, a pleasing example of the latter being found in a trip she once made to his office at night in order to blot his name as he signed it to 600 railway bonds of a thousand dollars each. He once wrote her a letter which tells this story better than any other words can tell it. She was then in Europe, and he was about to join her there:

While I am on this subject, let me write you a little love letter. Are you too old? Am I too old? Well, we have lived together more than a quarter of a century. The days of illusions are passed. You have been a true, faithful and devoted wife. Nothing has ever escaped your vigilant eye that could promote my welfare or your children's, and whatever you saw needful to be done you have always had the energy and the unconquerable will to do. I have never seen a woman who, all things considered, I thought had your ability and intellectual force—such a wide range of gifts. This is my estimate after, as I have said, the illusions which may deceive our youth are over and gone.

This Memoir, prepared with care, taste, self-repression and good judgment, gives throughout abundant evidence of Mrs. Dillon's forceful character and charming personality.

The volume, viewed in a large way, has positive value as a picture of American domestic life under modern environments in the station to which Judge and Mrs. Dillon belonged—a life into which came professional eminence and the social experience such eminence brings, but a life dominated and controlled by those happy domestic relations which are the greatest factors in giving inspiration and recompense, alike to effort and ambition. As a type, therefore, in American life, the record stands upon a plane all its own. It affords a representative picture, and if it be an exceptional one, this is because no one else has given to print so full, so faithful and so convincing an account of felicitous domestic life passed in what may be called the forefront of society in large communities. One need scarcely add how completely it could refute the pessimism of cynics,

but the wiser minds among us care not to see the cynics refuted, having neither faith in them nor patience with their carping.

A word in closing must be written of the restraint, or what might almost be called the judicial spirit, in which the memoir has been prepared. That temper of mind to which his profession has brought calmness as well as strength, cannot alone claim credit for this restraint. All our knowledge and all our culture stand for scarcely more than a surface growth, or a veneer superimposed upon our real selves, our elemental natures. In a crisis such as Judge Dillon so recently met with, that surface of knowledge and habit could have counted for little. Indeed, it must have been quite swept away by the torrent, and in its place must have risen into action the central forces of life itself. There is no page in this memoir where one does not see those forces present. But one must read mainly between the lines. Indeed, one cannot fail to do that, for everywhere present is seen emotion held in restraint. One closes the memoir—this potent illustration of “the infinite pathos of human life”—with a full understanding that his thoughts must always be dominated by the fixed conviction—

But yet I know where'er I go
That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.

STATE GOVERNMENT.—But little interest seems to have been felt on the subject of state government at the late election. A comparatively small number of votes were cast in reference to it, and these generally against it. It is fully evident that at this time the people of this Territory feel no solicitude to come into the Union as a State.—*Burlington Hawk-Eye, October 24, 1840.*

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.