



Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Little Trips Among the Eminent.

"Lives of great men all remind us
We may make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time."

We have been requested, more than once, to give a series of sketches on the lives of eminent men and women. This, then, the reason for the following. A beginning has been made upon Emerson, simply because he happens to be the writer about whom material has been for some time in course of preparation. The circumstance is not, perhaps, regrettable, since Emerson, besides being "the most original and influential writer that America has yet produced," leads on through his multifarious acquaintances to the many eminent men and women of his day, who were either drawn towards him by his genius, or whom he met on his trips to Europe. The sketches, it may be understood at the beginning, are not intended to be comprehensive. It is impossible that they could be so within limited space. They are merely intended to be, as the title of the series indicates, "little trips" among the great, rambling biographies in miniature, written with the aim of investing those far-off ones with the interest that attaches itself to humans, and in the hope that, through this human touch, our readers may be inspired to investigate further for themselves.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

(In the compiling of this sketch, we are especially indebted to Cabot's Memoir, with selections from Emerson's letters and journal.)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, son of the Rev. William Emerson, was born on May 25th, 1803, in Boston, then a quiet old place of quaint houses and large gardens and orchards. The house in which he first saw the light stood well back from the street, and across from it at that time was a large commons or pasture, where cowbells tinkled and the boys of the town played. The young Emersons, however, were never permitted to play with the boys in the street. From babyhood they were compelled to give themselves up to books

and letters, for which, it must be admitted, they showed remarkable aptitude. There is, however, something a little pathetic in the story which the famous Ralph Waldo afterwards told, of how he used to stand and watch wistfully the boys on the common. Childhood, no matter how precocious, has a right to play, and, perhaps, had the young Emersons spent more time at ball, and less in poring over "Plato and Plutarch, Shakespeare and Milton," they might have been less susceptible to that fatal lung trouble which later carried off so many of their brilliant circle. In that event, perhaps, the Emerson which we know might have been lost to the world—life is a great mystery—but it is safe to say that his unusual mind would have manifested itself in some other way, not less illustriously.

In 1811 the father died, and Mrs. Emerson was left with a family of small children and very little means of support. She at once took boarders, and the wonderful boys, William, Charles, Ralph and Edward, helped with the work. They were very poor. Sometimes they had little food, and it is told that Ralph and Edward had for long enough but one great-coat between them, and had to take turns in going without. "Chill penury," however, does not always repress.

Ralph's schooldays began in a private school before he was three years old. At ten he was reading Virgil; at eleven he entered the Latin School, and in 1817 started to Harvard College. Here he was not regarded as outstandingly brilliant. "Mathematics I hate," he wrote at the time, and probably his failure in such subjects "pulled his average down," to speak in language well understood of modern school circles. However, he was known as a great reader of classics and poetry, and he succeeded in taking two Bowdoin prizes for dissertations; also a Boylston prize of \$30 for declamation. He sent the money gleefully to his mother, and it tells a pathetic tale of financial straits that it "at once went to pay the baker's bill." Indeed, the financial stress during those college years was always as the rubbing on a sore, and the letters of the lads are painfully filled with discussions on ways and means of making ends meet.

Ralph was always of retiring disposition during his school days, but a few of the studious found him out, and he became one of the leading spirits in a Book Club organized for the study of literature. A classmate wrote of him as he was at this time: "He had then the same manner and courtly hesitation in addressing you that you have known in him since. He was not talkative . . . but there was a certain flash when he uttered anything that was more than usually worthy to be remembered."

After leaving college he tried school-teaching for a while—and hated it. "Better tug at the oar," he wrote once to a friend while in the thick of it, "better dig the mine or saw wood; better sow hemp or hang with it, than sow the seeds of instruction"—all of which was very strong language, which showed plainly enough that "Emerson" had not yet found his vocation.

He had some dreams of oratory, but even from the beginning it appears that he was not fitted to be the pulpit-orator which he later essayed to be. He was not filled with the necessary fire and enthusiasm. He was given to fits of discouragement. "The dreams of my childhood are all fading away," he complains in his

journal, "and giving place to some very sober and very disgusting views of a very quiet mediocrity of talents and condition: nor does it appear that any application of which I am capable, any efforts, any sacrifices, could at this moment restore any reasonableness to the familiar expectations of my earlier youth." It is the cry of a soul bound down to a monotonous round, and without any clear beacon ahead; yet the call of the pen must have been making itself faintly heard. "I keep school," he says, "I study neither law, medicine, nor divinity, and write neither poetry nor prose." . . . This, too, is suggestive as foreshadowing the future independence of thought upon which his place in the world would rest: "When I have been at Cambridge, and studied divinity, I will tell you whether I can make out for myself any better system than Luther or Calvin, or the liberal besoms of modern days."

In 1825, then, he went up to the Divinity School. About the time of entering, he wrote: "My reasoning faculty is proportionately weak. . . . Nor is it strange that, with this confession, I should choose theology; for the highest species of reasoning upon divine subjects is rather the fruit of a sort of moral imagination than of the reasoning machines, such as Locke, and Clarke, and David Hume." As a matter of fact, Emerson never became a logician; he was never strong on argument; he simply saw with keen perception or intuition, and told what he saw.

During these early years he was much hampered by ill-health, due to weak lungs. "Health, action, happiness," he writes in his journal,—"how they ebb from me! Poor Sisyphus saw his stone stop once, at least, when Orpheus chanted. I must roll mine up and up and up how high a hill." In the fall of 1826 he went south for the winter, and spent his time "writing sermons for an hour which may never arrive." In June he returned, and preached for a time, but was not well enough to take a regular church.

In 1827 he met Ellen Tucker, his future wife. "She is seventeen years old," he wrote his brother, and very beautiful by universal consent." In a year he became settled in a Unitarian church, and married Miss Tucker, who, however, died of consumption in a year.

Of his preaching at this period of his life, Dr. Hedge says: "His early sermons were characterized by great simplicity and an unconventional, untheological style which brought him into closer rapport with his hearers than was commonly achieved by the pulpit in those days." . . . "One day," says Mr. Congdon, "there came into our pulpit (at New Bedford) the most gracious of mortals, with a face all benignity, who gave out the first hymn and made the first prayer, as an angel might have read and prayed." From such passages as these, Emerson's peculiar magnetism may be imagined, and it does not seem wonderful that Margaret Fuller and others of the keen-thinking of Boston and its vicinity frequently came to hear him preach.

Emerson, however, was not orthodox. He disagreed on some points with the tenets of the church, and in 1832 stopped preaching as a settled minister, although he still continued, for some years, to take an occasional pulpit for a day. He had found that in the narrow, somewhat Puritanical atmosphere of his time he could not exercise independent

thought. Moreover, he revolted against "official goodness." Writing of Coleridge to his aunt, Mary Emerson, a year or so previously, he had expressed himself when he said: "I like to encounter these citizens of the universe that believe the mind was made to be spectator of all, inquisitor of all"; yet, on throwing up his church, he felt somewhat adrift. "But what shall poor I do?" he writes in his journal, "who can neither visit, nor pray, nor preach to my mind?"

His mania for independence, however, was paving the way for him. "It is exhilarating once in a while," he notes, "to come across a genuine Saxon stump, a wild, virtuous man who knows books, but gives them the right place in his mind, lower than his reason. Books are apt to turn reason out of doors. You find men talking everywhere from their memories, instead of from their understanding." And again, "I walk firmly toward a peace and freedom which I plainly see before me, albeit afar."

That peace, indeed, was coming in the discernment of his mission, however dimly, the mission to teach men the independence and inviolability of every human soul, to urge upon them self-reliance, self-development. While not utterly accepting pantheism, he began to look upon the world of nature as a mere symbol of the universal spirit, to believe that God speaks through the mind of every man. He would throw off old things, old ideas, as a snake sloughs off an old skin, if better ideas, better ways, were to be found. Consistency was a god of the times, but he began to denounce it as the bane of little minds.

Naturally, now, his mind turned to writing, and he planned a magazine in which a man could speak out his thought. His brilliant brothers were to help him. "Give me my household gods against the world," he cries, "William and Edward and Charles."

Ill-health, however, interfered with the scheme, and on Christmas Day, 1832, he sailed in a little trading brig for the Mediterranean, on a memorable trip. He rapidly improved in health, "found everywhere the same land of cakes and ale," was disappointed somewhat in the great men he met. "I never get used to men," he confides to his journal. "They always awaken expectations in me which they always disappoint." He was yet to learn that men do not wear their hearts and emotions on their sleeves, and might have understood the fact better if he had been able to read what Mr. Henry James (the elder) said of himself at a later day, when he had attained his own position of serene eminence: "On the whole, I may say that at first I was greatly disappointed in Emerson, because his intellect never kept the promise which his lovely face and manners held out to me. He was to my senses a literal, divine presence in the house with me; and we cannot recognize literal, divine presences in our houses without feeling sure that they will be able to say something of critical importance to one's intellect. It turned out that any average old dame in a horse-car would have satisfied my intellectual rapacity just as well as Emerson . . . and though his immense personal fascination always kept up, he at once lost all intellectual prestige to my regard. I even thought that I had never seen a man more profoundly devoid of spiritual understanding. In his talk or private capacity he was