

Reminiscences of Ralph Waldo Emerson

Louisa May Alcott

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As I count it the greatest honor and happiness of my life to have known Mr. Emerson, I gladly accede to a request for such recollections as may be of interest to the young readers for whom I write.

My first remembrance is of the morning when I was sent to inquire for little Waldo, then lying very ill.

His father came to me so worn with watching and changed by sorrow that I was startled, and could only stammer out my message.

"Child, he is dead," was his answer.

Then the door closed and I ran home to tell the sad tidings. I was only eight years old, and that was my first glimpse of a great grief, but I never have forgotten the anguish that made a familiar face so tragical, and gave those few words more pathos than the sweet lamentation of the Threnody.

Later, when we went to school with the little Emersons in their father's barn, I remember many happy times when the illustrious papa was our good playfellow.

Often piling us into a bedecked hay-cart, he took us to berry, bathe, or picnic at Walden, making our day charming and memorable by showing us the places he loved, the wood-people Thoreau had introduced to him, or the wild flowers whose hidden homes he had discovered. So that when years afterward we read of "the sweet Rhodora in the wood" and "the burly, dozy humblebee," or laughed over "The Mountain and the Squirrel," we recognized old friends, and thanked him for the delicate truth and beauty which made them immortal for us and others.

When the book-mania fell upon me at fifteen I used to venture into Mr. Emerson's library and ask what I should read, never conscious of the audacity of my demand, so genial was my welcome.

His kind hand opened to me the riches of Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe and Carlyle, and I gratefully recall the sweet patience with which he led me round the book-lined room, till "the new and very interesting book" was found; or the indulgent smile he wore when I proposed something far above my comprehension.

"Wait a little for that," he said. "Meantime try this, and if you like it, come again."

For many of these wise books I am waiting still, very patiently, because in his own I have found the truest delight, the best inspiration of my life.

When these same precious volumes were tumbled out of the window while his house was burning some years ago, as I stood guarding the scorched, wet pile, Mr. Emerson passed by, and surveying the devastation with philosophic calmness, only said in answer to my lamentations—

"I see my library under a new aspect. Could you tell me where my good neighbors have flung my boots?"

In the tribulations of later life, this faithful house-friend was an earthly Providence, conferring favors so beautifully that they were no burden, and giving such sympathy in joy and sorrow that very tender ties were knit between this beneficent nature and the grateful hearts he made his own.

Acquaintance with such a man is an education in itself, for "the essence of greatness is the perception that virtue is enough," and living what he wrote, his influence purified and brightened like sunshine.

Many a thoughtful young man and woman owe to Emerson the spark that kindled their highest aspirations, and showed them how to make the conduct of life a helpful lesson, not a blind struggle.

"For simple maids and noble youth
Are welcome to the man of truth;
Most welcome they who need him most,
They feed the spring which they exhaust,
For greater need
Draws better deed."

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He was in truth, like his own Saadi, "a cheerer of men's hearts."

Friendship, Love, Self-Reliance, Heroism and Compensation among the essays have become to many readers as precious as Christian's scroll, and certain poems live in the memory as sacred as hymns, so helpful and inspiring are they.

No better books for earnest young people can be found. The truest words are often the simplest, and when wisdom and virtue go hand in hand, none need fear to listen, learn and love.

The marble walk that leads to his hospitable door has been trodden by the feet of many pilgrims from all parts of the world, drawn thither by their love and reverence for him. In that famous study his town's people have had the privilege of seeing many of file great and good men and women of our time and learning of their gracious host the finest lessons of true courtesy.

I have often seen him turn from distinguished guests, to say a wise or kindly word to some humble worshipper, sitting modestly in a corner, content merely to look and listen, and who went away to cherish that memorable moment long and gratefully,

Here, too, in the pleasant room with the green hills opposite, and the pines murmuring musically before the windows, Emerson wrote essays more helpful than most sermons; lectures which created the lyceum; poems full of power and sweetness; and better than song or sermon has lived a life so noble, true and beautiful that its wide-spreading influence is felt on both sides of the sea.

In all reforms he was among the foremost on the side of justice and progress. When Faneuil Hall used to be a scene of riot and danger in Anti-Slavery days, I remember sitting tip aloft, an excited girl, among the loyal women who never failed to be there; and how they always looked for that serene face on the platform, and found fresh courage in the mere sight of the wisest man in America, standing shoulder to shoulder with the bravest.

When Woman's Suffrage was most unpopular, his voice and pen spoke for the just cause, undaunted by the fear of ridicule which silences so many.

His own simple, abstemious habits were his best testimony in favor of temperance in all things, while in religion he believed that each soul must choose its own aids, and prove the vitality of its faith by high thinking and holy living.

When traveling in various countries I found his fame had gone before, and people were eager to hear something of the Concord poet, seer and philosopher.

In a little town upon the Rhine, where our party paused for a night, unexpectedly delayed, two young Germans, reading the word Boston on the labels of our trunks as they stood in the yard of the inn, begged to come in and see the Americans, and their first question was,—

"Tell us about Emerson."

We gladly told them what they asked, and they listened as eagerly as we did to anything we could hear concerning their great countryman Goethe.

A letter once came to me from the far West, in which a girl asked what she should read to build up a noble character. It was a remarkable letter, and when I inquired what books she most desired she answered, "All of Emerson's; he helps me most."

A prisoner just from Concord jail came to see me on his release and proved to be an intelligent, book-loving young man, who had been led into crime by his first fit of intoxication. In talking with with him, he said Emerson's books were a comfort to him, and he had spent some of the money earned in prison to buy certain volumes to take with him as guides and safeguards for the future.

In England his honored name opened many doors to us, and we felt as proud of our acquaintance with him as Englishmen feel of the medals with which their Queen decorates them. So widely was he known, so helpful was his influence, so ennobling the mere reflection. of his virtue and his genius.

Longfellow was beloved by children, and of Emerson it might be said, as of Plato, "He walks with his head among the stars, yet carries a blessing in his heart for every little child."

When he returned from his second visit to Europe after his house was burned, he was welcomed by the school-children who lined his passage from the cars to the carriage, where a nosegay of blooming grandchildren awaited him; and escorted by a smiling troop of neighbors, old and young, he was conducted under green arches to his house.

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Here they sang "Sweet Home," gave welcoming cheers, and marched away to come again soon after to a grand house—warming in the old mansion which had been so well restored that nothing seemed changed.

Many a gay revel has been held under the pines, whole schools taking possession of the poet's premises; and many a child will gladly recall hereafter the paternal face that smiled on them, full of interest in their gambols, and of welcome for the poorest.

Mrs. Emerson, from her overflowing garden, planted flowers along the roadside and in the plot of ground before the nearest schoolhouse to beautify the children's daily life. Sweeter and more imperishable than these will be the recollections of many kindnesses bestowed by one who, in the truest sense of the word, was a friend to all.

As he lay dying, children stopped to ask if he were better, and all the sunshine faded out of the little faces when the sad answer came. Very willing feet roamed the woods for green garlands to decorate the old church where he would come for the last time; busy hands worked till midnight that every house should bear some token of mourning; Spring gave him her few early flowers and budding boughs from the haunts that will know him no more, and old and young forgot for a little while their pride in the illustrious man to sorrow for the beloved friend and neighbor.

Life did not sadden his cheerful philosophy; success could not spoil his exquisite simplicity; age could not dismay him, and he met death with sweet serenity.

He wrote "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself." Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles and this well earned peace transfigured the beautiful dead face, so many eyes beheld with tender reverence seeming to assure us that our august friend and master had passed into the larger life for which he was ready, still to continue, —

"Without hasting without rest,
Lifting Better up to Best;
Planting seeds of knowledge pure,
Thro' earth to ripen, thro' heaven endure."