

PAINLESS ESSAYS

By Richardson Wright

AN essay used to be considered a still life study, with definite limits — as definite as the frame of a picture; a conscious and exacting work with the author laboring preciously over his words the way a lapidary labors over his gems. Thanks to Christopher Morley (whose mind is almost as broad as his girth) these strait and narrow limitations have been burst asunder. According to his selection in this second anthology, an essay is anything that pleases his fancy and that lies outside the strict category of fiction and poetry. It may be what was once called a "character sketch", such as Edmund Lester Pearson's "The Cary Girls" or Alec Woollcott's moving and spirited recollection of "Madame Cocaud"; it may be a political summary, such as Raymond B. Fosdick's "Mussolini and the League of Nations" (although we have our doubts about the advisability of this selection); it may be a quickly moving picture with a fictional kick at the end, such as Edward Townsend Booth's "The Fountain of Youth" and Arthur G. Staples's "The Smell of a Brush Fire" (a delightful causerie!); it may be a fine piece of reporting, such as Lawrence Perry's "The Elwell Case", or a vaudeville act in swagger and slang, such as Sherwood Anderson's "Ohio: I'll Say We've Done Well"; or, again, it may be merely the crystallization of a mood, such as Alice Meynell's "Rejection".

Here and there the selection becomes a bit turgid, but the papers are so arranged that the turn of a few pages brings you to something brighter. Nor can it be said of this selection, as was said of the first, that Mr. Morley was preparing a literary Disarmament Con-

ference between England and America; of the thirty one authors, seventeen are Americans, thirteen British, and one Canadian.

In making such a varied and catholic selection Mr. Morley has smashed an idol into smithereens: he has confounded those sage and orthodox gentlemen to whom an essay must be Lambesque or no essay at all. And I'm not so certain but Charlie Lamb is chuckling in his shroud at this evolution of the essay idea — the way some of the saints must chuckle when they're made saints. For this widening of the essay limits has done a great work — it has made the essay acceptable to a larger range of people and intellects; it has lifted it out of the precious class and put it among the utilities; it has removed it from the stuffy and silent atmosphere of the library to the free air, clatter, and vibrant circumstance of the newspaper office, the street, the average walk of people who are just slightly above the average. In short, a selection such as this has made the essay palatable to many tastes, and, consequently, many people are tasting and enjoying essays. To make his selections even more palatable the editor has prefaced each essay with a Morleyistic biographical note.

What Mr. Morley has begun, Mr. Pence has carried to a still further degree. In his selection there are more authors who fall into the category of humorists. Beerbohm, Belloc, Bob Benchley, Heywood Broun, Chesterton, Oliver Herford, Bob Holliday, Burges Johnson, E. V. Lucas, Don Marquis, A. A. Milne — these might be classed among the playboys of the essay world. And yet even in this selection Mr. Pence is flirting with the Lambesque clique; he is laboring under the necessity for whimsicality. Heretofore whimsicality was considered the

faculty and gift solely of learned men (such as Frank Moore Colby who writes on "The Pleasures of Anxiety") or of critics (such as Robert Lynd whose "A Defense of Superstition" is selected). It was the rare smile of men who rarely smiled. Whimsicality was the careless and intimate toying with serious matters by men and women who were so close to those matters that they dared toy with them — like acolytes playing jokes during mass. Many of the essays in this volume fall into that class; others laugh right out loud in the sanctuary. In fact, there are so many laughs and whimsicalities in this selection that it might be called "The Joke Book of Essays". Even Will Beebe's "Jungle Night" has its whimsicalities, and Charles S. Brooks's "In Praise of a Lawn Mower".

The editor's apologia for his choice is set down in the preface, wherein he ex-

plains (Mr. Pence, by the way, is professor of rhetoric and English composition in De Pauw University) that the light essay appeals to students. Therein he, too, is doing a great work. Feed freshmen on Belloc, Benchley, and Broun, and when they shall have attained their sophomore year they can pass on to the delights of Don Marquis, Lucas, and Milne. After that they will have become accustomed to essays and will never, in after life, be essay-shy. Learned magazines such as "The Atlantic Monthly", "Scribner's", and "The Yale Review" should endow Mr. Pence and his confrères; they are training a new generation of potential essay readers.

Modern Essays (Second Series). Selected by Christopher Morley. Harcourt, Brace and Co.

Essays by Present-Day Writers. Edited by Raymond Woodbury Pence. The Macmillan Co.