

## A Group of Essayists

THE essayist of Addison's day, of Lamb's day, and to a great extent of our day, has always been a man who, having acquired the art of polishing gems, makes it his chief business to search for gems worth polishing. They may be small or large, with few facets or many, of dull colors or of the scintillating sort. It is his business to "shine them up," to make them fascinating in the parlor or the library.

Dr. William Morton Payne<sup>1</sup> has, rightly, in accordance with the modern practice, assumed a broader definition for the essay. It is still a gem to be polished—something "occupying a sort of literary limbo between the creative forms of poem, play, and novel, on the one hand, and the more substantial embodiments of knowledge or of speculative thought on the other." He does, however, keep decidedly within the lines of the old definition when he selects for his themes four such men as Irving, Emerson, Thoreau, and George William Curtis. They were, as he very closely shows, and with much learning, polishers of gems of "the purest rays serene"—Thoreau decidedly less so than the others, tho the author has so strong a liking for him that he is unwilling to remember that the poet-naturalist is, in his shorter themes, a lecturer and sermonizer rather than an essayist. Call him, however, what you will, the lover of original thinking, simplified living, and sane observation of man and nature, combined with the happiest manner of presenting the gems unfinished, will never quarrel with Dr. Payne for putting the Concord genius within the fence of any artistic form of literary work.

Dr. Payne touches chiefly on the biographical side of his themes, and in this form finds a half brother of the quill in Prof. C. T. Winchester, of Wesleyan University, whose subjects belong to the

first half of the last century': William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, Thomas De Quincey, John Wilson, Leigh Hunt, with Jeffrey of the new school of critics close at hand to rub on the oil or the vitriol to the chief of the poets. Precursors, all, of the American school, they were in deep sympathy with the growing desire to get a freer hand in the distribution of literary honors. All were true essayists of the expanded definition, and Professor Winchester deals with them as if he loved them—loved them chiefly for being one step in advance of their ancestors, and at least two steps behind their successors. A reformer who is not a good "whipper-in" of his following has a hard time in scoring successes. In William Hazlitt Professor Winchester finds a whipper-in exactly to his mind, and a proper subject for the whipping in poor, wild-eyed Leigh Hunt, with his multitudinous tendency to roam in wild daisy fields. Yet he does amusing justice to both men, and is delightful reading, mingling the critical deftly with the biographical.

A true essayist, and of the most charming form—one of the very best sort—is Mr. E. V. Lucas,<sup>2</sup> who has little of the professorial manner and enough of distinct personality to make one resist the temptation to place him in the school of Charles Lamb, as one is constantly on the point of doing. His humor and method of treatment are of the same glancing, personal kind which a frequent reading of Lamb has induced in so many writers. But the humor and the manner are both native in his case. He was born with it, as much as the author of *Alice in Wonderland* was born with his peculiar form of drollery, or Mr. Crothers with his. You may expect any one of them to jump out at any moment from under the parlor table and say "Boo!" to an unexpected guest, and

<sup>1</sup>LEADING AMERICAN ESSAYISTS. By William Morton Payne, LL.D. With Four Portraits. New York: Henry Holt & Co. \$1.75.

<sup>2</sup>A GROUP OF ENGLISH ESSAYISTS OF THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY. By C. T. Winchester, Professor of English Literature in Wesleyan University. New York: The Macmillan Co. \$1.50.

<sup>3</sup>ONE DAY AND ANOTHER. By E. V. Lucas. New York: The Macmillan Co. \$1.25.

no further introduction needed. Because Lamb came first and did best, there is no reason why others born under the same planet should keep their fun bottled up forever. Mr. Lucas's fun is of the sweetest, his egotism most lovable, his polish of the gem perfect in its way. It is always different from the next man's. It is possibly because of that subtle tendency to differ from his neighbors—but not to differ too much—that made him put just twenty-six essays, instead of the more tempting number of twenty-five, into his table of contents.

A most interesting group of essays, depending less on manner than on matter, varied, not relevant to any line of professional or practical work, and yet informing, is the little volume *On Everything*, originally contributed to the *London Morning Post*, by Hilaire Belloc. Here also there is evidence of humor in the odd number of articles included in the volume. No man would have stopped with the thirty-ninth essay unless he had had in mind the department store, where a penny is subtracted from the even tens in order that five cents may be added as a preliminary charge. Mr. Belloc gives full value, however, in whatever he has to offer. He is evidently a shrewd observer of details, and before sitting down to write, has his full quota of small facts to pack with the contents of the box. Everything is there which will be needed for an attractive showing when the box is opened in the playroom where a tired man likes to spend some part of each day. If the author is talking of song, for instance, his arrangement of material includes all that is of use in the world's habit of singing, set in a form that is worthy of the best humorists. A specimen of the grim order can be seen in a little skit bearing very likely on English politics, but borrowed from an historical season in French politics. "Mr. Robespierre" is at his culminating point, riding for a fall, and the "reasonable press" of Paris is helping him along. One paper "admits" that Mr. R. "has handled a very difficult situation with admirable patience and with a tremendous grasp of detail." Another paper declares that

also "1,200 executions in four months is a high record," more seem to be expected by an eager public. It is "the pressure of business in the courts" that prevents, and "unless a larger number of judges are created under his new bill, the popular discontent may grow to an extent he little imagines, and show itself vigorously at the polls." Under the heading of "Official News" comes the announcement: "We are requested by the Home Office to give publicity to the arrangements for tomorrow's executions. These will be found on page 3. There will be no executions on the day after tomorrow." Between these two specimens one can easily see what an assortment of literary *deliciæ* Mr. Belloc has in store in his thirty-nine articles. The curious reader will find enough fun and drollery in the author to be willing to place him near Mr. Lucas, but not in the Charles Lamb corner.

Mr. Charles D. Stewart's half dozen essays, *On the Spot*,<sup>\*</sup> are of the informing sort, but the information is dressed for the epicure in style. As the author lies in bed, after an alarming illness, and watches a spider spinning the sticky part of himself over the corner of a window, he becomes a student of natural history, and one follows him with much the same kind of amused joy that is induced by reading John Burroughs. If he is out of bed and has become a cowpuncher, with a story to tell—how his ox "Bully," braced back as a "Sitting Bull," gloriously held up a competitive Bos named "Scott"—into the story goes as much information about the "bos" breed as could well be put into a brief narrative that is pungent with wit and humor. The essay here verges on the domain of the story. Then there is a disquisition "On the Moraine," wherein the geologist comes to the fore, as, hammer in hand, he investigates what there is left of the glacial period in Wisconsin—as much of its ground rock, that is, as is necessary for his purposes. There is good writing here, of the Mark Twain school—if there is any such school—where the humorist "leaks information." In fact, "leaking information" has come to be a characteristic of the modern essay.

<sup>\*</sup>ON EVERYTHING. By H. Belloc. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. \$1.25.

<sup>\*</sup>ESSAYS ON THE SPOT. By Charles D. Stewart. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. \$1.25.