



The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. 3: Society and Solitude Letters and Social Aims Address (Classic Reprint)

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Excerpt from The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. 3: Society and Solitude Letters and Social Aims Address

I fell in with a humorist, on my travels, who had in his chamber a cast of the Rondanini Medusa, and who assured me that the name which that fine work of art bore in the catalogues was a misnomer, as he was convinced that the sculptor who carved it intended it for Memory, the mother of the Muses. In the conversation that followed, my now friend made some extraordinary confessions. "Do you not see," he said, "the penalty of learning, and that each of these scholars whom you have met at S - , though he were to be the last man, would, like the executioner in Hood's poem, guillotine tho last but one?" He added many lively remarks, but his evident earnestness engaged my attention, and, in the weeks that followed, we became letter acquainted. He had good abilities, a genial temper, and no vices; but he had one defect, - he could not speak in the tone of the people. There was some paralysis on his will, such that, when he met men on common terms, he spoke weakly, and from the point, like a flighty girl. His consciousness of the fault made it worse. He envied every drover and lumberman in the tavern their manly speech. He coveted Mirabeau's don terrible de la familiarité, believing that he whose sympathy goes lowest is the man from whom kings have the most to fear. For himself, he declared that he could not get enough alone to write a letter to a friend. He left the city; he hid himself in pastures. The solitary river was not solitary enough; the sun and moon put him out. When he bought a house, the first thing he did was to plant trees. He could not enough conceal himself. Set a hedge here; set oaks there, - trees behind trees; above all, set evergreens, for they will keep a secret all the year round.

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