

Chapter XIII: Emerson's Failure.

Emerson, who was present at Longfellow's funeral, looked pityingly at the face of the dead poet and said: "He was a very sweet and amiable character, but I cannot remember his name." He was in the first stages of softening of the brain -- although he seemed to show indications of it from the very start.

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Emerson was troubled all his life by a sordid conceit. He was not a Puritan, nor had he anything in common with the Puritans. He had a simple delicate, susceptible temperament, but seemed to want to attain something unattainable. He had a strong imagination and strong ambition, but no balance.

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Emerson rejected all the traditions of environment, without any careful scrutiny of the consequences. He was a minister, but suddenly laid aside his sect and unofficially became a Unitarian. Before long he rejected God as well as Christ, and had to leave the Unitarians. He preferred Plato to Christ. It is the peculiarity of nervous, weak persons, to build up, if they can, a social and domestic life suitable to their dispositions and this is what Emerson did, saying good bye to everything which bound him to his fellowmen, to build up a cult around his own ideas.

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At this time there was an opportunity for a great liberator in America. The Native American movement was in full swing, and shortly afterwards the Know-nothings came into existence. Signs went up, "No Irish need apply." They tried to keep the Catholics from voting. But instead of taking up the cudgel for freedom, he took up another cause. He commenced to write essays advancing his own peculiar beliefs. First he eliminated Christ, then he dispensed with God, and finally he counselled the rejection of all religion and "living with nature alone." He was surrounded by a group of trumpeters who shouted their way into literature.

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Emerson's essays were simply the outgrowth of his own conceit. He knew no other language than English. Having made his studies haphazard he proceeded to give his message with all the assurance of a John Alexander Dowie. But the Transcendentalists lacked a poet. Everyone wrote verse then, but most of it was bad verse. Egged on by his cohorts, Emerson was at first timid, but grew bolder and issued miles of occult mysterious verse that was supposed to be an echo from ages long forgotten.

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Charles Dudley Warner said that Emerson never had an ear for rhyme nor sense of rythm, but that there was something in his poetry that lifted to glory. (The lifting was done by his press agents.) His only achievements were:

1. He was the greatest solvent of Protestantism in America;
2. He was the father of Nothingarianism;
3. He was the head of the dead movement of Transcendentalism which is only a single pebble on the literary beach of America.