ADDISON

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English Men of Letters

EDITED BY JOHN MORLEY

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CHAPTER I.

THE STATE OF ENGLISH SOCIETY AND LETTERS AFTER THE RESTORATION.

Of the four English men of letters whose writings most fully embody the spirit of the eighteenth century the one who provides the biographer with the scantiest materials is Addison. In his *Journal to Stella*, his social verses, and his letters to his friends, we have a vivid picture of those relations with women and that protracted suffering which invest with such tragic interest the history of Swift. Pope, by the publication of his own correspondence, has enabled us, in a way that he never intended, to understand the strange moral twist which distorted a nature by no means devoid of noble instincts. Johnson was fortunate in the companionship of perhaps the best biographer who ever lived. But of the real life and character of Addison scarcely any contemporary record remains. The formal narrative prefixed to his works by Tickell is, by that writer's own admission, little more than a bibliography. Steele, who might have told us more than any man about his boyhood and his manner of life in London, had become estranged from his old friend

before his death. No writer has taken the trouble to preserve any account of the wit and wisdom that enlivened the "little senate" at Button's. His own letters are, as a rule, compositions as finished as his papers in the *Spectator*. Those features in his character which excite the greatest interest have been delineated by the hand of an enemy—an enemy who possessed an unrivalled power of satirical portrait-painting, and was restrained by no regard for truth from creating in the public mind such impressions about others as might serve to heighten the favourable opinion of himself.

This absence of dramatic incident in Addison's life would lead us naturally to conclude that he was deficient in the energy and passion which cause a powerful nature to leave a mark upon its age. Yet such a judgment would certainly be erroneous. Shy and reserved as he was, the unanimous verdict of his most illustrious contemporaries is decisive as to the respect and admiration which he excited among them. The man who could exert so potent an influence over the mercurial Steele; who could fascinate the haughty and cynical intellect of Swift; whose conversation, by the admission of his satirist Pope, had in it something more charming than that of any other man; of whom it was said that he might have been chosen king if he wished it; such a man, though to the coarse perception of Mandeville he might have seemed no more than "a parson in a tye-wig," can hardly have been deficient in force of character.

Nor would it have been possible for a writer distinguished by mere elegance and refinement to leave a lasting impress on the literature and society of his country. In one generation after another men, repre-

senting opposing elements of rank, class, interest, and taste, have agreed in acknowledging Addison's extraordinary merits. "Whoever wishes," says Johnson—at the end of a biography strongly coloured with the prepossessions of a semi-Jacobite Tory—"whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison." "Such a mark of national respect," says Macaulay, the best representative of middle-class opinion in the present century, speaking of the statue erected to Addison in Westminster Abbey, "was due to the unsullied statesman, to the accomplished scholar, to the master of pure English eloquence, to the consummate painter of life and manners. It was due, above all, to the great satirist who alone knew how to use ridicule without abusing it; who, without inflicting a wound, effected a great social reform, and who reconciled wit and virtue, after a long and disastrous separation, during which wit had been led astray by profligacy and virtue by fanaticism."

This verdict of a great critic is accepted by an age to which the grounds of it are perhaps not very apparent. The author of any ideal creation—a poem, a drama, or a novel—has an imprescriptible property in the fame of his work. But to harmonise conflicting social elements, to bring order out of chaos in the sphere of criticism, to form right ways of thinking about questions of morals, taste, and breeding, are operations of which the credit, though it is certainly to be ascribed to particular individuals, is generally absorbed by society itself. Macaulay's eulogy is as just as it is eloquent, but the pages of the *Spectator* alone will hardly show the reader