

**LETTERS FROM RALPH
WALDO EMERSON TO
A FRIEND, 1838-1853**

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Letters from Ralph Waldo Emerson to a Friend, 1838-1853 by Ralph Waldo Emerson & Charles Eliot Norton

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RALPH WALDO EMERSON & CHARLES ELIOT NORTON

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By Ralph Waldo Emerson.

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1838-1853

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CHARLES ELIOT NORTON

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INTRODUCTION

THE letters and fragments of letters here printed are part of the early records of a friendship which, beginning when Emerson was thirty years old, lasted unbroken and cordial till his death. In his well-known essay, Emerson has set forth his conception of friendship in what, with no derogatory intention, he called "fine lyric words," and his idealizing genius is nowhere more manifest than in his depicting of it. For its perfection it must be free from the limitations inevitable in all human relations. It was never to be completely realized. "We walk alone in this world," he says;

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"friends such as we desire are dreams and fables." But though the ideal was not to be attained, he prized, as few men have prized, the blessing of such imperfect friendship as the artificial order of society and the weakness of human nature allow to exist, and rejoiced in it as the symbol, at least, of that select and sacred relation between one soul and another "which even leaves the language of love suspicious and common, so much is this purer, and nothing is so much divine."

It is thus that his letters to his friends may show Emerson in a clearer mirror even than his poems and his essays. They are at times his most intimate expressions, the most vivid illustrations of his essential individuality, an individuality so complete and absolute as to dis-

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tinguish him from all other men in his generation, and to give him place with the few of all time who have had native force sufficient to enable them to be truly themselves, and to show to their brother men the virtue of an independent spirit.

The friend to whom the letters in this little volume were addressed was younger than Emerson by nine years. At the beginning of their friendship he had lately returned from Europe, where he had spent a year and a half under fortunate conditions. Europe was then far more distant from New England than it is to-day, and more was to be gained from a visit to it. The youth had brought back from the Old World much of which Emerson, with his lively interest in all things of the intelligence, was curious

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and eager to learn. His own genius was never more active or vigorous, and his young friend's enthusiasm was roused by the spirit of Emerson's teaching as expressed in the famous Phi Beta Kappa discourse in 1837, the lectures on Culture, delivered in Boston in the winter of 1838, and the address before the Cambridge Divinity School in July of the same year. He did not fall into the position of a disciple seeking from Emerson a solution of the problems of life; but he brought to Emerson the highest appreciation of the things which Emerson valued, and knowledge of other things of which Emerson knew little but for which he cared much. He possessed, moreover, the practical qualities and the acquaintance with affairs in which Emerson was fortunately deficient,