

# On An Essay and Two Men Also

By Boniface Tor

ONE who has run the gauntlet of English courses at the University of the Philippines, and is now upon the staff of a local daily, (but not, I am glad to say, for good), being once seized with what he fancied to be an inspiration to write what he imagined to be an essay, did it, and having done it, hied away to another whom he had long known to be a bit off on that particular subject—essay-writing. He repaired to the other, as official endorsements say, for comment and criticism. The result of the interview is soon told: No. 2 bit No. 1 with his madness, and for the space of a fortnight, both talked, ate, drank and dreamt nothing but essays. They discoursed enthusiastically and at large of the personal element in essays, and how no other form of literature is so thoroughly English, and so wholly lends itself to the cultivation of style; they expatiated on the different kinds of style and even went so far as to attempt to classify all styles under two heads: (1) the *plain*, such as Swift, Addison, Steele, De Foe, Hazlitt, Meynell, Thackeray, and Johnson in his talk, all habitually employed with force or fitness, with wit or grace; and (2) the *rich*, such as Elia preferred, and Goldsmith, and De Quincey, Thompson, Ruskin, Alexander Smith, Stevenson, and Johnson in the *Rambler*, wielding it with equal force and fitness, with no less wit and grace.

The two *dilettanti*, in fine, not merely sought to write essays—not forgetting how Sir Edmund Gosse had described the writing of them as 'the gente art'—but actually lived after the fashion of consistent essayists (if such beings could be), roving east and roving west,

roaming far afield amidst all sorts and conditions of men and matters,—of life and letters,—and grazing in the pastures of human wit and learning.

One of them thought Montaigne the originator of the form; and, reading from out the *Essais*, bade the other mark well what he heard, for nowhere, either before or since, would he find such perfect frankness, such hearty, fine, engaging frankness. But his companion thought the form much older, and, after pointing out one or two passages in Chaucer—whom, by the way, the first one did not know to have written any prose, much less an essay—he turned to certain translations from the Greek (for they were; neither of them, read in the original classics, being mere *dilettanti*, and young and unconscionably lazy) of one known to posterity,—or at least to that considerable portion thereof which communicates in what is called "English", which runs through the whole gamut, from the precocity of the Decadents, through honest, homespun John Bull, and dialectal Scots, Irish, Australian, Canadian, and so-called American, down to plumb talkee-talkee in its various shapes, such as pidgin English, bamboo English, carabao English, *und so weiter*,—he turned, then, to an English translation of the original Greek of one known to this heterogeneous posterity by the inscrutable initials, "T.T." The other was naturally taken aback by a cast so far into the past, but he was also delighted to learn that the Essay belonged to such an ancient line, and upon being asked, willingly granted without stopping to think twice (for he had been struck with a bright thought), that he had been hasty in believing that a finished Art

like Essay-writing could be in its callow two hundred and fiftieth year or so. It was simple of him to be taken in by the Montaigne story!

"And yet," he added, after pausing a bit, "I am not at all ashamed of such simplicity, so but I be of dear old Noll's ilk. You remember how they used to say of him, that he wrote like an angel and talked like poor Poll. But do you think Boswell conceived of him aright, who could say to the burly Doctor, 'If you were describing little fishes, Dr. Johnson, you would make the little fishes talk like whales.' Of all the wise and witty remarks that have been made to my knowledge about the great lexicographer, this seems to me at once the simplest and the best. Simplicity, then, far from laying one open to ridicule, makes rather an excellent foil for genuine wit. Consider that other charmingly simple figure in Literature, La Fontaine, who on one occasion at a theatre . . . ." Here he launched forth upon a sea of anecdote, and very nearly drowned in it, too, but that the other took him up in the very nick of time with an anecdote about Mr. Shaw and Mr. Galsworthy, which he made up out of his own head on the spur of the moment, neatly finishing it off with a quotation from Pope. But he had not got to the middle of the fifth line, when his companion, regaining his breath, cut him short with a couplet from Dryden; whereupon the two fell to capping verses, Scotch proverbs, nonsense rhymes, hoary Latin saws, geometric axioms, book titles, and what not—all with immense gusto.

Thus they spent the livelong, garrulous day, calling up the shades of the past and the wraiths of the present, and pointing out one little forgotten beauty of character or circumstance after another; and, as Night came down upon them, and brushed their shoulders with her sable wings, they parted company, solemnly swearing—as many a noble pair had done before them since that Golden Age when heroes walked abroad — swearing upon their four clasped hands, that for the two of them, the Shades and Spirits of the Past should haunt the woods and towns forevermore.

And so they parted, walking on air. They felt within their veins that ichor which the gods of olden Hellas must have felt when keenest bent upon some mad Olympian escapade. He who had survived the English courses at the U. P., poured out a libation of Dedicated Ink to Pallas Athene, and vowed his fresh young (but married) life to Essay-writing. He who had hitherto been a bit off on the subject, sped homewards all but wholly off, going more and more off with every step. "I shall fly through life", he announced to the stolid Moon, "a Mercury or messenger of the gods that cannot be, and my heels shall be winged with the fly-leaves of a book of essays which no one yet has ever dreamed of, and no one ever will, and whose title shall be 'Nothing' and whose subject 'Everything'."

Thus they parted, raving far into the night, until Morpheus mercifully drew his inky veil about them, and wrapt them up in dreams.