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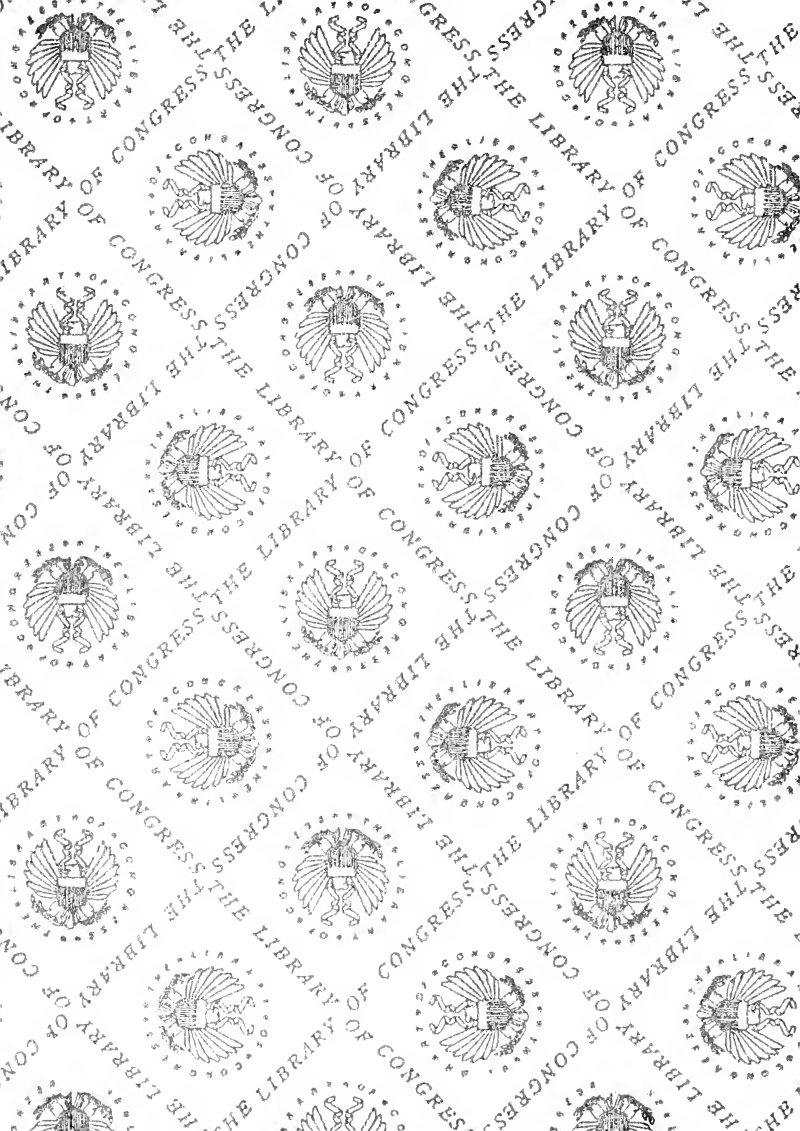
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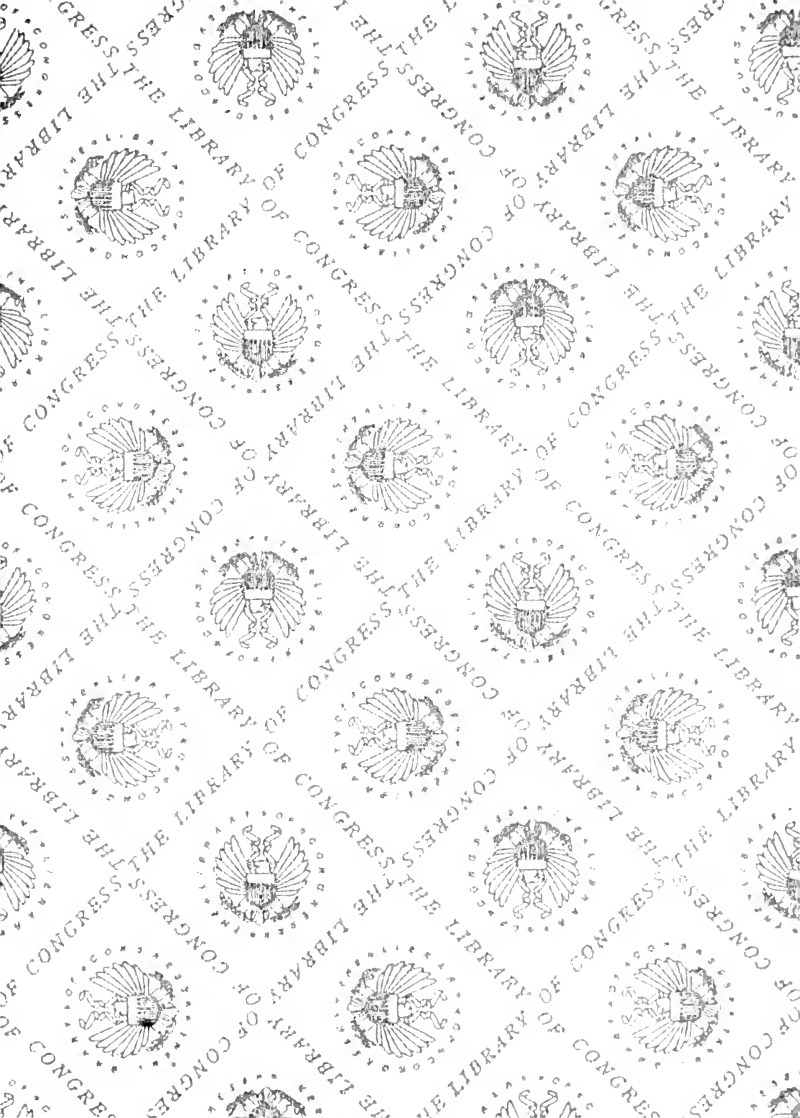
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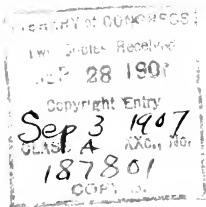
John Milton

ODE ON THE MORNING
OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY
BY JOHN MILTON ❀ ❀

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
WALTER TAYLOR FIELD



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MILTON IN THE NATIVITY ODE

IN Milton we find two personalities interfused and blended into one. He is, first, the courtly gentleman, the accomplished musician, the elegant scholar, the warm-hearted friend of Charles Diodati and Edward King; again, he is the great unfathomable one, the preacher of morality, the apostle of liberty, the searcher of Divine mysteries. There is a wide difference between the poet of *Comus* and the prophet of *Paradise Lost*, yet in each are the two natures. The growing preponderance of the sterner qualities was due partly to an evolution of character under the stress of bitter personal experiences,—loss of sight, loss of fortune, loss of position and influence,—but, more than this, to the growing spirit of religious austerity which marked the seventeenth century in England and which culminated in Cromwell and the Commonwealth.

Standing historically between the Elizabethan era and the Puritan Reformation, he showed the

influence of both,—his earlier work having more of brightness, his later more of cold sublimity. Like a tall cathedral spire at sunset, we see him on the one side glorified by the light of a fading day, on the other wrapped in the shadows.

For many years it was the Puritan Milton who was known in literature. He was considered only as the poet of *Paradise Lost*,—lofty, majestic, far-seeing, profound, clothed in the mantle of philosophy, moving like a seer along the highway of his verse. But more recently attention has been attracted to his Elizabethan qualities, not only in the *Paradise Lost* but particularly in his so-called minor poems—which are minor only in respect to size, and which include *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, that superb pair of lyrics; *Comus*, the peerless masque; *Lycidas*, the elegy which unites delicacy with passion; and the *Ode on the Nativity*, with its burst of pure religious ecstasy.

Of them all, the *Ode on the Nativity* is perhaps the least read and yet the most truly representative. It lacks the flawless elegance of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, the lightness of *Comus* and the intensity of *Lycidas*, but it shows, more than any other poem of Milton's, I believe, the

two sides of his genius. It is joyous and yet earnest; bright and yet full of a stately dignity which is a prophecy of the grandeur of *Paradise Lost*.

Its faults were those which were bequeathed to its author by a former generation,—by Donne and others of his school, who were the popular poets of Milton's earlier years. A few strained metaphors and overwrought comparisons mark this influence, but the strength, the vigor, the polish, the sincerity of it, were new in English literature and announced the advent of a poet of heroic mould.

Milton wrote the *Ode* while in college at Cambridge. Prior to this he had produced a few unimportant poems, metrical versions of two of the *Psalms* composed at fifteen, a few creditable Latin elegies and several ordinary pieces of English verse. On the Christmas morning of his twenty-first year, however, inspired by the sweet significance of the day and filled with the spirit of peace and joy with which it has touched so many hearts, he launched into this first of his real flights of song. His sixth Latin epistle, written soon after to Charles Diodati, describes the cir-

cumstance. He says: "But if you will know what I am doing, . . . I am singing the King of Heaven, bringer of peace, and the fortunate days promised by the Holy Book, the wanderings of God and the stabling under a poor roof of Him who rules with his Father the realms above; the star that led the wizards, the hymning of angels in the air and the gods flying to their endangered fanes. This poem I made as a birthday gift for Christ; the first light of Christmas dawn brought me the theme."

Its burden is Peace on Earth. No sound of war breaks the stillness of the holy night. The shepherds, talking together as they watch their flocks, are suddenly greeted with such music as was never heard before save when the sons of morning sang together in the dawn of the Creation. Cherubim and seraphim with outstretched wings, a radiant circle in the heavens, strike their harps in honor of their new-born Lord. The ancient gods have lost their power; the oracles are dumb; the nymphs have left the haunted springs; the priests and flamens see strange prodigies before the altars. In vain they call upon their pagan deities, the Babe of Bethlehem has

conquered them. But the mother lays the Holy Child to rest while the youngest star of heaven holds her lamp above him, and angels surround the manger where he lies.

Such is the argument,—a simple theme, and yet clothed with a beauty of phrase and imagery which gives it singular distinction. It is this elaboration of detail, together with an essential dignity of movement and musical cadence that designate the Miltonic touch. The ornament is not confined to happy phraseology; it embraces a wealth of allusion, a breadth of knowledge, a suggestiveness that appeal particularly to the scholar. Few other poets have been able to put so much into a phrase. "I like Milton and Butler," said Dr. Johnson, once, to Boswell, "because they make me think." This thought stimulus together with a rare classical influence makes the reading of Milton an education. Says Matthew Arnold: "In our race are thousands of readers, presently there will be millions, who do not know a word of Greek and Latin, and will never learn those languages. If this host of readers are ever to gain any sense of the power and charm of the great poets of antiquity, their way to gain it is not

through translations of the ancients, but through the original poetry of Milton, who has the like power and charm, because he has the like great style.'

But perhaps the most remarkable quality of Milton's verse is its melody. We do not need to be told that he was an accomplished musician, and that his father was a musician before him. His verse shows the musical ear. It has in it a subtle power which is akin to magic. We need not try to analyze it, for it eludes analysis; but we cannot fail to be moved by it. Children are moved by it, not knowing what it means. Those majestic Alexandrines, which make the last line of each stanza in the Ode, were in form borrowed from Spenser, from whom Milton in his earlier poems borrowed much,—but there is something in them distinctly Miltonic. Then, too, they suggest so much. We feel the solemnity and the mystery of the Incarnation in that line,

“And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.”

We feel the peace of the new era of love and good will in the phrase,

“While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmèd wave.”

We feel the majesty of Omnipotence in the words,

“And bid the weltering waves their oozy channel keep.”

Even the names of the pagan gods, in the twenty-second and succeeding stanzas, roll out with a largeness that commands respect.

It must not be thought that this music and this beauty came to Milton as an inspiration. His work was not that of an improvisatore, but of a painstaking and consummate artist. Every word was chosen and every phrase polished. A manuscript of his in the library of Christ's College, Cambridge, shows erasures and recastings which proves the efficacy of careful work as opposed to slipshod rhapsodizing.

But, after all, the greatness of Milton's verse is not in its haunting melody, nor in its beauty of phrase, nor in its intellectuality. It arises out of the greatness of the poet himself. In it we see Milton the patriot, the reformer, the idealist, the high-minded Christian, the stainless hero; his individuality is stamped upon every line that he ever wrote. “He who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things,” he says quaintly, in the Apology for Smectym-

nuus, "ought himself be a true poem." This is the secret of the vitality of Milton's work. It is vivified and ennobled by the character which shines out through it.

The traveler may climb today the narrow staircase which leads to Milton's quarters at Christ's, Cambridge,—may stand in the little room in which the Ode on the Nativity was begun on that Christmas morning nearly three hundred years ago, may look out of the window and see the roofs and turrets and bit of lawn which Milton saw,—all these are suggestive of the tangible presence of a great poet,—but to know Milton and to realize the greatness of his work, one must look farther than mere externals; he must have a spiritual insight which will let him look deeply, a sympathy with the scholar's life which will let him look appreciatively, a pure heart which will let him look clearly. A sincere admiration for Milton is the touchstone of character. If one can take this great soul into his own, he may feel that he is in some sense, himself, above the little-nesses of life.

WALTER TAYLOR FIELD

ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY

(COMPOSED 1629)

I

HIS is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heaven's eternal King,
Of wedded maid and virgin mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

II

That glorious form, that light unsufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of majesty,
Wherewith he wont at Heaven's high council-table

To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
He laid aside, and, here with us to be,
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal
clay.

III

Say, Heavenly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein
Afford a present to the Infant God?
Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,
To welcome him to this his new abode,
Now while the heaven, by the Sun's team untrod,
Hath took no print of the approaching light,
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons
bright?

IV

See how from far upon the eastern road
The star-led wizards haste with odours sweet!
Oh! run; prevent them with thy humble ode,

And lay it lowly at his blessed feet ;
Have thou the honour first thy Lord to greet,
 And join thy voice unto the Angel Quire,
From out his secret altar touched with hallowed fire.

THE HYMN

I

It was the winter wild,
While the heaven-born child
All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies;
Nature, in awe to him,
Had doffed her gaudy trim,
With her great Master so to sympathize :
It was no season then for her
To wanton with the Sun, her lusty paramour.

II

Only with speeches fair
She woos the gentle air
To hide her guilty front with innocent snow,
And on her naked shame,
Pollute with sinful blame,
The saintly veil of maiden white to throw ;
Confounded, that her Maker's eyes
Should look so near upon her foul deformities.

III

But he, her fears to cease,
Sent down the meek-eyed Peace:
She, crowned with olive green, came softly sliding
Down through the turning sphere,
His ready harbinger,
With turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing;
And waving wide her myrtle wand,
She strikes a universal peace through sea and
land.

IV

No war, or battle's sound,
Was heard the world around;
The idle spear and shield were high uphung;
The hookèd chariot stood
Unstained with hostile blood;
The trumpet spake not to the armèd throng;
And kings sat still with awful eye,
As if they surely knew their sovran Lord was by.

V

But peaceful was the night
Wherein the Prince of Light
His reign of peace upon the earth began.
The winds, with wonder whist,
Smoothly the waters kissed,
Whispering new joys to the mild Ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmèd
wave.

VI

The stars, with deep amaze,
Stand fixed in steadfast gaze,
Bending one way their precious influence,
And will not take their flight,
For all the morning light,
Or Lucifer that often warned them thence;
But in their glimmering orbs did glow,
Until their Lord himself bespake and bid them go.

VII

And, though the shady gloom
Had given day her room,
The Sun himself withheld his wonted speed,
And hid his head for shame,
As his inferior flame

The new-enlightened world no more should need:
He saw a greater Sun appear
Than his bright throne or burning axletree could
bear.

VIII

The shepherds on the lawn,
Or ere the point of dawn,
Sat simply chatting in a rustic row ;
Full little thought they than
That the mighty Pan

Was kindly come to live with them below :
Perhaps their loves, or else their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts so busy keep.

IX

When such music sweet
Their hearts and ears did greet
As never was by mortal finger strook,
Divinely-warbled voice
Answering the stringèd noise,
As all their souls in blissful rapture took:
The air, such pleasure loth to lose,
With thousand echoes still prolongs each heavenly
close.

X

Nature, that heard such sound
Beneath the hollow round
Of Cynthia's seat the airy region thrilling,
Now was almost won
To think her part was done,
And that her reign had here its last fulfilling:
She knew such harmony alone
Could hold all Heaven and Earth in happier union.

XI

At last surrounds their sight
 A globe of circular light,
 That with long beams the shamefaced Night ar-
 rayed;
 The helmèd cherubim
 And sworded seraphim
 Are seen in glittering ranks with wings displayed,
 Harping in loud and solemn quire,
 With unexpressive notes, to Heaven's new-born
 Heir.

XII

Such music (as 'tis said)
 Before was never made,
 But when of old the Sons of Morning sung,
 While the Creator great
 His constellations set,
 And the well-balanced World on hinges hung,
 And cast the dark foundations deep,
 And bid the weltering waves their oozy channel
 keep.

XIII

Ring out, ye crystal spheres!
Once bless our human ears,
If ye have power to touch our senses so;
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time;
And let the bass of heaven's deep organ blow;
And with your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort to the angelic symphony.

XIV

For, if such holy song
Enwrap our fancy long,
Time will run back and fetch the Age of Gold;
And speckled Vanity
Will sicken soon and die,
And leprous Sin will melt from earthly mould;
And Hell itself will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering
day.

XV

Yea, Truth and Justice then
 Will down return to men,
 Orbed in a rainbow; and, like glories wearing,
 Mercy will sit between,
 Throned in celestial sheen,
 With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering;
 And Heaven, as at some festival,
 Will open wide the gates of her high palace hall

XVI

But wisest Fate says No,
 This must not yet be so;
 The Babe lies yet in smiling infancy
 That on the bitter cross
 Must redeem our loss,
 So both himself and us to glorify:
 Yet first, to those ychained in sleep,
 The wakeful trump of doom must thunder through
 the deep,

XVII

With such a horrid clang
As on Mount Sinai rang,
While the red fire and smouldering clouds out-
brake :
The aged Earth, aghast
With terror of that blast,
Shall from the surface to the centre shake,
When, at the world's last session,
The dreadful Judge in middle air shall spread his
throne.

XVIII

And then at last our bliss
Full and perfect is,
But now begins; for from this happy day
The Old Dragon under ground,
In straiter limits bound,
Not half so far casts his usurpèd sway,
And, wroth to see his kingdom fail,
Swinges the scaly horror of his folded tail.

XIX

The Oracles are dumb;
No voice or hideous hum
Runs through the archèd roof in words deceiving.
Apollo from his shrine
Can no more divine,
With hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving.
No nightly trance, or breathèd spell,
Inspires the pale-eyed priest from the prophetic cell.

XX

The lonely mountains o'er,
And the resounding shore,
A voice of weeping heard and loud lament;
From haunted spring, and dale
Edged with poplar pale,
The parting Genius is with sighing sent;
With flower-inwoven tresses torn
The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets
mourn.

XXI

In consecrated earth,
 And on the holy hearth,
 The Lars and Lemures moan with midnight plaint;
 In urns, and altars round,
 A drear and dying sound
 Affrights the flamens at their service quaint;
 And the chill marble seems to sweat,
 While each peculiar power forgoes his wonted seat.

XXII

Peor and Baalim
 Forsake their temples dim,
 With that twice-battered god of Palestine;
 And moonèd Ashtaroth,
 Heaven's queen and mother both,
 Now sits not girt with tapers' holy shine:
 The Lybic Hammon shrinks his horn;
 In vain the Tyrian maids their wounded Thammuz
 mourn.

XXIII

And sullen Moloch, fled,
Hath left in shadows dread
His burning idol all of blackest hue ;
In vain with cymbals' ring
They call the grisly king,
In dismal dance about the furnace blue ;
The brutish gods of Nile as fast,
Isis, and Orus, and the dog Anubis, haste.

XXIV

Nor is Osiris seen
In Memphian grove or green,
Trampling the unshowered grass with lowings
loud ;
Nor can he be at rest
Within his sacred chest ;
Nought but profoundest Hell can be his shroud ;
In vain, with timbreled anthems dark,
The sable-stolèd sorcerers bear his worshiped ark.

XXV

He feels from Juda's land
The dreaded Infant's hand ;
The rays of Bethlehem blind his dusky eyn ;
Nor all the gods beside
Longer dare abide,
Not Typhon huge ending in snaky twine :
Our Babe, to show his Godhead true,
Can in his swaddling bands control the damnèd
crew.

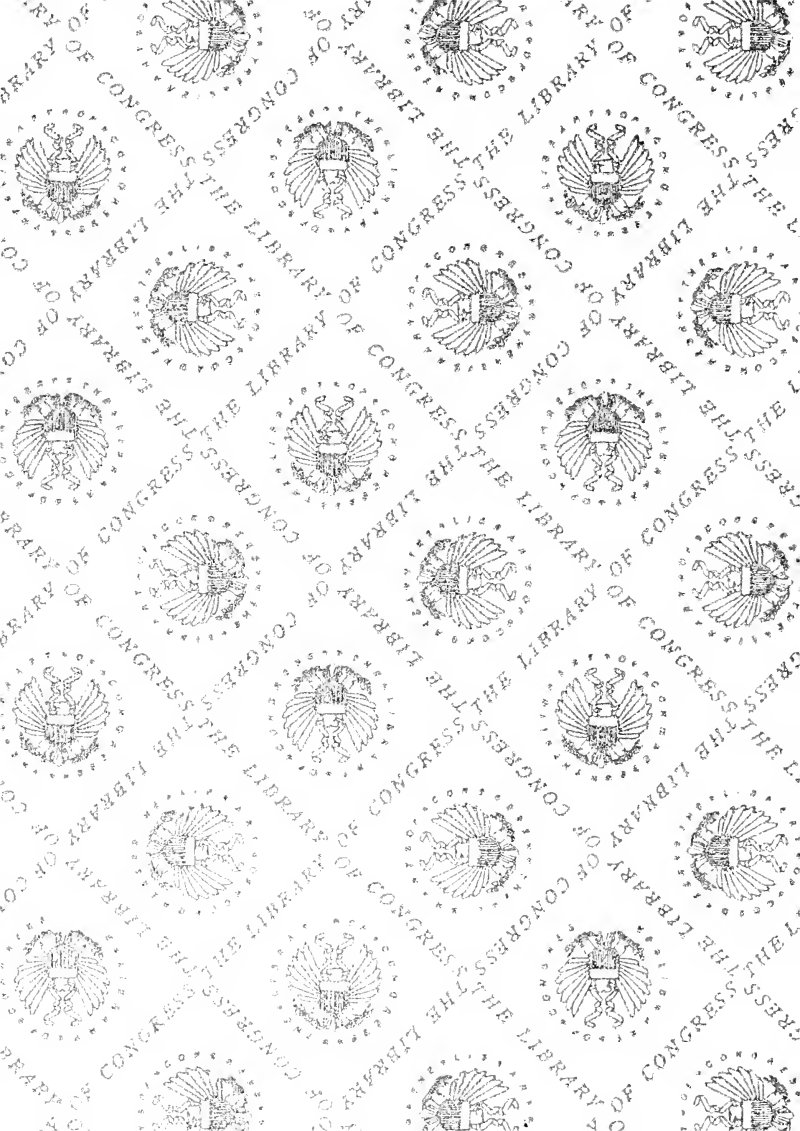
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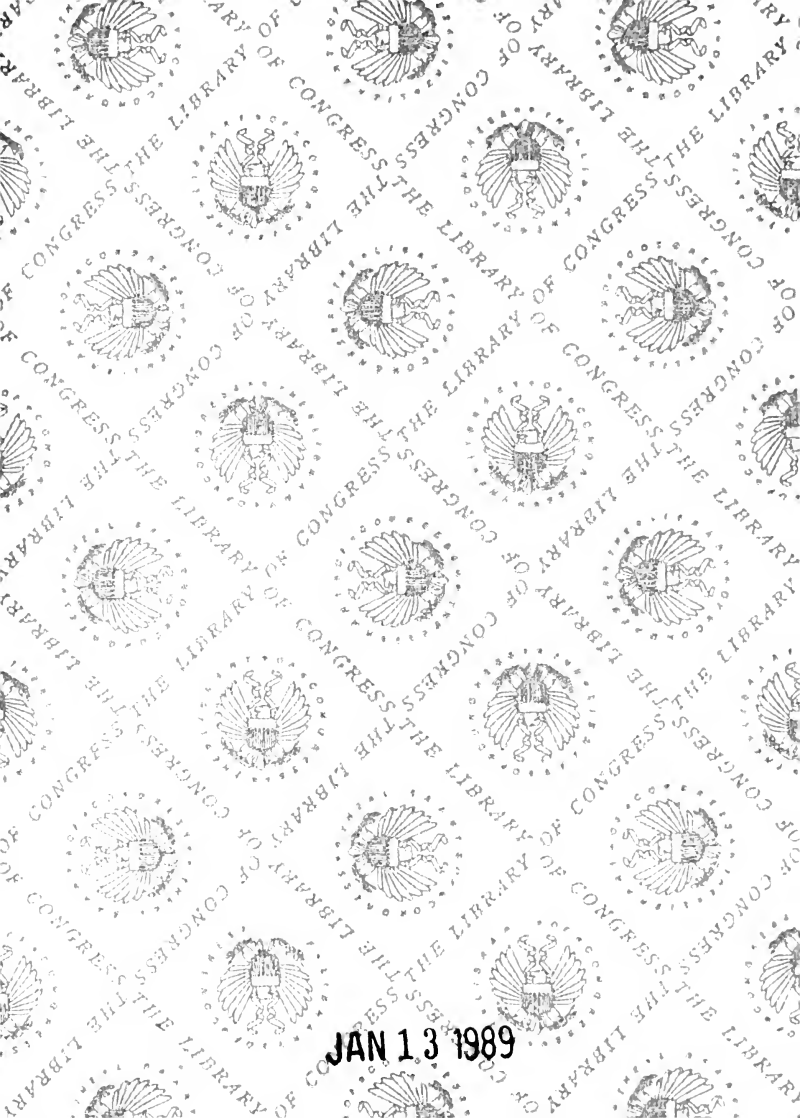
So, when the sun in bed,
Curtained with cloudy red,
Pillows his chin upon an orient wave,
The flocking shadows pale
Troop to the infernal jail,
Each fettered ghost slips to his several grave,
And the yellow-skirted fays
Fly after the night-steeds, leaving their moon-loved
maze.

XXVII

But see! the Virgin blest
Hath laid her Babe to rest.
Time is our tedious song should here have ending:
Heaven's youngest-teemèd star
Hath fixed her polished car,
Her sleeping Lord with handmaid lamp attending;
And all about the courtly stable
Bright-harnessed Angels sit in order serviceable.

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