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A P O E M
O F T H E O L D E N T I M E

Describing a ball at Cambridge, Mass.
in the year 1840

Written by

MISS ANN G. STORROW

Read by Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson at the annual meeting of the Omar Khayyam Club of America, Saturday, March 28, 1908, at the Algonquin Club, Boston, Mass. The original verses were addressed by the reader's aunt to his cousin and Harvard classmate, William Farley Storrow, who had just gone back to his Virginia home. The dance was given at Mrs. Higginson's house, until recently standing in the Radcliffe College grounds.

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29 BUCKINGHAM ST.,
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

APRIL 17, 1908.

DEAR MR. BURRAGE,—

Thank you heartily for your note and proposal for printing those verses of my dear old aunt's. I had always thought it likely that the Cambridge Historical Society might print them sooner or later but I should like your plan much better. I have already got them into shape which will cover the omissions, here and there, except four lines which can be left out entirely. I will also write explanatory notes indicating who the different people are, so far as I can, which will make it the more interesting. I shall not make the notes conspicuous, but so as to enhance the interest to all.

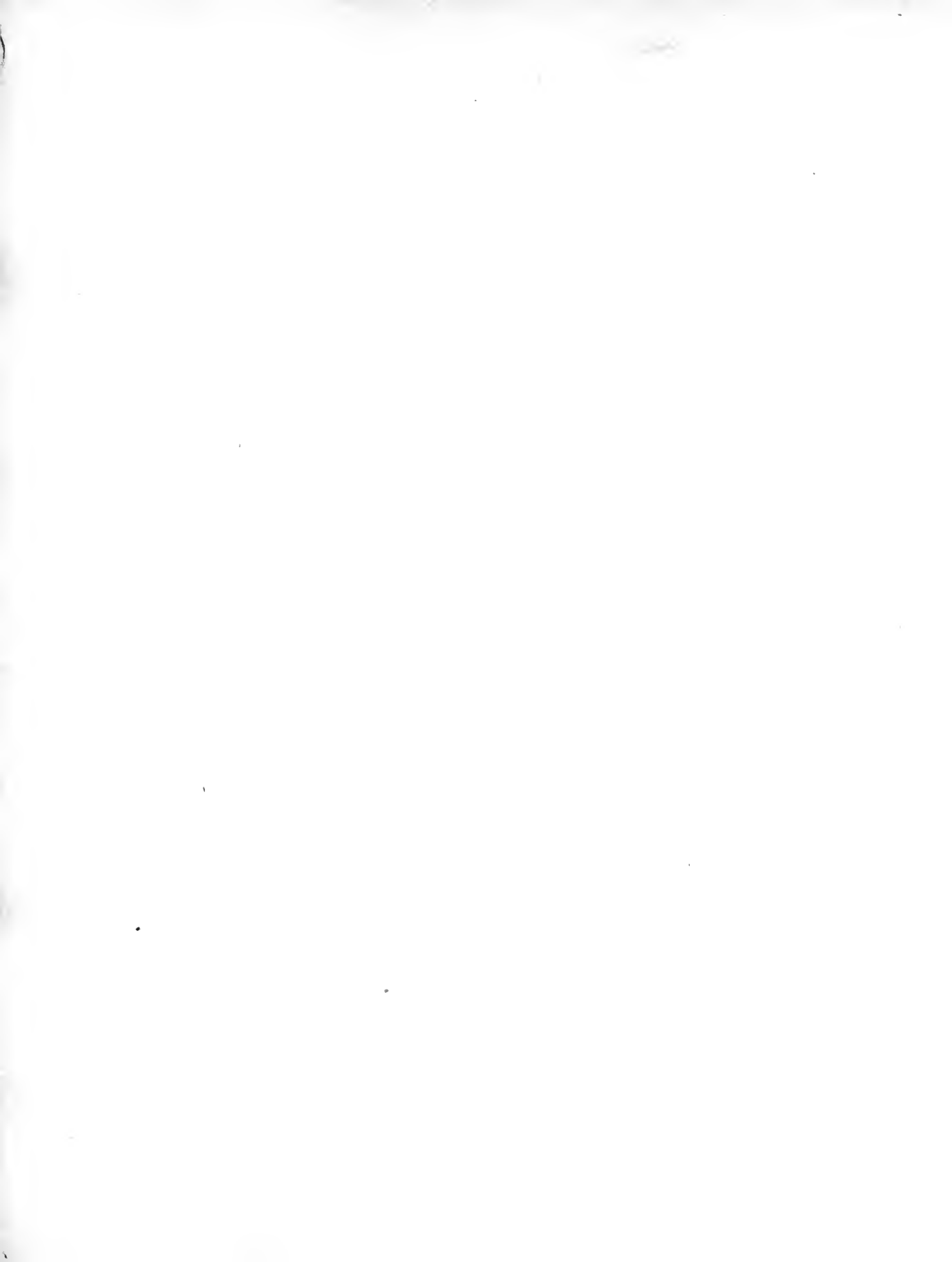
Cordially yours,

THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON.

Dear Farley—though twenty young writers will all
Send posting to you an account of the ball
Yet you will not object, I am sure, to get mine
Just to tell you again 'twas prodigiously fine—
Some time was consumed in arranging the guests
And the catalogue studied to know which was best
Of all the distingués whom Cambridge can boast
And th' upshot of the matter was taking a host.
So the notes were despatched—Foster, Williams and Law
And fifty fine beaux whom I never yet saw—
Brother Griggs, Mr. Gray, and the Devenses both
John Ware, Mr. Coolidge, and Douglas not loth,
(Though somewhat too lothely to shine at a ball)
No matter for that—take one and take all—
Rufus King, Mr. Aspinwall, graceful Kirk Boott,
John Holmes and Frank Minot, so stiff and so mute,
Mr. Peirce, Mr. Felton, and Loverings were here
And a few other beaux who will shortly appear—
Our own three divine ones—how rich and how proud
Were we when we singled them out from the crowd.
They are beauties, you know, dear, but each in his way
But more of that matter I'll think not to say.
Mr. Robinson came, to the pleasure of all,
For the ladies all thought he embellished the ball.
Mr. Roubieu was not in the humour to come
So at least for that evening he tarried at home.



For the ladies,—Miss Fosters and Rices and Ware
(Miss Quincys sent answer they could not appear)
Miss Rogers, Miss Wellses, and Adams and Fay
Miss Watson, Miss Treadwell, and now shall I say
Who pleased me the most, when they all were so fair
Twas sweet Mary Devens of beauty most rare
So graceful and modest, so joyous and bright
The beauty itself gives me far less delight
Than the beautiful union of all that could move
The heart to delight in, the fancy to love—
Well—that's 'tween ourselves—who came next—let me see
The Channings from Boston, and Higginsons three,
Besides Charley and Johnny, and shall I forget
The sweetest of brides, the loveliest pet
That ever made sunshine in a showery day
The fair Mary Greenleaf, as lovely as May—
Helen Davis was brilliant, and “pleasant as a bird”
When after long winter its voice may be heard
And Margaret, arrayed in white muslin, was seen
As graceful as fairy that trips o'er the green.
Mary Howe, the magnificent, Mr. McKean
(I put them together, because they were seen
In pretty close contact—no matter for that
They both understand very well ‘what is what’)
The morning was glorious in sunshine and smiles
And dire was the bustle and business the while



The filling of lamps and the cutting of cake
And all the nice morsels important to make
An imposing appearance and tempt all the party
If they so were inclined, to eat supper quite hearty
Mary Howe came in early to make Charlotte Russe
(And really 'twas made without any great fuss)
And ham from Virginia flourished in dishes—
And ginger in Canton proved true to the wishes
Of those who love sweet things, and who does not, pray?
But oysters, dear oysters, oh what shall I say
To tell how delightfully Ann had them cooked
And how finely they tasted—how elegant looked
And how soon disappeared—that was all very well,
But many more goodies of which I could tell
I shall leave to your fancy, and go to the Ball
Where dancing and merriment ruled each and all.
'Twas as gay an assembly as ever I saw
But the soul of mirth was the young Mr. Law;
He is wild as a bird just let loose from its cage
But he never was rude in his life, I'll engage.
His little feet twinkle so witchingly round
That he seems in the air to dance—not on the ground.
Thacher danced with Maria—made love by the yard
And then with Miss Story—and if right I read
He'll “get up a flirtation” to use his own word '
But the chain's not yet wrought that will bind that fair bird.

So they danced (Peter fiddled) and supper they ate
And they danced after that till it grew very late
And they knew they must go, but they hated the thought
For, unlike most seekers, they found what they sought
So Helen and Margaret and Kirk Boott sat down
To a nice little supper, when all the rest gone
We talked o'er the evening so pleasant and gay
And wished for the friend who was then far away
And surely your name was a thousand times said
And we thought it a shame that so far you had strayed.
But your triumph will come when "the Lomax" is here
And that time will be in the spring of the year
All else will be forgotten— thrice happy you'll be
When the fair "leaning Tower" shall bend toward thee
P. S. One thing, I forget, for my wit's not o'er bright
To speak of two fair ones who failed us that night
Alice Crabbe and her cousin, the gentle Miss T—
Were detained by the illness of boys, one, two, three.
"Aunt Julia" was sick too, and sorry we were
To see our gay prospects all melted in air
But Jemmy, Charles Henry, and Joseph 'gan cry
And the poor little ladies were forced to "stand by"
But Sam Todd was here, with his eyes shut so tight
'Twas whispered he'd watched on the foregoing night!
So Farewell, my dear Farley, you're tired I fancy
But long-winded has often been called your Aunt Nancy.



NOTE.

The above rhymes were written about the year 1840 by my Aunt Miss Ann G. Storrow of Cambridge who had largely the care of me in childhood, and who was, through her wit and gaiety, always a favorite in Cambridge and Boston society through a long life. Her later years were spent in Brattleboro, Vermont, where my eldest brother was a physician and where she fairly killed herself in old age by constant labors and exposure in the care of the Vermont soldiers during the civil war.

The scene of this dancing party which she describes was a house which still stands with a large elm tree before it and is now included in the grounds of Radcliffe College. It fronts on Cambridge Common and was built by my elder brother, Dr. Higginson, though it is now known as the Vaughn House because of a later occupant. My brother having removed elsewhere, my mother occupied it during all my college life.

It must be remembered that the dance occurred at a time when Mr. Justice Story had built up the Harvard Law School to an extent which seemed surprising at that day, and when the favorite social leaders among young men in Cambridge were the southern law students. Thus the three students first named were respectively from Alabama, Louisiana, and Georgia. Of those which follow, Griggs was from Brookline and was then librarian of the Law School; Gray was from Vermont; and the Devenses were both from Cambridge, the elder of these being afterward Major General Charles Devens, for whom statues are erected both in Boston and Worcester. Ware was the Rev. John F. W.

Ware, afterward a clergyman in Baltimore. Coolidge was the Rev. Dr. Coolidge, now a resident in Cambridge and the oldest living graduate of Harvard. Douglas was from Ohio; King was afterwards Chief Justice King of Ohio; Aspinwall was long known as one of the leading citizens of Brookline; Kirk Boott was then a resident of Cambridge and a great social favorite; John Holmes, the younger brother of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, was regarded by many as the more brilliant man of the two, and a full sketch of him will be found in my volume called "Contemporaries." Minot was afterward Dr. Francis Minot of Boston, eminent as a physician. Peirce, Felton, and Lovering were professors or tutors in college. The "Three divine ones"—every large family in the community at least contains as many as that—were my two elder brothers Waldo and Thacher and myself. Robinson was from Louisiana and was considered the most attractive of all the southerners, and Roubieu was from the same state.

The Misses Quincy were the president's daughters and the Miss Wellses the daughters of William Wells, a highly trained Englishman whose school Lowell and Story and myself attended. The Misses Adam were the daughters of Professor William Adam, teacher of Oriental literature, while Miss Fay was the lady from whom the so-called Fay House was afterward bought by Radcliffe College. The lovely and beloved maiden, Mary Devens, the younger sister of Gen. Devens, was the belle of Cambridge in those days. The "Charley and Johnny" were Dr. Charles E. Ware, afterwards well known, and John Holmes already mentioned. The fair Mary Greenleaf, justly described, was the younger sister of Professor Longfellow and spent all the later years of her life in the attractive house now opposite the new Radcliffe Library on Brattle Street, and

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used by the musical department. The Misses Helen and Margaret Davis were sisters of the elder Admiral Davis, the one noted for her delightful singing and the other for her graceful dancing. Mary Howe was a daughter of Judge Howe, and was distinguished for her striking appearance. The later verses describe vividly Mr. Law and his dancing. My elder brother, Thacher, one of the most joyous of men, and drowned at sea a few years after, danced with Maria Fay, our next door neighbor, and then with Miss Mary Story, daughter of the Judge and afterwards the wife of George Ticknor Curtis.

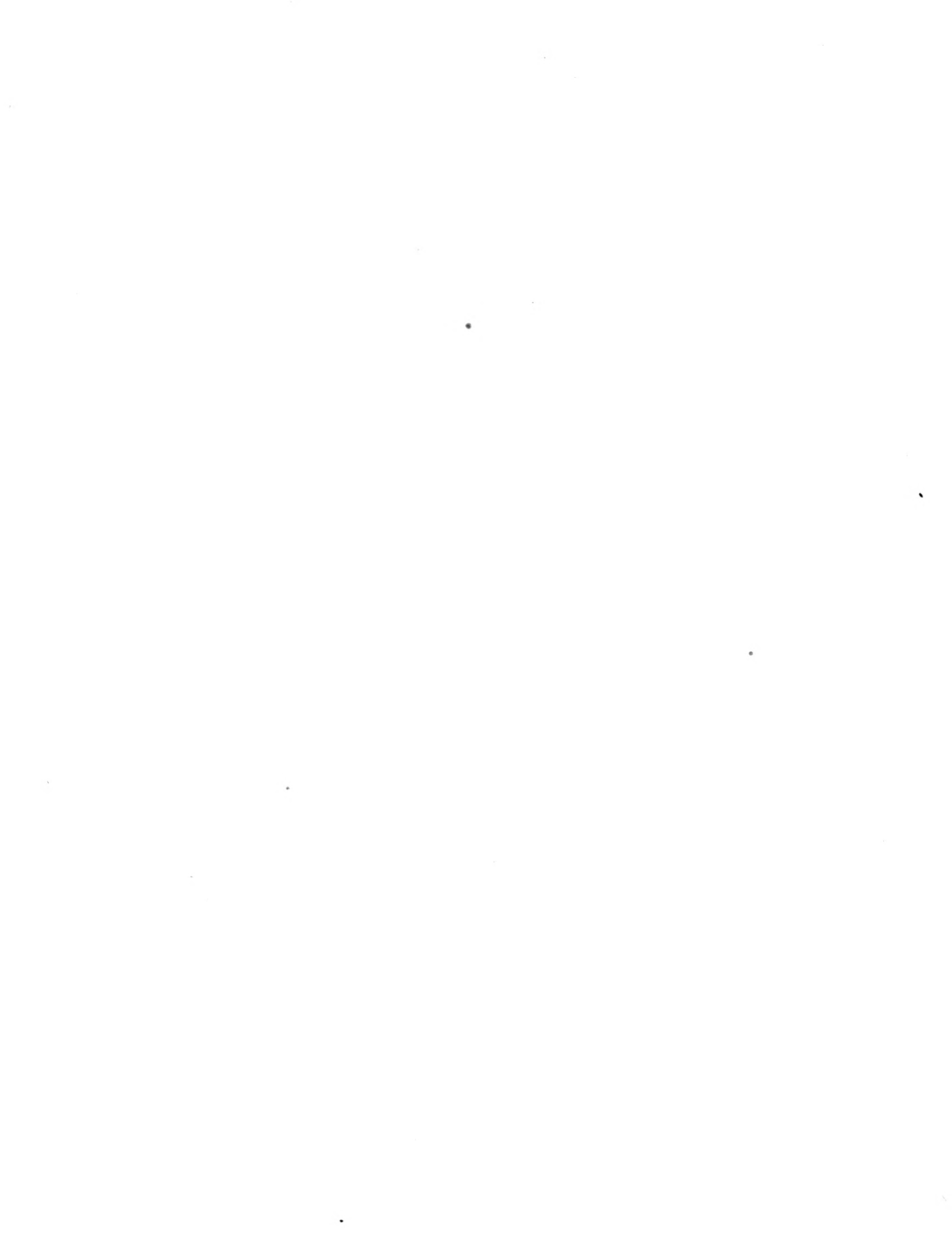
The three who talked over the evening were the two Misses Davis and Kirk Boott. The Lomaxes later mentioned were a Virginia family whose father, Major Lomax, was stationed about that time in the Watertown Arsenal and had as a visitor a young lady who charmed all Cambridge and with whom my ardent Virginia cousin, Farley Storrow—he to whom the verses were written—had had an especial flirtation. Miss Crabbe and Miss Todd were members of a large naval family, the latter being one of the children of Purser Todd, whose various experiences delighted us all for several years and made all schoolboys long to be midshipmen. These details will be without interest to the reader who has not detected the name of some kith or kin among those present at this dance, but they may be worth preserving through the possibility that some children of the young dancers may take an interest in the innocent frolics of those simpler days.

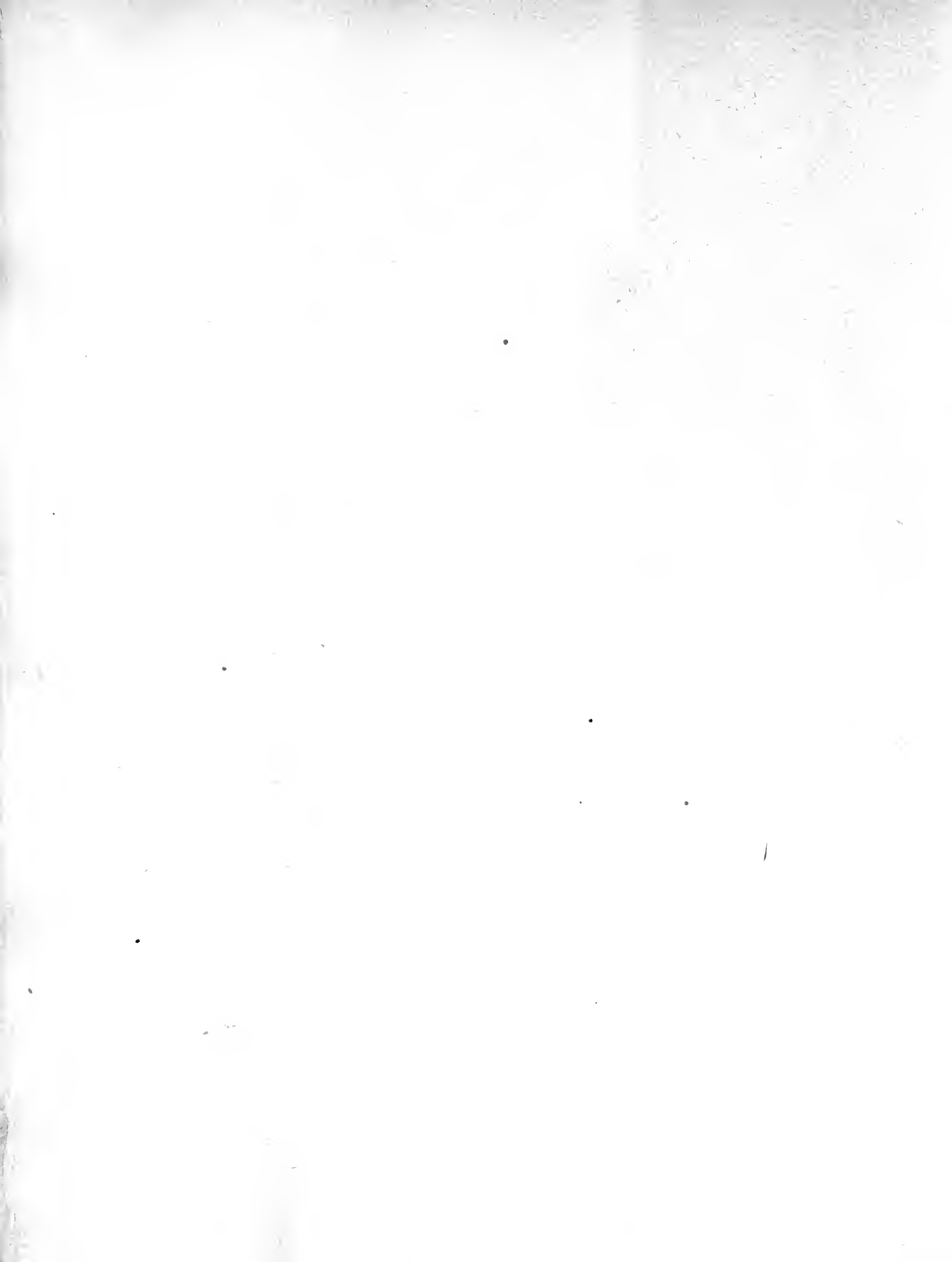


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