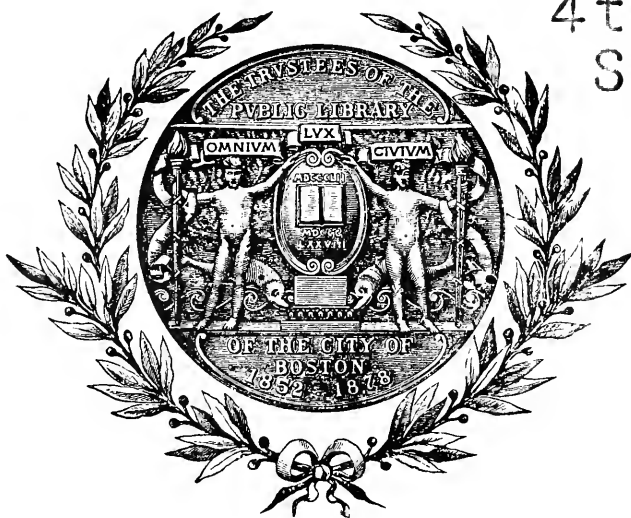


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THE
PUNISHMENT OF SIN.

BY
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AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,
BOSTON.

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“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.” — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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THE PUNISHMENT OF SIN.

My subject is the Punishment of Sin; in other words, the Ethical Sternness of our Unitarian Faith. "The Strict System and the Easy" were the terms in which the orthodox of half a century ago were agreed to set forth their system as against that of the protesting Unitarians. Theirs was the strict, the Unitarian was the easy, system. Was the distinction well made? Is the moral system of Unitarianism and of every form of reasonable faith an easy system? Does it leave morality without the sanctions necessary for its support? Does it make evil-doing a little matter in comparison with the sin of the traditional theology, the punishment of evil-doing so small a matter that it can have no appealing force for the imagination, no terrors for the weak and erring will?

I think we should do well to heed a challenge that is flung so often in our teeth. Woe to the preacher and the congregation of whom it can be truly said, "Behold, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one who hath a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument"! And the charges brought against us have not been absolutely groundless or unjust. No matter for the relative aspect of the case, — the possible retort that sin can be no such dreadful matter if a moment of repentance and the precipitation of one's self upon the merits of the atoning blood of Jesus can blot the record out. The fact remains that in our liberal churches the doctrines of the love of God and the divine forgiveness have often tended to obscure the laws of moral retribution. "God likes to forgive little

boys: that's what he's for," a budding Universalist is reported to have said, in justification of his latest peccadillo. There is as much liberal theology of a certain sort compressed in that as of charcoal in a diamond. "We must preach the doctrine of hatred," says Emerson, "when love pules and whines." No, not of hatred, but of "the terrible things in righteousness," the sternness of the moral law,—a sternness which is not the negation, but the expression, of Almighty Love.

In choosing a title for this discourse, one of the first I hit upon was "A Holy Fear;" and I am not yet sure that I did well in changing it to another. Holy means healthy; and that there is a healthy fear inherent in any just perception of a man's relations to the moral law there cannot, I think, be any slightest doubt. Perfect love casteth out fear, no doubt, but love is very far from being perfect in a very great majority of human hearts; and, while this condition lasts, a wholesome fear is a desideratum not to be despised. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of goodness," says the Old Testament. "The beginning of wisdom," it is commonly rendered; but wisdom here, as in many other places, has the force of goodness. This doctrine of the genesis of goodness is not one that any well-instructed evolutionist would accept. Darwin found the beginning of goodness in the gregarious tendency of animal races, and Spencer finds it in the tendency of certain actions to produce pleasure and of others to produce pain. So far as fear had anything to do with the beginning of goodness, it was the fear of man, and not the fear of God. So much for the historical aspect; and for the individual the beginning of goodness is not the fear of "our Father who is in heaven," but of the father or the mother who is on earth. Fear of their punishment, of their displeasure, of their blame, of their disappointment, of their grief,—these are the beginning of goodness for the growing child. They

are not only the beginning: they are a continual moral brace and spur. Many a grown man and woman is kept from shameful courses by the thought of the old folks at home, the fear of doing anything that would bring down their venerable heads in sorrow to the grave. But the wholesome fear which encourages men to difficult duty, and shames them out of meanness, and keeps them from excess, is made up of many parts. The fear of statutory penalties, wholesome enough in many instances, is but the smallest part of it. Another is the fear of social disesteem, of the clear-eyed rebuke of noble friends, of the rebuke their character and their ideals would minister if they did not, could not, speak one word; if they were wholly ignorant of the committed fault. Another part of it is the fear of what a brutish vice may brand upon the physical organism; another, of that entanglement in which every secret act of wickedness involves the doer soon or late, the little sin ever steadily compelling a greater. Again, what fear more wholesome than the fear of being what we hate, of missing those beatitudes which have been promised to us by our most serious and consecrated hours? There is no need to go beyond the present life for a fear so noble and constraining that it would seem impossible for any soul on which it had fairly delivered itself to choose the evil way. But it is an absurd idea, a ridiculous assumption, that, because "we still have judgment here," a future life can have for us no fear. Fear enough the fear of entering on another life conscious that we have miserably squandered this, the fear of an accusing memory dimming the lustre of the bright immortal years, the fear of meeting those whose noble expectation we have not fulfilled, the fear of being known at length for what we inly are. The preacher of religion who does not seek to bring to bear upon his people's minds these "terrors of the Lord" is doing his prophetic duty in a miserably imperfect way.

I shall enter into no comparison of this heterodox hell with the hell of the traditional religion. I do not care to prove that it is every whit as terrible as that. Whatever that traditional hell may signify when the process of transformation which is at present going on is completed, for centuries, in its habitual presentation, it has meant that a man for not believing what he could not believe without intellectual suicide would be thrust into an eternal fiery hell, — a punishment that would make the God inflicting it more reprobate and more deserving of such pangs than any human being, though we should imagine one uniting in himself the crimes of all the Cæsars and the Borgias, the Hapsburgs and the Bourbons, the Sultans and the Tsars. The easiest system would be preferable to such strictness as that which Jonathan Edwards taught with sad-eyed, broken-hearted earnestness a century and a half ago. I do not even care to show that the reality which is now connoted by the symbol of eternal hell is not a sterner construction of the ways of God with men than that of rational religion. Of this, however, I am sure, that it is not a construction that begins to make “the sinfulness of sin” so evident and so deterrent. It threatens the evil-doer with an eternity beyond the grave in which he has no power of self-recovery, in which not God himself could, if he would, break up the torpor of his soul, or allay the fierceness of its never-ending pains of bitter accusation and of vain regret.

“My own hope is, a sun will pierce
 The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;
 That, after Last, returns the First,
 Though a wide compass round be fetched;
 That what began best, can't end worst,
 Nor what God blest once, prove accurst.”

Meantime, “we still have judgment here;” and Macbeth spoke for universal man when he declared that, if his

crime might have its be-all and its end-all here upon this bank and shoal of time, he'd jump the life to come. If Macbeth could say this, with all his superstitious certainty of a material hell, with all his spiritual incompetency for measuring the scope of punishment upon this hither side of death, how much more can they for whom the fires of hell are only glowing metaphors of spiritual pain! As "a hangman's whip to hold the wretch in order," the fear of hell has never been a potent instrument. It will not be more potent now that its flaming terrors have all been translated into the terms of conscience and the inner life. If "the judgment of this world" could be brought home to sinful men without any least exaggeration, but with the unfaltering simplicity of scientific truth, it would breed in them a holy fear more potent to pluck back their feet from paths of vice and crime than any vision of the penal fires that flamed up in the old theology, or any dim reflection of them in the glassy current of the progressive and evasive orthodoxy of the present time.

The circles of the "judgment here" are quite as numerous and deepen down as formidably and fearfully as those which Dante threaded round and down, till in the lowest deep he found Satan, half-apparent, jammed like a ragged stopper into the bottom of the pit. There is first the hell of physical misery and degradation and defect. This is the hell of saints who have not kept the body's sacred law; of restless women who can never find enough to do or to be done; of the victims of society, so called — the round of frivolous excitements from which come prostration and collapse; of men who run the race for wealth till something breaks, and henceforth they are mere physical and mental wrecks along the road where others are in full career. This is the hell of drunkards, of debauchees, a hell fierce — flaming in their faces, burning away their physical nobility with its intolerable rage. It is much wider in its scope

than we are wont to think. As the violet of the spectrum shades into colors that we might see if we had better eyes, so, if we did but know it, there is many a physical penalty that we do not note as such, that with our dull eyes we do not perceive at all, but which, if we were more observant, or if we had better eyes, we might see plainly enough. We read of Jesus in the New Testament that, as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered. The story carries with it the suggestion of a universal law. Every man's face is being daily, hourly, altered by his prayers, by the desires which he allows himself, by the dominant passions of his life. There is many a face that is now hateful and repellent which might have been beautiful and attractive but for some secret shame, some fatal tendency of thought or will, some adultery of the heart. It is not the sensual vices only that insure these penalties. Greed and vanity and pride all twitch the mask aside, and show the actual man. And such is the unity of soul and body that it may well be doubted whether there can be any moral aberration which does not register itself upon the physical man, — not on his face alone, but on his total life. "I am all face," said the naked beggar to Montaigne, — his whole body equally toughened to the weather. So is the universal human body equally plastic to the stress of good and evil thoughts, of high and low ideals. If we could have a perfect chemistry, I doubt not that it would detect in each man's bodily tissues an "abstract and brief chronicle" of all the vices of his past life, of all the ignoble passions to which in the sphere of the imagination he has allowed full swing, though he has not dared to put them into the concrete of action.

But the hell of physical deterioration, ruin, and defect is not the only hell of those whose faults are on the sensual side; and there are faults much deadlier than these, — faults which make no appreciable registry upon the physical

man. No one can study the New Testament without seeing that, as between the brutal and the fiendish sins, — the sins of sensual passion and the sins of selfish and malicious calculation, — Jesus was kindly and sympathetic with the former every time. They were much less heinous than the latter, in his eyes. But the moral standards of Christendom have in general reversed this order. For the Roman Catholic, impurity has been almost the only vice; and in Protestant societies, for the woman overtaken in a sexual fault there is no “place for repentance.” I leave you to determine whether Jesus was mistaken in the distinction that he made. Your decision against him would be immediate if the measure of a fault were to be found in the amount of physical penalty that it entails. For it is evident that our calculating and malicious faults entail no such obvious physical penalties as our faults of sensual passion. Are they, then, less severely punished? Nay; for the hell of physical deterioration is but one hell of many in the range of natural penalty for vice and crime. Even for the sensual fault, the physical penalty is but the smallest part. Another is the public shame, though there has been no formal, public arraignment, the consciousness of pitying or averted eyes, the visible grief and shame of nearest friends, the dread of sinking to some lower deep, the haunting memory of days once pure and sweet, the sense of banishment from the society of the purest and the best, whom still the weak and erring often reverence in their inmost hearts. Then, too, there is for almost every sensual fault a hell of correlated shame and sin. The secret fault escapes a hundred social penalties that wait on the discovered vice or crime, only to plunge into a vortex of temptations to new forms of guilt, through which the hardiest mariner may not hope to safely steer his way. You will at once recall the saying of George Eliot: “Under every guilty secret there is hidden a brood of guilty wishes whose un-

wholesome, infecting life is cherished by the darkness. The contaminating effect of deeds often lies less in the commission than in the consequent adjustment of our desires, — the enlistment of our self-interest on the side of falsity." Well may we pray, as did the Psalmist, to be saved from secret faults: they are such mothers of lies, of insincerity, of dishonesty, of faithlessness. They are

"the little rift within the lute,
That by and by will make the music mute,
And ever widening slowly silence all."

Can you not conceive of faults which, in their first inception, have but little power to curse and kill, but which, to preserve their secret, have so walled themselves about with various obstruction that no good influence can penetrate to them, and the man cannot break through into the freedom of a sincere and simple life? It is a tragedy which repeats itself as regularly as the rising of the sun. Happy are they who are quite sure that it has never touched their lives with even a passing shadow!

It is conceivable that the inveterate sinner may be so hardened in his fault, may be so deaf to the rebuke of conscience through prolonged neglect of her persuasive voice, that nothing shall disturb him in the base enjoyment of his evil way. Is this escape from punishment, or is it the worst possible punishment that can come upon a man, — to be dead in trespasses and sins? But this is slow to come; and till it comes, through infinite degrees of moral lapse, what accusation and what punishment there is prepared for every sinful heart! I see not what necessity there is for "future punishment," as if within the limits of this present life the resources of Omnipotence were not sufficient for the reward of every man according to his works. The punishment is oftentimes so great, so terrible, that it would seem to be out of all proportion with the

offence committed, did we not know that by such punishment the erring heart is made to see "how awful goodness is, and virtue in her shape how lovely, — see, and pine its loss." Once let a man depart from the right way, and there seems to be some terrible fatality through which, at every turn, he is reminded of his fault. Things that are blessedness to other men, are grief and pain to him. The air so pure, the sky without a cloud, the spring so fresh and sweet, the earth's warm coverlet of snow so white and pure, are images of lost beatitudes. Will he seek forgetfulness in the pages of some pleasant book? Suddenly he sees himself as in a mirror, — his meanness or his cruelty, his selfishness or his dishonesty, his faithlessness to sacred trusts of business or of home, depicted there so vividly that it seems as if the author must have intended every word for him. If not directly, then by contrast he is reminded of his secret shame.

"The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king,"

the Prince of Denmark says. A capital device! How many consciences have been caught in such a net from first to last! more, I have sometimes thought, than in the meshes of the preacher's homily; so many that I find it hard to understand the accusation of the drama as immoral, thinking that, if evil men would not be stricken to the heart by what passes on the stage, they had better stay at home. Then, too, what accusation and what punishment for erring men there is in the high trust and noble expectation of their friends, and in the memory of past experience that was full of stainless joy! If ever for a little while there is a respite from these visions and these voices, there is sure to come along some happy Pippa, singing her untimely song, her unconscious comment on the moral situation. At other times, from out the silent dark the faces of the friends whom we have loved and lost shape themselves, grieved and sad,

as if they looked into our very hearts and saw what harbors there of unrepented fault and vain desire. Yea, for each one of us who has not kept the law of righteousness, till we are hardened in our sin, all things have eyes to see, "as if they were God's spies;" all things have voices to impeach, and hands to smite and slay.

Rossetti asks, "What is the sorriest thing that enters hell?" and makes reply

"None of the sins, but this and that fair deed,
Which a soul's sin at length can supersede."

That is to say, the real goodness of a man, which may, in one part of his life and action, for a long time co-exist with evil in some other part, at length gives way. It is the case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Soon or late, one must invade the province of the other. There must be war, and to the knife. There cannot be an everlasting dualism of the moral life. No man can serve two masters. Eventually he must cleave to the one, and despise the other. And what a fearful hell is that of real goodness broken down and utterly despoiled! If there is one more fearful, it is that which is constituted for us by the reactionary influence of a persistent fault upon the memory of the good that we have done. To think that even our most loving offices of friendship and affection have come to be remembered only with stinging shame, since we have fallen away from truth and righteousness! Thank Heaven it is not so with all! that there are those who graciously remember every noble, generous deed done for them by men and women who have been overmastered by temptation and fallen into evil ways! But with the most, an evil presence spoils the noblest past, making it seem an unreality and sham, which very likely it was not; while for the evil-doer his hell of blasted recollection has no sharper pang than that the noble and the good whom he has served with offices of the purest possible affection will wish perhaps that they could blot out his memory and the memory of such offices forever.

In my divinity school days, I read in Plutarch's crabbed Greek an essay on "The Delay of the Deity in Punishing the Wicked." But is there really much delay? There is of certain outward penalties. The sensual indulgence does not work its obvious ruin all at once. The penalties of social disesteem, of friendship growing cold, of honor changing to contempt, of ruined fortunes and domestic altars broken down, — all these may be delayed; but if they were delayed forever, the vindication of the moral law would still be a hard and terrible reality. There would still remain the hells of shameful character and of dreadful loss. "Be sure your sin will find you out," though you should go unwhipped of justice till the end, or scourged with praises which but mock the voices of your heart. "They that are in sin," said Swedenborg, "are in the punishment of sin." That was a real vision of "Things seen in Hell": *They that are in sin are in the punishment of sin.* And to be in sin were punishment enough if there were no other. It is punishment enough to be a brute, when one might be a man; to be a coward, when one might be a hero; to be a hindrance to all social good, when one might be a help; to destroy men's faith in human nature and in God, when one might strengthen it; to be a petty, grovelling creature, when one might stand with port erect and face towards heaven, without hate or fear.

In the last analysis, the most dreadful punishment is not anything that may come upon us from without, any social penalty; nor is it anything that may arise in our own minds of miserable regret, of shapeless fear, of imagined voices, — "Thou art become as one of us," from the bad in literature and life; "Depart from us: we never knew you," from the good and true. The most dreadful punishment is to fall immeasurably short of the mark of our high calling; to be so little, when we might be so much. In Shakespeare's plays, how little does the tragic end of Mac-

beth or Iago, Regan or Goneril, add to our sense of their great misery! To be a Macbeth or an Iago, a Regan or a Goneril, that is more terrible than any outward ruin, or any consciousness of an impassable gulf between ourselves and those in whose approval we could see the smile of God.

“I sent my soul through the invisible,
 Some letter of the after-life to spell;
 And by and by my soul returned to me,
 And answered, ‘I myself am heaven — and hell.’”

Hell unmistakably for the unrighteous man, however clear of outward suffering for his sin, however dead to inward pleading and expostulation, — most unmistakably when most dead to these; but heaven with equal certainty for those who, if they must say, “I am poor and despised,” can add, “Yet have I kept thy precepts.” It would be a very dark and gloomy picture that I have presented to your minds and to your consciences and hearts, were it not that it involves an opposite as full of brightness and of cheer. For there is no misery of wickedness and no painfulness of accusation or of punishment for the erring soul which has not a corresponding excellence and satisfaction and beatitude for the soul unswervingly devoted to the law of righteousness. But I can easily conceive that the terms of my discourse suggest, in various particulars, a situation foreign to your experience. You have your faults, but they are not so dark and tragical as those which I have seemed to have in mind. Yet, for such as you have, there is the same eternal law. You are less because of them than what you ought to be. They rob you of your peace. They turn your pleasures into grief and shame. The friendship and the love that are given you so lavishly, — you must often ask yourselves if you are worthy of such costly gifts. Are they really given to *you*, or to some imaginary person? And if to some imaginary person, must you not strive to

grow into that image, so that the friendship and the love you prize so much may really be for you an indefeasible possession, so that you may rightfully account yourself one of that blessed family in earth and heaven who, though poor and despised, have kept the eternal law?

Such, then, is the ethical sternness of our Unitarian faith. Such is the heterodox hell. If our presentation of this theme has any claim to merit, that claim rests, not on its being ours, but on its conformity to reality and to the solemn laws of the world. That it can match the terrors of the old theology, I have not desired to show. But that we have not here any "easy system" is, surely, plain enough; and that we have here a system which, although the half has not been told, makes the intrinsic hideousness of sin sufficiently apparent, is as plain. What man is there, however clean his conscience, who can look upon these laws and retributions without holy fear? What can they mean if not that the Eternal loveth righteousness, and that he has made the way of the transgressor so immeasurably hard in order that, should "goodness draw us not, then weariness may toss us to his breast"?

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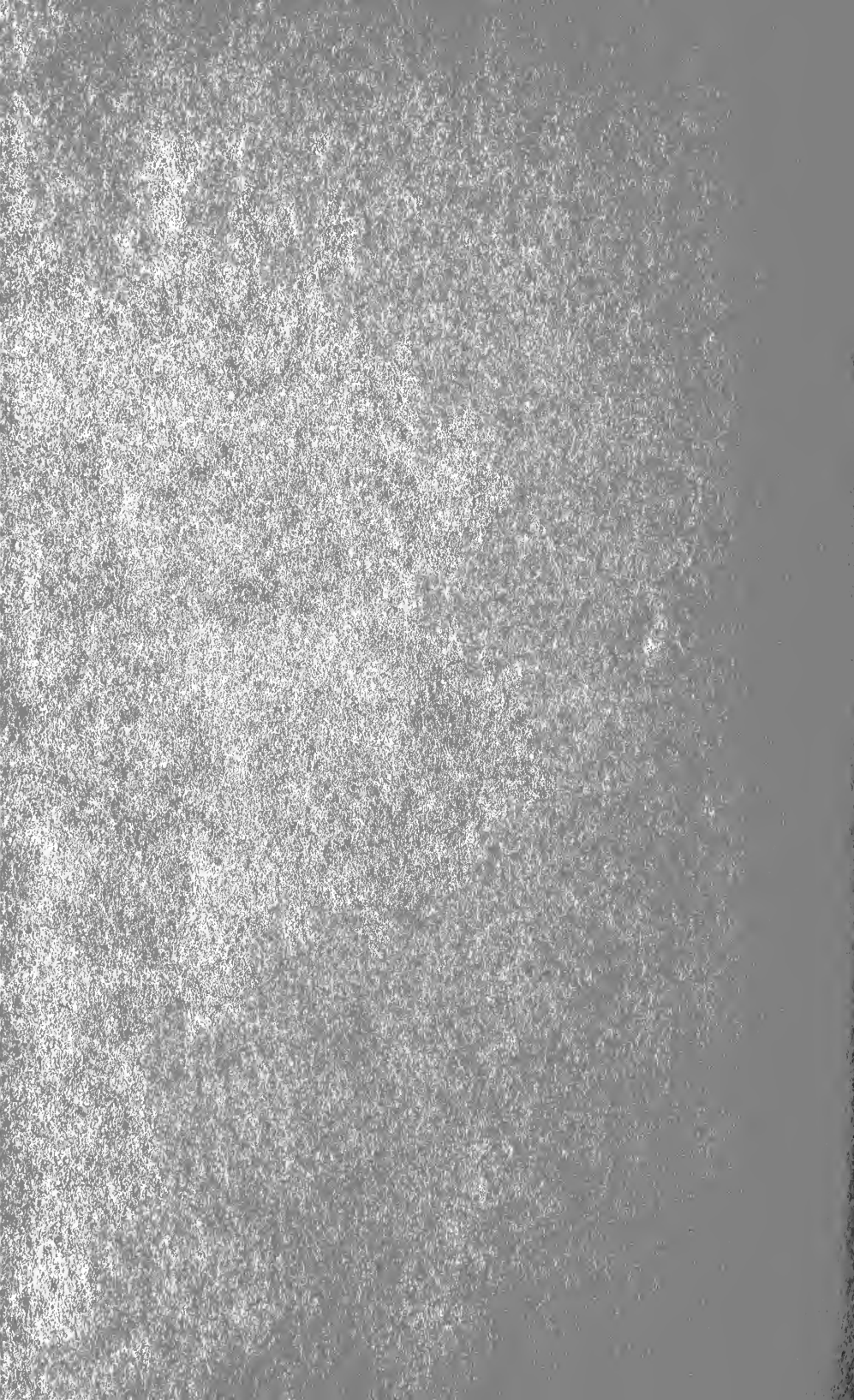
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