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*A POET
IN EXILE*

EARLY LETTERS OF JOHN HAY

Edited by Caroline Ticknor

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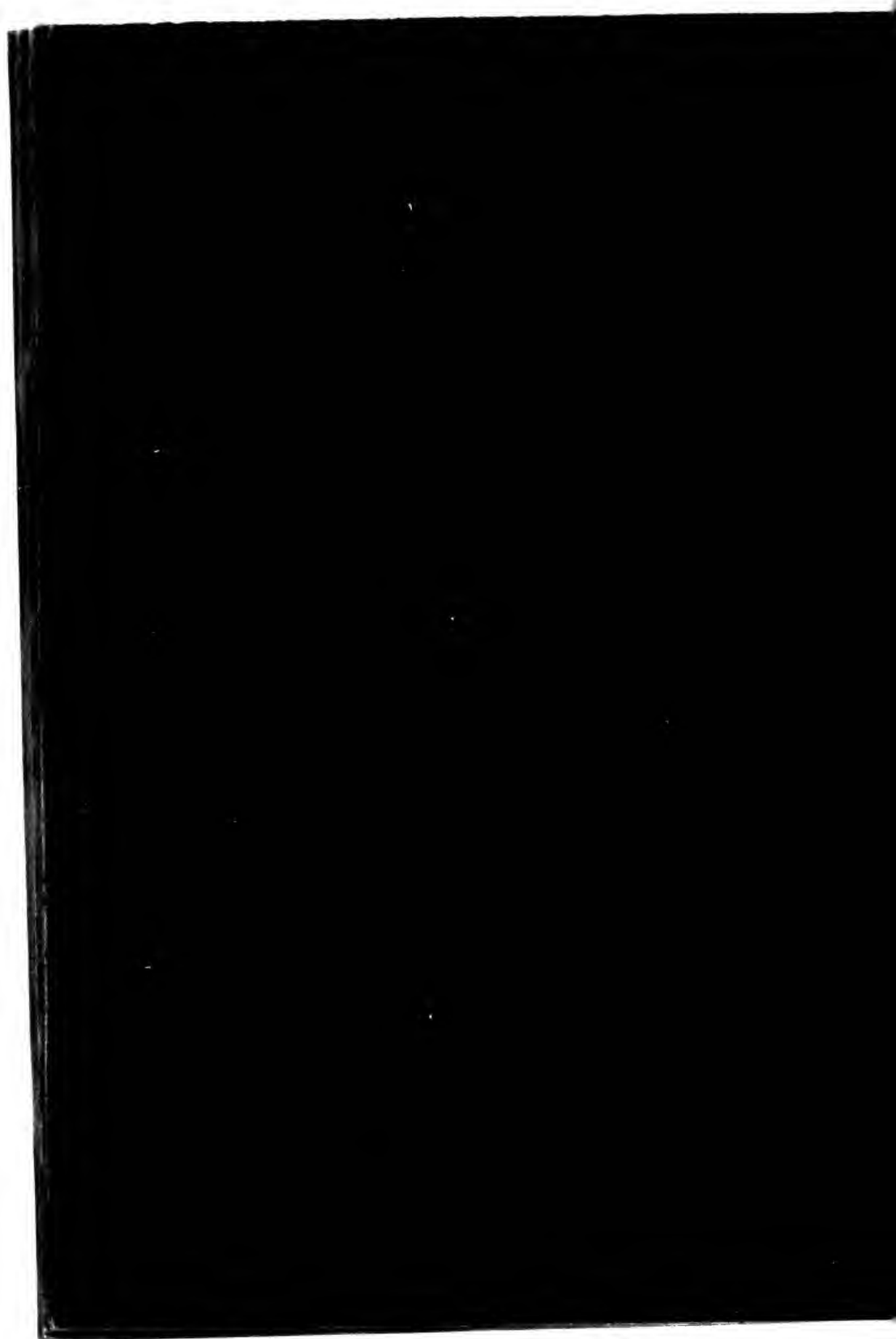
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NOTE

For permission to print the letters and poems in this volume thanks are due to Mrs. John Hay. The frontispiece is an etching by Sidney L. Smith from a photograph of John Hay taken about 1860.



A Poet in Exile

JOHN HAY was born a poet; he achieved fame as statesman, diplomat, and man-of-letters. And because of this manifold achievement there was vouchsafed him little leisure or opportunity for the pursuit of the poetic muse that had smiled on him at his birth.

Too many honors are not easy to reconcile with the exactments of a goddess who demands one's sole allegiance, and so the poet's over-generous endowment, which came to him both from within and from without, forced him, if not to turn his back upon his muse, at least to consign her to a secluded niche. "To him the parting of the ways came early; and what was there in our literary atmosphere

and opportunity sixty years ago, to make poetry the vocation of any thorough trained, aspiring, resolute man?"

It was with longing and regret that John Hay turned away from that poetic muse, who would have claimed him for her own. "The Nation called for workers"; the call was sounded by the voice of Lincoln. John Hay, the man of action, answered, and the poet John Hay accepted his inevitable banishment.

Yet after the accomplishment of "daily tasks," the poet did return from time to time to sing, and for these "songs," though they were but a presage of what might have been, we must be grateful, as we are for those onerous "tasks" so faithfully performed.

Of the relation of his public service to his poetic gift Stedman asserted in his "Poets of America":—

"John Hay, whose writings are at once

fine and strong, has been so engrossed by rare experience of 'cities, — councils, governments,' as scarcely to have done full justice to his sterling gifts. With his taste, mental vigor, and mastery of style, he may well be taken to task for neglecting a faculty exceptionally his own. The uncompromising dialect pieces, which made a hit as easily as they were thrown off, are the mere excess of his pathos and humor. Such poetry as the blank-verse impromptu on Liberty shows the higher worth of a man who should rise above indifference, and the hindrance of his mood, and in these spiritless times take up the lyre again, not fitfully touch the strings."

But John Hay was destined to touch the strings no more than fitfully, for as a man of action he must be ever in the saddle, and the reiterated order to "ride abroad" was one not to be disregarded. And so the poet, early banished from the Elysian fields that beckoned

so alluringly, remained in exile until the end, with how many fair songs unsung!

Had the man of action lived less fully and richly, out in the open, had he been less successful, worked less assiduously, the poet might have come into his own; he might have realized those early aspirations that were his birthright, those that he cherished in his college days when he was chosen class-poet at Brown University.

One views with interest the boyish picture of the slender youth as he appeared to his associates at twenty years of age; it is a sensitive and thoughtful face, and viewing it, one is disposed to question if this immature strippling can be the brilliant young graduate with exceptional gifts and exalted literary ideals? Beside this early picture of John Hay, as he appeared to others, it may be edifying to place a second portrait, drawn by himself just at the

close of his college career, which shows the subject in a light that reveals the maturity of his thought, and the depth and breadth of his intellectual development.

This characteristic portrait has been long hidden away in a small packet of old letters tied with a faded ribbon, and carefully preserved for nearly forty years by her to whom they were addressed. And now more than a decade has elapsed since the departure of the recipient, who treasured the slim packet both for the writer's sake, and for the wealth of memories of her own youth which its contents evoked.

Miss Nora Perry, to whom these letters were addressed, was one of the leading spirits in that artistic and literary coterie in Providence, Rhode Island, which grouped itself about the charming Mrs. Whitman, who came so near to linking her fortunes with those of Edgar Allan Poe.

His days at Brown University were drawing to a close when John Hay, who ranked among the brightest of the college men, was introduced into this small and charmed circle, which appealed strongly to his active intellect and did much to strengthen his literary aspirations. These aspirations were above all poetical, and to these, the poetic gift of Mrs. Whitman, and that of Miss Perry, contributed not a little, while their friendly sympathy and emphatic personalities made a forcible impression upon the modest youth, who was wearing the laurels of class-poet. This young man, with his boundless enthusiasm and his love of the beautiful in art and nature, responded with all his characteristic ardor to the stimulating influence of those brilliant women and clever men who frequented the cultured gatherings of which Mrs. Whitman was invariably the central figure.

At this time Miss Perry, who was a few

years older than Mr. Hay, had already won fame for herself as a poet and writer of short stories, having captured the public by that most popular of her poetic productions which opens with the familiar lines : —

“Tying her bonnet under her chin,
 She tied her raven ringlets in ;
 But not alone in the silken snare
 Did she catch her lovely floating hair,
 For, tying her bonnet under her chin,
 She tied a young man’s heart within.”

In later years this poem, in company with “After the Ball,” another of her popular successes, became the writer’s *bête noir*, so thoroughly did she weary of being hailed as their author, an experience shared by many poets who have tried vainly to focus the attention of their public upon what they consider their best work. Edmund Clarence Stedman suffered constantly from popular enthusiasm for

his "Undiscovered Country," as did Thomas Bailey Aldrich in regard to "Baby Bell."

Although not favored with any especial beauty of feature, Miss Perry in her youth undoubtedly possessed many personal attractions. Her figure was fine, her complexion marvellous, her eyes a deep blue, and her golden hair, which was her particular glory, was long, wavy, and very beautiful.

Bright, vivacious, and always clever at repartee she was hailed as an acquisition at every gathering, and in later years, when she made her home in Boston, she was conspicuous at the literary receptions of Mrs. Sargent for her wit, gaiety, and the fearless expression of her convictions. Miss Perry was incapable of feigning an interest she did not feel, and that which she did experience was so genuine and vital that it was something she never dreamed of simulating; her friendship was a very live and potent factor to those intimately acquainted

with her, to whom she brought the inspiration which springs from a keen grasp of truth, an enthusiasm for the beautiful, and a just appreciation of the relative values in life. She formed her own opinions and uttered them frankly, relying less than do most people upon the judgment of others. Intensely loyal to her friends, she was tireless in her endeavors to be of service to them, and her quickness of temperament tolerated no slights or derogatory statements which might be directed towards them.

Miss Perry numbered among her intimate friends Whittier, Wendell Phillips, George William Curtis, and many other eminent men, who appreciated her unique personality and unusual gifts. Her friendship with Whittier may be particularly emphasized, for she possessed his love and confidence to a rare degree, and the bond of intimacy which extended over many years was a very strong one. The

serious poet exchanged jests with her, told her stories, and delighted in the gay and audacious speeches which she alone would have dared to venture. It is doubtful if any of Whittier's friends were vouchsafed quite the same ingenuous good-comradeship as that bestowed upon the flippancy "Nora," beneath whose flippancy the Quaker Poet discerned the same directness and sincerity which characterized his own mental standpoint. With Wendell Phillips, who was also a warm friend, she enjoyed the same spontaneity of intercourse and frank good-fellowship.

Her friendship with John Hay, formed a short time before the close of his college days, awakened an enthusiastic response in the young man, whose own poetic nature readily revealed itself under the warmth of her sympathetic interest. Her commendation of his verse, her willingness to read him her own forthcoming poems, and to discuss with him

her literary ideals, were a keen source of gratification to the young collegiate, who was about to plunge into the commercial atmosphere of a western life. In the first days which ensued after his return to his home in Warsaw, Illinois, he felt sharply the contrast in the conditions about him to those which he had found so inspiring in Providence.

His opening letter to Miss Perry refers, a bit mournfully, to a "happier state of existence," from which he sighs to think that he is now banished. It also voices his admiration for Mrs. Whitman, of whom he speaks in nearly all of his communications, and of his delightful memories of the hours spent in her drawing-room.

Warsaw, Ill.

Aug. 30th (1858).

However much you may have wondered, Miss Perry, at not receiving an answer to the

note you so kindly sent me in Providence, your surprise will probably be much greater upon receiving this — for your own experience of the West has probably taught you how unstable are all promises made by faithless nomads of the prairies, and how readily all their ties and associations formed in the East are dissolved by the air of Illinois. It is probably too late for me to begin to account for a neglect which seems at best unaccountable, but I will try to absolve my own conscience, and I cannot flatter myself that your interest in the matter is sufficient to cause you to demand an elaborate explanation. Being absent from the city when your note was written, I did not receive it until I was on the point of departure, and the necessary business which I had to transact occupied my time so fully that I could neither allow myself the pleasure of calling upon you, nor of preparing that copy of verses which you flatter me by requesting. Ever since that, I have been on my homeward journey, delaying at

several points, until now the fogs of September have come before their time to give me a chilling welcome to my home. But now that my journey is finished, and the noise and bustle that banished thought during its progress is gone, my mind has leisure to travel back to the "good bye lande" that I have left, and I am willing to turn away from the familiar faces that I meet in the streets of Warsaw and go to my room to converse with shadows. You may smile at that expression, but the lady whom I now honor myself by addressing is only a shadow to me, however pleasant a reality she may be to others who are blest with her society.

And thus it is that I hasten to fulfill a promise made in a happier state of existence, and connect myself by a bond, however slight, to one whom I hope you will permit me to call a friend, none the less valued because so recent. And if I may beg a reward, not just but generous, may I ask you to send me one of those charming lyrics,

which cost you so little, and which have the silvery music and swing and sparkle, because they are yours simply, and because you are content to sing them as you heard them in Dreamland without impertinent alteration. Only my thanks can repay you.

I was exceedingly disappointed at not being able to see Mrs. Whitman before I left Providence. I delayed calling upon her for a long time, but I hope the explanation which I have sent will be sufficient to excuse me. One of the most valued of the treasures that I have brought out to gladden the solitude of a western winter is the memory of an evening that I spent at her house this summer, and I shall count it the heaviest of misfortunes to lose all hope of future intercourse with a spirit so exalted, whose influence is inevitably refining upon even the humblest minds which are brought in contact with it. Trusting then at some future day to renew an acquaintance whose beginning has been so delightful to

*me, and hoping that the interval of banishment
may not be altogether silent,*

I remain

Yours very sincerely

John Hay.

A little more than a month has elapsed since the penning of his first letter, when he replies to one of Miss Perry's communications, in which she has enclosed some of her own poetic work. In regard to this, he speaks enthusiastically, congratulating himself, as in his first letter, upon the bonds of friendship which still link him with the literary coterie in Providence, where he had found true appreciation and sympathy. He proceeds to contrast his life in the West with that left behind, and refers to the copy made by him of her poem "La Papillon," which he encloses, refusing

her request for something of his own on the ground that it is not worthy to travel in such superior company.

Warsaw,
October 12, 1858.

My dear Miss Perry :

I shall not attempt to tell you how rejoiced I was at receiving your very kind letter. I had the pleasure of meeting you but a very few times, but with the quick instinct of a woman and a poet, you saw how susceptible I was to the flattery of those I esteemed. So you can judge that I was more than delighted with your letter, and still continue to read it with unabated pleasure. Even though I know myself unworthy of the praise you so kindly give me, I cannot but be pleased that you consider me of sufficient importance to flatter me.

Yet while I read your letter, I could not but shrink from the prospect of answering it. The very fact of your writing to me proved that you had an opinion of my powers which I might vainly strive to justify, and when I read the poems which you added, I was still more embarrassed in view of my situation. I despair of ever carrying on a correspondence on terms in any degree approaching equality with one whose mental plane is so far above my own. The pieces with which you honored me were different from others of yours which I had read and admired, and I was filled with a delighted surprise on beholding you unwreath from your brow the vine-leaf of the Bacchante and assume with equal grace the laurel of the Pythoness. I could only read them with delight, and then silently wonder how such good fortune had befallen me.

I shall never cease to congratulate myself upon the acquaintances I formed during the last few months of my stay in Providence. I found among

them the objects for which my mind had always longed, true appreciation and sympathy. It is to their own goodness and generosity that I render all the kindness which I met with, and not to any qualities of my own ; for it is the highest glory of genius to be quick in sympathy and prodigal of praise. But now when I am removed to a colder mental atmosphere, and the hopes and aspirations that gilded the gliding hours of my last year at college are fading away, I still can console myself with a dream of the possibilities that once were mine, and soothe my soul with the shadowy Might-have-been. In spite of the praise which you continually lavish upon the West, I must respectfully assert that I find only a dreary waste of heartless materialism, where great and heroic qualities may indeed bully their way up into the glare, but the flowers of existence inevitably droop and wither. So in time I shall change. I shall turn from "the rose and the rainbow" to corner-lots and tax-titles, and a few years will find my

eye not rolling in a fine frenzy, but steadily fixed on the pole-star of humanity, \$!

But I am not yet so far degraded that I cannot love poetry and worship a poet. So let me implore you to ask a favor of me as often as you possibly can — whatever it is, it is granted as soon as asked, if you will only acknowledge it as you did the last. If you will so far favor me your letters will be a thread of gold woven into the dusky texture of a western life.

With unalloyed pleasure I copy that delicious "La Papillon," but are you not ashamed of your unnatural neglect? I would take the bright wanderer and claim it for my own if I dared. But it would look in my household like the last hope of Persia in the hovel of a cobbler of Bagdad.

I would have bored you with something of mine, but it would not dare to travel in company with "La Papillon."

Will you, in mercy, write to me again? If it were not so brazen I would beg to see another of

those new poems from which you selected that magnificent battle-piece. Why did you not give a name to the second poem? It has too much spiritual beauty to be called Anacreontic. You ask me to name the former. What do you think of "Upharsin"?

I have run myself into a corner and will now close.

Yours very truly,

John Hay.

I am very anxiously awaiting a letter from Mrs. Whitman. Is she in Providence?

A few months later, in a letter throughout which runs a vein of depression mingled with the writer's ever sparkling touches of humor, Mr. Hay again eulogizes Providence, and recalls the joys of his college life, contrasting his festive student days with the gross dissi-

pation practised by the youth of his western town. He voices his attitude towards his surroundings, which are so wholly out of harmony with his own trend of thought, and literary and æsthetic tastes. The writer encloses two poems which have presumed never appeared in print, and which have, for fifty years, lain hidden away in the packet of old letters.

Warsaw,
January 2nd, 1859.

Let me hope, Nora, that your Christmas was merrier than mine. Whatever be your fortune, you are happy in yourself and in your friends. You have the poetic soul that can idealize common things till they stand before you in transfigured vitality. Permit me to say also that you have what is better than all poetry, the warm

and catholic love of a woman for everything that is beautiful or good. The world must be very fair as seen through the rosy atmosphere of luxuriant youth and maidenhood. Memory paints warm pictures of the past, to adorn the gay revels of the present, and the mind goes a-gypsying into the future. You are much to blame if you are not happy, lighted through pleasant places by the soul of a poet,

*“Singing alone in the morning of life,
In the happy morning of youth and of May,
A passionate ballad, gallant and gay.”*

If you loved Providence as I do you would congratulate yourself hourly upon your lot. I turn my eyes eastward, like an Islamite, when I feel prayerful. The city of Wayland, and Williams that smiles upon its beauty glassed in the still mirror of the Narragansett waves, is shrined in my memory as a far-off mystical Eden where the women were lovely and spirituelle, and the men

were jolly and brave ; where I used to haunt the rooms of the *Athenæum*, made holy by the presence of the royal dead ; where I used to pay furtive visits to Forbes' forbidden mysteries (peace to its ashes !), where I used to eat *Hasheesh* and dream dreams. My life will not be utterly desolate while memory is left me, and while I may recall the free pleasures of the student-time ; pleasures in which there was no taint of selfishness commingled, and which lost half their sin in losing all their grossness. Day is not more different from night than they were from the wild excesses of the youth of this barbarous *West*.

Yet to this field I am called, and I accept calmly, if not joyfully, the challenge of fate. From present indications my sojourn in this "wale of tears," as the elder *Weller* pathetically styles it, will not be very protracted. I can stand it for a few years, I suppose. My father, with more ambition and higher ideals than I, has dwelt and labored here a lifetime, and even this winter

does not despair of creating an interest in things intellectual among the great unshorn of the prairies. I am not suited for a reformer. I do not like to meddle with moral ills. I love comfortable people. I prefer, for my friends, men who can read. In the words of the poet Pigwiggen, whom Neal has immortalized in the "Charcoal Sketches," "I know I'm a genius, 'cause I hate work worse 'n thunder, and would like to cut my throat — only it hurts." When you reflect how unsuitable such sentiments are to the busy life of the Mississippi Valley, you may imagine then what an overhauling my character must receive — at my own hands, too.

There is, as yet, no room in the West for a genius. I mean, of course, of the Pigwiggen model. Impudence and rascality are the talismans that open the gates of preferment. I am a Westerner. The influences of civilization galvanized me for a time into a feverish life, but they will vanish before this death-in-life of solitude.

I chose it, however, and my blood is on my own head.

I received Mrs. Whitman's very kind letter a day or two ago. To have friends, esteemed like her, welcome me so cordially back to life is something worth being sick for. I will seize the privilege of writing to her soon. When I last wrote I promised to send her something saved from the wreck that burnt in my stove last winter. But I concluded not to look back, and so will request you to hand her the enclosed affair, being the only fruit of so many months of exile. If you can read it, look upon it, not with justice but mercy. I wrote it the other morning because I felt like it, and I don't know whether it is passable or execrable. I add another somewhat dissimilar. I am at once flattered and grateful for the favor you conferred upon me and my lines at the Phalanstery. I, alas! have no audience out of my own family to read your beautiful poems to, but they all admire them equally with me.

*I send a little piece in which I say a little,
meaning a good deal. Boys are not often success-
ful in condensation. Will you please give my love
to the Doctor.*

PARTED

We sailed together once on the sea —
In the blast I am driving now alone.
One night a stranger came up on the lee —
The morn woke clouded and thou wert gone.

Joy fill his sails for the sake of thee
While I sail on o'er the rainy sea.

Black the clouds threaten. My heart is as dark.
(How glad was the sunlight when thou wert near.)
But I'll trim the sails of my lonely bark,
And mock the wind with a merry cheer.

For a storm comes out of the lurid lee
And night comes down o'er the rainy sea.

[Written, January, 1859.]

This little poem evidently embodies the writer's longing for that responsive companionship which his fellow poet had supplied, and which in his western environment he sadly missed. He offers it to Miss Perry as a personal tribute from her young literary friend.

The verses which follow are quite impersonal as far as Miss Perry is concerned; they reflect the writer's own mental attitude, reveal something of the spiritual conflict through which he was then passing, and voice his doubts and fears and wonderments regarding life, death, and love.

IN THE MIST

"As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport."—LEAR.

Drearly sweeping above the dim plain,
Wanders the rain;

Mad fly the shadows, and eager behind,
Chases the wind ;
And the mist of the evening dank, dismal, and chill,
Like the curse of a father, hangs low on the hill.
Through the murk air
Wails the faint voice of a sullen despair ;
Solemn and slow,
Over my head
Flit the black plumes of a vanishing crow,
Till in the thick darkness his darkness is lost,
Like the black-flitting ghost
Of a hate that is dead.

Dreary the sky !
Dreary the heath !
Why should we shudder to slumber or die ?
Peaceful is death.
Weary the strife
Of our wintry life !
Our eyes grow dazed with the staring day,
Our brain grows crazed with the limitless rattle
And we long to sink down from the sulphurous
battle,
And steal from the thunderous tumult away.

To the victor the palm!
 To the wounded the balm!
 Tearless and calm in the grave they shall sleep,
 Weary and worn on the earth we shall weep.

But ah! Is it brave
 To go down to the grave?
 When the heaven laughs aloud in its infinite glee,
 When the sunlight is sparkling on mountain and sea,
 When every day has its silvery tongue
 To challenge the red-leaping blood of the young,
 Shall we steal from the sunlight so golden and broad
 To slumber in silence beneath the cold sod?
 And the cold glare of Destiny's pitiless eyes
 Strikes the heart with a stony Medusean chill.
 What matter our curses? What matter our prayers?
 They are swallowed above by the thin hungry airs.
 God has given us the world, he has left us the grave,
 He is too good to love us, too lofty to save.
 The world with her burden of woe and of crime
 Rolls on through the twilight of gathering years,
 While she twines round her brow the dim trophies
 of time,
 And joins in the thunderous chime of the spheres.

No wail from the earth breaks the calm of the sky,
Unheeded we live and unheeded we die.
Then why should we sing of a home in the skies
Or mourn in the dusk of the spirit's eclipse,
When a pledge of joy lurks in the challenging eyes
And the love-dew is sparkling on budding red lips.
Then garland the bowl!
Let the shuddering soul
Here stifle the voice of its idle alarms!
Let doubt sink to sleep
In oblivion deep
Within the white joy of love's sheltering arms!

Launch the boat! Set the sails! and adown the still
stream
We will glide with the mystical float of a dream.
Ah, vain the endeavor! Along the dim river
The voice of the ages low whispers "In vain,"
Death sits at the helm, and our shallop forever
Drives into the night, through the mist and the rain.

The verses which follow were apparently enclosed with the ones above, and as they were

without any heading, it is likely that they were intended as a second part of the same poem. The unfinished stanza at the end seems to indicate that these were not the closing lines of the poem, which were doubtless penned upon an additional sheet that has not been preserved.

To slumber in silence, nor feeling nor knowing
 That the breezes are out and the roses are growing!
 Is it well? Is it well?
 The living are mazed and the dead cannot tell.

Still wails the mad wind through the shuddering
 vale,

Still hangs the white mist on the slope of the hills,
 The elm-leaves upturned in the shadows grow pale,
 And the peach flowers fall in the wind's dying thrills.
 Not alone in the gloom of the charnel is death,
 But he lurks in the forest, he strives in the trees,
 The trembling leaves fall at his withering breath;
 Flowers sicken and die. There is death in the breeze.
 And the morning will come in its splendor and glory,

And the mist
Will be kissed
By the jolly red day,
But the sky of the east will be dabbled and gory,
And the night
From the light
Shall fade sickly and gray.
And when the fired leaves in the bright sun are
dancing,
And the wanton hills pant in the joy of his blaze,
Full-freighted with fate his hot arrows are glancing,
And death in high carnival laughs in his rays.
And thus while the earth in his rapture is gleaming,
Death's thick-trailing veils of malaria rise,
To chill the warm blushes of Nature's sweet dream-
ing,
And blot the white bliss that transfigured the skies.

Oh, lurks there no spot in the waste of the world,
Where the black shade of care skulks forever away,
Where the soul, like a rose with its petals dim-furled,
Shall flush in warm dreams through the glimmering
day?

Does there bloom in the bleak desolation no spot
 Where joy dies in calm and the spoiler is not?
 "Ah, yes!" whispers Youth, and his merry voice
 swells
 With the soul-drunken music of sweet marriage-
 bells.

"Seek not for a heaven in the cold blue above
 While the earth blushes red with the roses of love.
 For what shall awake us to life's vague alarms
 When lost in the clinging of tender white arms?
 What shade flecks the blank of love's fiery bliss
 When rosy lips melt in their earliest kiss,
 And we gaze on a heaven more fair than the skies
 Shrined deep in the azure of passionate eyes?
 How rich the wild sunbeams that over us glimmer,
 How leaps the hot heart in the burst of its pride,
 While lapt in a shimmer that ever grows dimmer,
 We sail with the sweep of the rose-rippled tide!
 Soon we cease sailing
 The summer-lit sea.
 For us is the wailing,
 For Death is the glee!
 Where'er in soft dalliance fond lovers play

Death glides like the darkness pursuing the day,
 Ever wakeful the spectre creeps into love's bowers
 And mingles his gall with the slumbering flowers.
 All rudely his fingers the soft arms unclasp
 From the neck that was thrilling to bliss in their
 grasp,

He hushes low laughter, he dims the fond eyes
 And stifles the bliss of the maiden's warm sighs;
 And on the sweet lips, the bright heaven of Love's
 prayer,

He will riot in glee while they rest unaware.

Oh, God! Oh, our Father! Oh, Mighty to save!
 As thy might, so thy Love. Is there love in the grave?

When low we lie
 Death can but kill,
 But love may die
 Ere the heart is still.

The glory vanishes out of the skies
 When out of the heart its true Love dies,
 The thrill of joy, the laugh of mirth
 Die away from the waste wide earth,

And the heart hangs lone like a desolate lyre
That moans forever its wildered wail,
And pours the voice of its vague desire
On the heedless ear of the mocking gale.

And why shall we struggle? The mist will not rise
Though we shout till the echoes die faint on the hill.

Had these early poems fallen into the hands of their author "twenty years after" their composition, he, with his fastidious taste in literary matters, would doubtless have immediately consigned them to the scrap-basket, pronouncing them "effusive," "morbid," "immature," — and certainly unworthy to be preserved among his contributions to the poetic world.

Every poet, who has achieved celebrity, has suffered from the frequent unearthing and reprinting of bits of his early work that he would

tain obliterate, but which from time to time reappear to torment their creator, who has long since outgrown them. And it is truly an unpardonable offence to bring forth, as if it were a typical, mature production, some early piece of work, snatched from its context, and robbed of its extenuating circumstances.

But it is quite a different thing to study the man himself through certain aspects of his early, experimental efforts. This is true in regard to these examples of John Hay's youthful verse. These picture, as do his letters, penned at this time, an interesting phase in the writer's development, a phase through which he passed just before entering upon his active participation in the great struggle that convulsed the land in 1861.

The time which elapsed between John Hay's graduation from Brown University, and his acceptance of the post of assistant secretary to Lincoln, was a period of outward calm for

the young collegiate and law student, but of much inward conflict and unrest. The future thinker, statesman, diplomat, and man-of-letters was finding himself, and in the process he touched the very depths of gloom and blackness before emerging into the clear sunlight of serenity and poise.

His picture, as he pens it for us, reveals the writer outwardly gay and nonchalant, absorbed in business and in social activities, but inwardly engaged in a spiritual conflict which stirred his nature to its very foundation. God, Life, Death, Immortality, and Love, what was his attitude towards these? What his beliefs concerning them? What his relationship to each? What was his aim in life? His mission? And what was, after all, his true vocation?

Such was the inward questioning, the mental strife which was going on in the soul and mind of the boyish enthusiast, who was to be the instrument of Abraham Lincoln, and one of this

great nation's greatest statesmen, but who at heart still longed to be above all else a poet.

It is a glimpse of such a struggle that is registered in these early letters and in the accompanying verses, which must be viewed, not as the poetry of John Hay, but as John Hay at 21; thoughtful, sensitive, idealistic, with a keen sense of humor, exquisite taste in things, people, and thoughts, and a remarkable command of his own mother tongue.

The two remaining letters are penned from Springfield, Illinois; the one in May, 1859, and the other almost a year later.

In the interim Hay had left Warsaw, and after a brief stay at Pittsfield had begun the study of law with his uncle, Colonel Milton Hay, though it is recorded that for a time he seriously considered the subject of studying for the ministry.

At Springfield young Hay found his uncle in the turmoil of the political struggle which

was to lead to the nomination of Abraham Lincoln for the Presidency. Milton Hay's association with Lincoln was most intimate, and his nephew John was thrown into very close relationship with the latter; his appointment to the assistant-secretaryship came about naturally, and the opening of the conflict found John G. Nicolay, secretary to Lincoln, assisted by John Hay.

Springfield,
May 15th, 1859.

My dear Miss Perry :

On arriving here yesterday I was no less surprised than delighted to find a letter from you. As it has pursued rather a devious and lonesome course in following me through three weeks of Ishmaelitish wandering, I will not longer delay an answer, especially as my letter brings some-

thing to recommend itself, in the shape of the enclosed beautiful tribute to the material loveliness of our state, and the sparkling and rippling chimes which follow it. It is very amusing for me to be able to supply from my jealously hoarded store, jewels which you have scattered in the careless profusion of intellectual wealth. I should think of mutiny and sullen rebellion, however, if it were not for the promise you make of future restoration.

It may seem somewhat strange to you, Miss Perry, that I, holding, as you know I did, the honor of a correspondence with you and with Mrs. Whitman so high, and regarding it as so far above my own deserving, should have availed myself so little of the privilege so kindly granted. Let me make another admission, which may surprise you still more. Had it not been for the last note you wrote me, in which your goodness of heart was still so clearly visible, I should have probably never written to you again more than a sad acknowledgement of former kindness. But seeing

your handwriting once more and meeting you in spirit again, unites in a manner the broken links of the chain that binds the past and the present. Let me request, then, the privilege of a reply, and the pleasure of a continuance of the correspondence. In the mean time, I may only hint the reason of my silence.

I have wandered this winter in the valley of the shadow of death. All the universe, God, earth, and heaven have been to me but vague and gloomy phantasms. I have conversed with wild imaginings in the gloom of the forests. I have sat long hours by the sandy marge of my magnificent river, and felt the awful mystery of its unending flow, and heard an infinite lament breathed in the unquiet murmur of its whispering ripples. Never before have I been so much in society. Yet into every parlor my Daemon has pursued me. When the air has been fainting with prisoned perfumes, when every spirit thrilled to the delicate touch of airy harmonies, when perfect forms moved in uni-

son with perfect music, and mocked with their voluptuous grace the tortured aspirations of poetry, I have felt, coming over my soul colder than a northern wind, a conviction of the hideous unreality of all that moved and swayed and throbbed before me. It was not with the eye of a bigot, or the diseased perceptions of a penitent that I looked upon such scenes; it was with what seemed to me —

Thus far I wrote, and turned over the page and wrote no more for an hour. You have had enough of that kind of agonized confession, have n't you? An open human heart is not a pleasant thing. I wanted only to tell you why I had not written. It would have been easier to say it was simply impossible.

I am now at work. In work I always find rest. A strange paradox — but true. If my health returns, I do not question but that I shall work out of these shadows. If not, there is a cool rest under

the violets, and eternity is long enough to make right the errors and deficiencies of time.

Please write to me before long. I should not send you such a spasmodic and unfinished thing as this — but you want that article. I am going to join a spiritual circle soon. I am, of course, an unbeliever, but Mrs. Whitman has taught me to respect the new revelation, if not to trust it. How happy I should have been under other circumstances in my acquaintance with a soul so pure and high as hers. Tell her something for me that will not make her think less of me, and believe me,

Yours very sincerely,

John Hay.

I wrote to O'Connor a long time ago, and have heard nothing from him. Is he still in Philadelphia?

Springfield, Ill.

March 4, 1860.

My dear Miss Perry,

I cannot adequately tell you how flattered I was on receiving the evidence which you and the Doctor sent me so kindly, that I was not utterly forgotten by those I can never forget. I hope you may never be placed in a situation where you will be able to sympathize with my present habitudes of mind, or appreciate the feelings of grateful delight occasioned by a kindness like your last.

When in the midst of my laborious and intensely practical studies, the current of my thoughts is changed by a reminder of a state of existence so much higher than mine, I feel for a moment as a pilgrim might have felt, in the days when angels walked with men, who, lying weary and exhausted with his toilsome journey, has heard in the desert silence faint hints of celestial

melody, and seen the desolate sands empurpled and glorified with a fleeting flash of spiritual wings.

The splendor fades, but the ripples of memory still stir the stagnant waters of the soul, and life is less dreary that the vision has come and gone.

It is cowardly in me to cling so persistently to a life which is past. It is my duty, and in truth it is my ultimate intention to qualify myself for a Western Lawyer, et praeterea nihil, "only that and nothing more." Along the path of my future life, short tho' it be, my vision runs unchecked. No devious ways. No glimpses of sudden splendor striking athwart. No mysteries. No deep shadows, save those in my own soul, for I expect prosperity, speaking after the manner of men. No intense lights but at the end. So my life lies. A straight path — on both sides quiet labor, at the end, Death and Rest.

Yet though I know all this, though I feel that Illinois and Rhode Island are entirely antipa-

thetic — though I am aware that thy people are not my people, nor thy God my God, I cannot shut my friends out of my memory or annihilate the pleasant past. I cannot help being delighted to receive a letter from you, and to know that the Doctor sometimes remembers me. When I read "After the Ball," and when, going into the State House, the Secretary of State said to me, "Hay, have you read the last Atlantic? there is the prettiest poem there this month it has ever published," I could not help feeling a personal pride that I had heard it read, alive with the poet's voice and warm from the poet's heart.

What more can I say than to confess that my friends are necessary to me, to ask you to give my love to the Doctor, and to write to me as soon as you will. How glad I am that the world is learning to love Mrs. Whitman as much as those who have sat at the feet of the revered Priestess.

John Hay.

So closes the last letter in the little packet, tied up half-a-century ago, and the sensitive college boy, with his literary aspirations and poetic ideals, turns to follow his new chief in the direction of the "State House," casting a reluctant glance behind him at his alma mater, and at the loved group of friends in Providence.

In the light of John Hay's subsequent career this last letter is of special interest, setting forth as it does his youthful prophecy in regard to the dim future stretching ahead of him.

And what a contrast that early vision presents to the actual unfolding of the life which was to be the writer's portion!

John Hay longed for the cultured atmosphere of that small literary circle in Providence which he felt he had once for all relinquished, and dreamed not that the centres of culture the wide world over would one day beckon him to their holy of holies. He saw himself a hum-drum western lawyer, and

caught no glimpse of the honored associate of leaders in the land which he was destined to become. He pictured for himself "no devious ways," no "sudden splendor," yet he was bound to traverse the former with ease and diplomatic skill, to bear the latter with modest grace.

There were indeed "deep shadows," and a "prosperity" transcending youthful hopes. And finally, "intense lights" — "at the end," yes, here only too truly his early prophecy was realized. For "at the end" the search-lights of the world were flashed upon him.

Why should we shudder to slumber or die?

Peaceful is death

Wears the stripes

Of our wretched life

Our eyes grow glazed with the stormy day,

Our brain grows crazed with the humbled rattle

And we long to sink down from the sulphurous rattle

And steal from the thunderstorm's mouth away,

To the victor the pain

To the wounded the pain

Peace & calm on the grass the small sleep

Wear woven on the carpets we shall wrap

But can we ever

Go down to the grave?

When the heaven lowers aloud in its impotent grief,

When the sunlight is sparkling on mountain & sea,

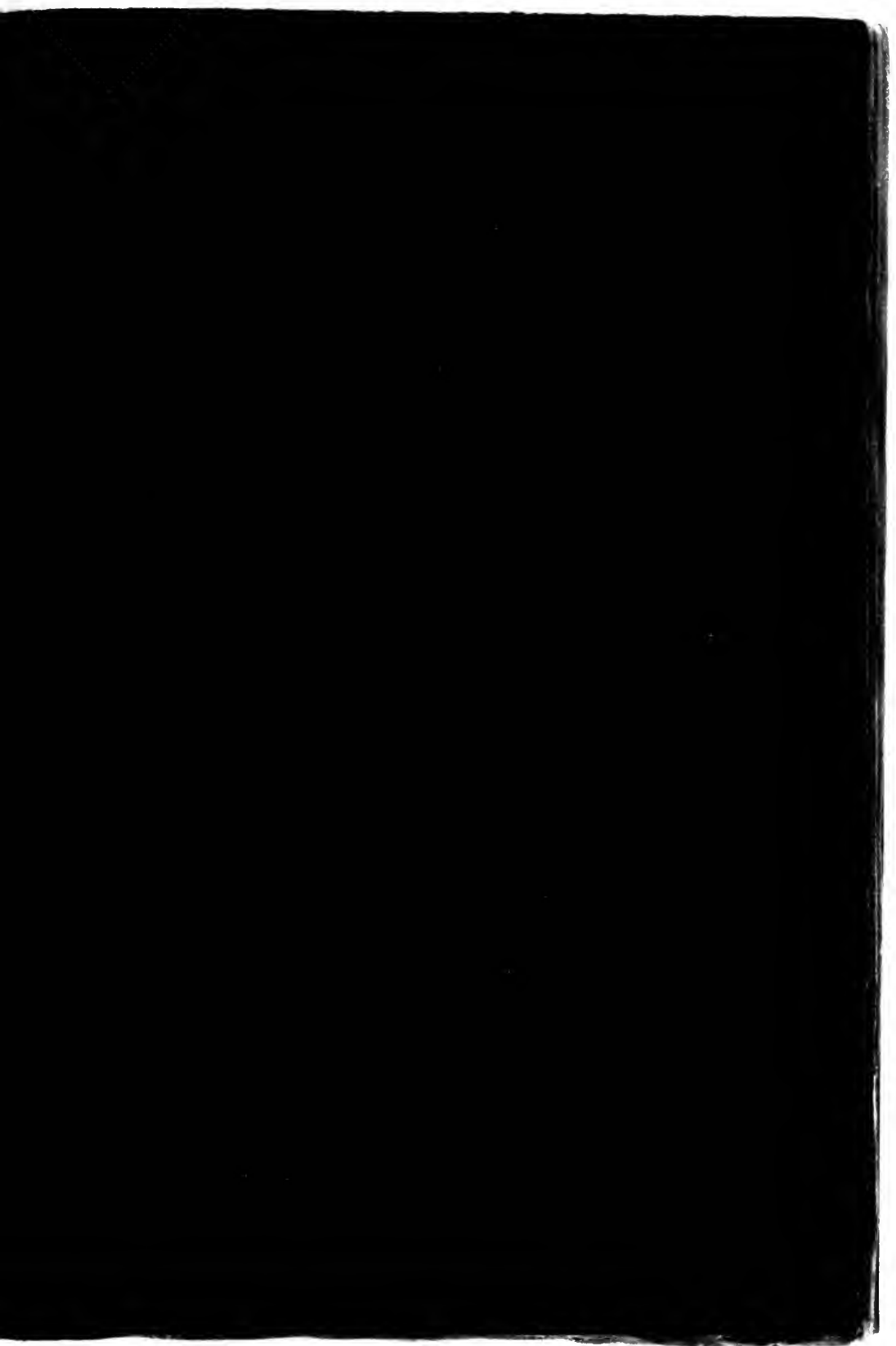
When every sea has its silver tongue

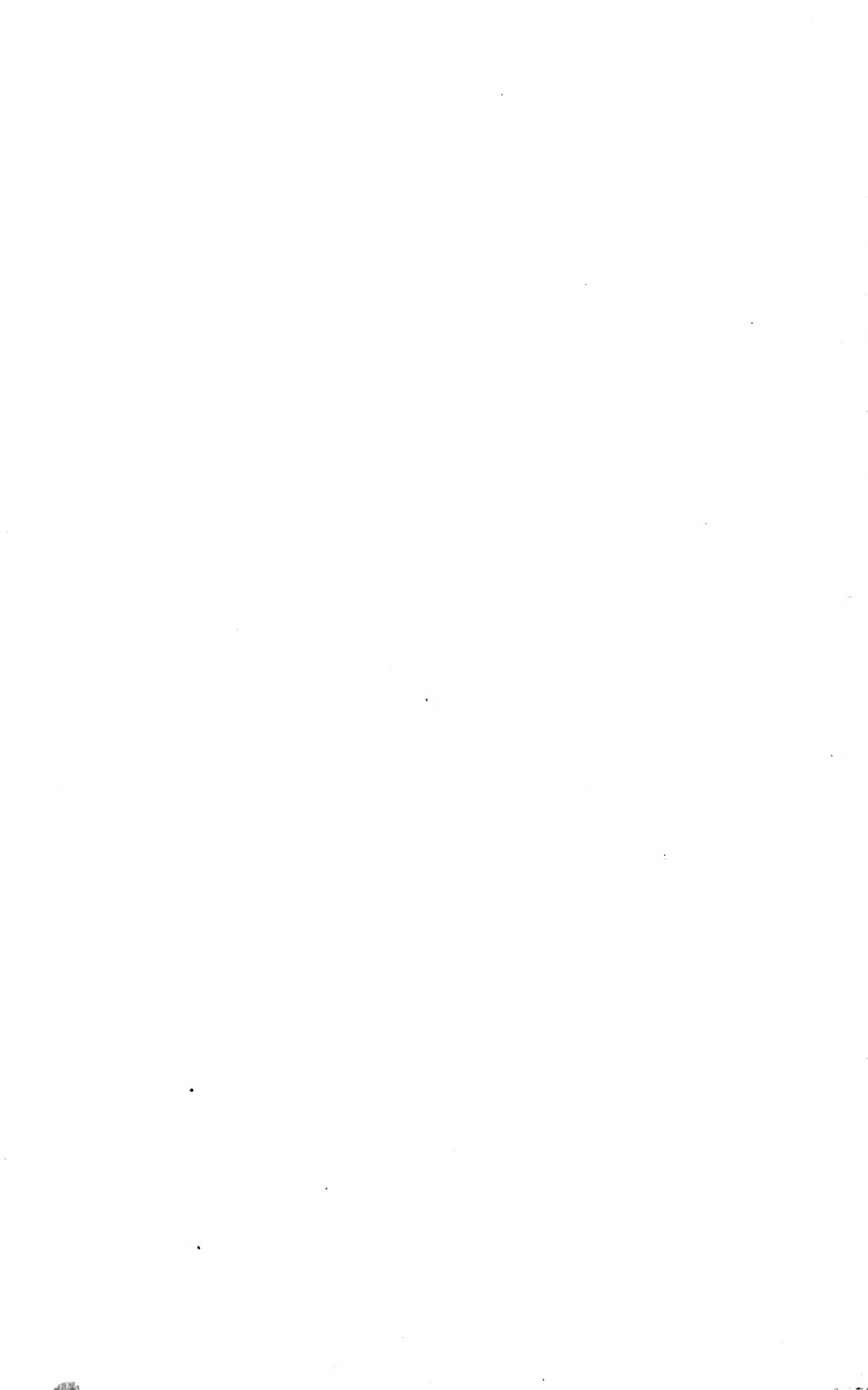
To challenge the red-impious blood of the young,

Shall we steal from the sunlight so golden & broad

To slumber in silence beneath the cold sod?









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