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HYMNS OF THE MARSHES



SIDNEY
LANIER

HYMNS OF THE MARSHES

BY
SIDNEY LANIER

ILLUSTRATED FROM NATURE BY HENRY TROTH

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
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HYMNS OF THE MARSHES

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HYMNS OF THE MARSHES

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ILLUSTRATIONS

*From photographs taken near Brunswick, Georgia, where the poet
derived his inspiration for the Hymns of the Marshes*

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HYMNS OF THE MARSHES



I

SUNRISE

IN my sleep I was fain of their fellowship, fain
Of the live-oak, the marsh, and the main.
The little green leaves would not let me alone in my
sleep;
Up-breathed from the marshes, a message of range and
of sweep,
Interwoven with waftures of wild sea-liberties, drifting,
Came through the lapped leaves sifting, sifting,
Came to the gates of sleep.

TO THE
ARMY

*In my sleep I was fain of their fellowship, fain
Of the live-oak, the marsh, and the main.*



SUNRISE

Then my thoughts, in the dark of the dungeon-keep
Of the Castle of Captives hid in the City of Sleep,
Upstartèd, by twos and by threes assembling:

 The gates of sleep fell a-trembling
Like as the lips of a lady that forth falter yes,
 Shaken with happiness:
 The gates of sleep stood wide.

I have waked, I have come, my beloved! I might not
 abide:

I have come ere the dawn, O beloved, my live-oaks, to
 hide

 In your gospelling glooms,—to be
As a lover in heaven, the marsh my marsh and the sea
 my sea.

Tell me, sweet burly-bark'd, man-bodied Tree
That mine arms in the dark are embracing, dost know
From what fount are these tears at thy feet which flow?

SUNRISE

They rise not from reason, but deeper inconsequent
deeps.

Reason 's not one that weeps.

What logic of greeting lies

Betwixt dear over-beautiful trees and the rain of the
eyes?

O cunning green leaves, little masters! like as ye gloss
All the dull-tissued dark with your luminous darks that
emboss

The vague blackness of night into pattern and plan,

So,

(But would I could know, but would I could know,)

With your question embroid'ring the dark of the ques-
tion of man,—

So, with your silences purfling this silence of man

While his cry to the dead for some knowledge is under
the ban,

Under the ban,—

SUNRISE

So, ye have wrought me
Designs on the night of our knowledge,—yea, ye have
taught me,
So,
That haply we know somewhat more than we know.

Ye lispers, whisperers, singers in storms,
Ye consciences murmuring faiths under forms,
Ye ministers meet for each passion that grieves,
Friendly, sisterly, sweetheart leaves,
Oh, rain me down from your darks that contain me
Wisdoms ye winnow from winds that pain me,—
Sift down tremors of sweet-within-sweet
That advise me of more than they bring,—repeat
Me the woods-smell that swiftly but now brought breath
From the heaven-side bank of the river of death,—
Teach me the terms of silence,—preach me
The passion of patience,—sift me,—impeach me,—
And there, oh there

*My gossip, the owl,—is it thou
That out of the leaves of the low-hanging bough,
As I pass to the beach, art stirred?
Dumb woods, have ye uttered a bird?*



SUNRISE

As ye hang with your myriad palms upturned in the air,
Pray me a myriad prayer.

My gossip, the owl,—is it thou
That out of the leaves of the low-hanging bough,
As I pass to the beach, art stirred?
Dumb woods, have ye uttered a bird?

* * * * *

Reverend Marsh, low-couched along the sea,
Old chemist, rapt in alchemy,
Distilling silence,—lo,

That which our father-age had died to know—

The menstruum that dissolves all matter—thou
Hast found it; for this silence, filling now
The globèd clarity of receiving space,
This solves us all: man, matter, doubt, disgrace,
Death, love, sin, sanity,
Must in yon silence' clear solution lie.

Too clear! That crystal nothing who 'll peruse?

SUNRISE

The blackest night could bring us brighter news.

Yet precious qualities of silence haunt

Round these vast margins, ministrant.

Oh, if thy soul 's at latter gasp for space,

With trying to breathe no bigger than thy race

Just to be fellow'd, when that thou hast found

No man with room, or grace enough of bound

To entertain that New thou tell'st, thou art,—

'T is here, 't is here, thou canst unhand thy heart

And breathe it free, and breathe it free,

By rangy marsh, in lone sea-liberty.

The tide 's at full: the marsh with flooded streams

Glimmers, a limpid labyrinth of dreams.

Each winding creek in grave entrancement lies

A rhapsody of morning-stars. The skies

Shine scant with one forked galaxy,—

The marsh brags ten: looped on his breast they lie.

*And look where the wild duck sails round the bend of
the river,—*



SUNRISE

Oh, what if a sound should be made!

Oh, what if a bound should be laid

To this bow-and-string tension of beauty and silence
a-spring,—

To the bend of beauty the bow, or the hold of silence the
string!

I fear me, I fear me yon dome of diaphanous gleam
Will break as a bubble o'er-blown in a dream,—

Yon dome of too-tenuous tissues of space and of night,
Over-weighted with stars, over-freighted with light,
Over-sated with beauty and silence, will seem

But a bubble that broke in a dream,
If a bound of degree to this grace be laid,
Or a sound or a motion made.

But no: it is made: list! somewhere,—mystery, where?

In the leaves? in the air?

In my heart? is a motion made;

'T is a motion of dawn, like a flicker of shade on shade.

SUNRISE

In the leaves, 't is palpable: low multitudinous stirring
Upwinds through the woods; the little ones, softly
conferring,

Have settled my lord 's to be looked for; so; they
are still;

But the air and my heart and the earth are a-thrill,—
And look where the wild duck sails round the bend of
the river,—

And look where a passionate shiver

Expectant is bending the blades

Of the marsh-grass in serial shimmers and shades,—

And invisible wings, fast fleeting, fast fleeting,

Are beating

The dark overhead as my heart beats,—and steady and
free

Is the ebb-tide flowing from marsh to sea—

(Run home, little streams,

With your lapfuls of stars and dreams),—

And a sailor unseen is hoisting a-peak,

SUNRISE

For list, down the inshore curve of the creek

How merrily flutters the sail,—

And lo, in the East! Will the East unveil?

The East is unveiled, the East hath confessed

A flush; 't is dead; 't is alive; 't is dead, ere the West

Was aware of it; nay, 't is abiding, 't is unwithdrawn:

Have a care, sweet Heaven! 'T is Dawn.

Now a dream of a flame through that dream of a flush
is uprolled;

To the zenith ascending, a dome of undazzling gold
Is builded, in shape as a bee-hive, from out of the sea;

The hive is of gold undazzling, but oh, the Bee,

The star-fed Bee, the build-fire Bee,

Of dazzling gold is the great Sun-Bee

That shall flash from the hive-hole over the sea.

Yet now the dew-drop, now the morning gray,

Shall live their little lucid sober day

*And look where a passionate shiver
Expectant is bending the blades
Of the marsh-grass in serial shimmers and shades,—*



SUNRISE

Ere with the sun their souls exhale away.
Now in each pettiest personal sphere of dew
The summ'd morn shines complete as in the blue
Big dew-drop of all heaven; with these lit shrines
O'er-silvered to the farthest sea-confines,
The sacramental marsh one pious plain
Of worship lies. Peace to the ante-reign
Of Mary Morning, blissful mother mild,
Minded of nought but peace, and of a child.
Not slower than Majesty moves, for a mean and a
measure
Of motion,—not faster than dateless Olympian leisure
Might pace with unblown ample garments from pleasure
to pleasure,—
The wave-serrate sea-rim sinks unjarring, unreeling,
Forever revealing, revealing, revealing,
Edgewise, bladewise, halfwise, wholewise,—'t is done!
Good-morrow, lord Sun!
With several voice, with ascription one,

SUNRISE

The woods and the marsh and the sea and my soul
Unto thee, whence the glittering stream of all morrows
doth roll,
Cry good and past-good and most heavenly morrow,
lord Sun.

O Artisan born in the purple,—Workman Heat,—
Parter of passionate atoms that travail to meet
And be mixed in the death-cold oneness,—innermost
Guest
At the marriage of elements,—fellow of publicans,—
blest
King in the blouse of flame, that loiterest o'er
The idle skies yet laborest fast evermore,—
Thou, in the fine forge-thunder, thou, in the beat
Of the heart of a man, thou Motive,—Laborer Heat:
Yea, Artist, thou, of whose art yon sea 's all news,
With his inshore greens and manifold mid-sea blues,
Pearl-glint, shell-tint, ancientest perfectest hues

SUNRISE

Ever shaming the maidens,—lily and rose
Confess thee, and each mild flame that glows
In the clarified virginal bosoms of stones that shine,
It is thine, it is thine:

Thou chemist of storms, whether driving the winds
a-swirl

Or a-flicker the subtiler essences polar that whirl
In the magnet earth,—yea, thou with a storm for a heart,
Rent with debate, many-spotted with question, part
From part oft sundered, yet ever a globèd light,
Yet ever the artist, ever more large and bright
Than the eye of a man may avail of:—manifold One,
I must pass from thy face, I must pass from the face of
the Sun;

Old Want is awake and agog, every wrinkle a-frown;
The worker must pass to his work in the terrible town;
But I fear not, nay, and I fear not the thing to be done;
I am strong with the strength of my lord the Sun;

SUNRISE

How dark, how dark soever the race that must needs be
run,

I am lit with the sun.

Oh, never the mast-high run of the seas

Of traffic shall hide thee,

Never the hell-colored smoke of the factories

Hide thee,

Never the reek of the time's fen-politics

Hide thee,

And ever my heart through the night shall with know-
ledge abide thee,

And ever by day shall my spirit, as one that hath tried
thee,

Labor, at leisure, in art,—till yonder beside thee

My soul shall float, friend Sun,

The day being done.

BALTIMORE, December, 1880.



II

INDIVIDUALITY

SAIL on, sail on, fair cousin Cloud:

Oh loiter hither from the sea.

Still-eyed and shadow-brow'd,
Steal off from yon far-drifting crowd,
And come and brood upon the marsh with me.

Yon laboring low horizon-smoke,

Yon stringent sail, toil not for thee

Nor me; did heaven's stroke

INDIVIDUALITY

The whole deep with drown'd commerce choke,
No pitiless tease of risk or bottomry

Would to thy rainy office close
Thy will, or lock mine eyes from tears,
 Part wept for traders'-woes,
Part for that ventures mean as those
In issue bind such sovereign hopes and fears.

—Lo, Cloud, thy downward countenance stares
Blank on the blank-faced marsh, and thou
 Mindest of dark affairs;
Thy substance seems a warp of cares;
Like late wounds run the wrinkles on thy brow.

Well may'st thou pause, and gloom, and stare,
A visible conscience: I arraign
 Thee, criminal Cloud, of rare
Contempts on Mercy, Right, and Prayer,—
Of murders, arsons, thefts,—of nameless stain

*Sail on, sail on, fair cousin Cloud:
Oh loiter hither from the sea.*



INDIVIDUALITY

(Yet though life's logic grow as gray
As thou, my soul 's not in eclipse.)

Cold Cloud, but yesterday
Thy lightning slew a child at play,
And then a priest with prayers upon his lips

For his enemies, and then a bright
Lady that did but ope the door
Upon the storming night
To let a beggar in,—strange spite,—
And then thy sulky rain refused to pour

Till thy quick torch a barn had burned
Where twelve months' store of victual lay,
A widow's sons had earned;
Which done, thy floods with winds returned,—
The river raped their little herd away.

What myriad righteous errands high
Thy flames *might* run on! In that hour

INDIVIDUALITY

Thou slewest the child, oh why
Not rather slay Calamity,
Breeder of Pain and Doubt, infernal Power?

Or why not plunge thy blades about
Some maggot politician throng
 Swarming to parcel out
The body of a land, and rout
The maw-conventicle, and ungorge Wrong?

*What the cloud doeth
The Lord knoweth,
The cloud knoweth not.
What the artist doeth,
The Lord knoweth;
Knoweth the artist not?*

Well-answered!—O dear artists, ye
—Whether in forms of curve or hue

INDIVIDUALITY

Or tone your gospels be—
Say wrong *This work is not of me,*
But God: it is not true, it is not true.

Awful is Art because 't is free.
The artist trembles o'er his plan
Where men his Self must see.
Who made a song or picture, he
Did it, and not another, God nor man.

My Lord is large, my Lord is strong:
Giving, He gave: my me is mine.

How poor, how strange, how wrong,
To dream He wrote the little song
I made to Him with love's unforced design!

Oh, not as clouds dim laws have plann'd
To strike down Good and fight for Ill,—

Oh, not as harps that stand
In the wind and sound the wind's command:
Each artist—gift of terror!—owns his will.

INDIVIDUALITY

For thee, Cloud,—if thou spend thine all
Upon the South's o'er-brimming sea
That needs thee not; or crawl
To the dry provinces, and fall
Till every convert clod shall give to thee

Green worship; if thou grow or fade,
Bring on delight or misery,
Fly east or west, be made
Snow, hail, rain, wind, grass, rose, light, shade;
What matters it to thee? There is no thee.

Pass, kinsman Cloud, now fair and mild:
Discharge the will that 's not thine own.
I work in freedom wild,
But work, as plays a little child,
Sure of the Father, Self, and Love, alone.

BALTIMORE, 1878-9.



III

MARSH SONG—AT SUNSET

OVER the monstrous shambling sea,
 Over the Caliban sea,
Bright Ariel-cloud, thou lingerest;
Oh wait, oh wait, in the warm red West,—
 Thy Prospero I'll be.

Over the humped and fishy sea,
 Over the Caliban sea
O cloud in the West, like a thought in the heart

Over the monstrous shambling sea,



MARSH SONG—AT SUNSET

Of pardon, loose thy wing, and start,
And do a grace for me.

Over the huge and huddling sea,
Over the Caliban sea,
Bring hither my brother Antonio,—Man,—
My injurer; night breaks the ban:
Brother, I pardon thee.

BALTIMORE, 1879-80.





IV

THE MARSHES OF GLYNN

GLOOMS of the live-oaks, beautiful-braided and woven
With intricate shades of the vines that myriad-cloven

Clamber the forks of the multiform boughs,—

Emerald twilights,—

Virginal shy lights,

Wrought of the leaves to allure to the whisper of vows,
When lovers pace timidly down through the green
colonnades

Of the dim sweet woods, of the dear dark woods,

Of the heavenly woods and glades,

*Glooms of the live-oaks, beautiful-braided and woven
With intricate shades of the vines that myriad-cloven
Clamber the forks of the multi-form boughs,—*



THE MARSHES OF GLYNN

That run to the radiant marginal sand-beach within
The wide sea-marshes of Glynn;—

Beautiful glooms, soft dusks in the noon-day fire,—
Wildwood privacies, closets of lone desire,
Chamber from chamber parted with wavering arras of
leaves,—

Cells for the passionate pleasure of prayer to the soul
that grieves,
Pure with a sense of the passing of saints through the
wood,

Cool for the dutiful weighing of ill with good;—

O braided dusks of the oak and woven shades of the
vine

While the riotous noon-day sun of the June-day long
did shine

Ye held me fast in your heart and I held you fast in
mine;

*Of the dim sweet woods, of the dear dark woods,
Of the heavenly woods and glades,*



THE MARSHES OF GLYNN

But now when the noon is no more, and riot is rest,
And the sun is a-wait at the ponderous gate of the West,
And the slant yellow beam down the wood-aisle doth
seem

Like a lane into heaven that leads from a dream,—
Ay, now, when my soul all day hath drunken the soul
of the oak,

And my heart is at ease from men, and the wearisome
sound of the stroke

Of the scythe of time and the trowel of trade is low,
And belief overmasters doubt, and I know that I
know,

And my spirit is grown to a lordly great compass
within,

That the length and the breadth and the sweep of the
marshes of Glynn

Will work me no fear like the fear they have wrought
me of yore

When length was fatigue, and when breadth was but
bitterness sore,

Affable live-oak, leaning low,—



THE MARSHES OF GLYNN

And when terror and shrinking and dreary unnamable
pain

Drew over me out of the merciless miles of the plain,—

Oh, now, unafraid, I am fain to face

The vast sweet visage of space.

To the edge of the wood I am drawn, I am drawn,

Where the gray beach glimmering runs, as a belt of
the dawn,

For a mete and a mark

To the forest-dark:—

So:

Affable live-oak, leaning low,—

Thus—with your favor—soft, with a reverent hand,

(Not lightly touching your person, Lord of the land!)

Bending your beauty aside, with a step I stand

On the firm-packed sand,

Free

By a world of marsh that borders a world of sea.

*Sinuous southward and sinuous northward the
shimmering band
Of the sand-beach fastens the fringe of the marsh
to the folds of the land.*



THE MARSHES OF GLYNN

Sinuous southward and sinuous northward the
shimmering band

Of the sand-beach fastens the fringe of the marsh
to the folds of the land.

Inward and outward to northward and southward the
beach-lines linger and curl

As a silver-wrought garment that clings to and follows
the firm sweet limbs of a girl.

Vanishing, swerving, evermore curving again into sight,
Softly the sand-beach wavers away to a dim gray loop-
ping of light.

And what if behind me to westward the wall of the
woods stands high?

The world lies east: how ample, the marsh and the sea
and the sky!

A league and a league of marsh-grass, waist-high, broad
in the blade,

Green, and all of a height, and unflecked with a light or
a shade,

*A league and a league of marsh-grass, waist-high, broad
in the blade,
Green, and all of a height, and unflecked with a light or
a shade,*



THE MARSHES OF GLYNN

Stretch leisurely off, in a pleasant plain,
To the terminal blue of the main.

Oh, what is abroad in the marsh and the terminal sea?
 Somehow my soul seems suddenly free
From the weighing of fate and the sad discussion of sin,
By the length and the breadth and the sweep of the
 marshes of Glynn.

Ye marshes, how candid and simple and nothing-
 withholding and free
Ye publish yourselves to the sky and offer yourselves to
 the sea!
Tolerant plains, that suffer the sea and the rains and the
 sun,
Ye spread and span like the catholic man who hath
 mightily won
God out of knowledge and good out of infinite pain
And sight out of blindness and purity out of a stain.