

BROTHER AND LOVER

EBEN E. REXFORD

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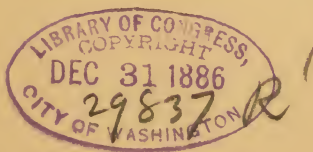


# BROTHER AND LOVER:

## A WOMAN'S STORY.

✓  
By EBEN E. REXFORD.

33



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JOHN B. ALDEN.



TO ALL WOMEN, NORTH AND SOUTH,  
WHOSE MEMORY GOES BACK TO WAR-TIME,  
THIS LITTLE VOLUME IS INSCRIBED.



# BROTHER AND LOVER :

## *A WOMAN'S STORY.*

---

I never shall forget the summer day  
When mother died. If I but close my eyes  
It all comes back to me, as, after dreams,  
Remembrance of them haunts our waking  
hours.

I hear the low, soft twitter of the birds  
Whose nest was hidden in the cherry tree  
Beside the window, as they talked about  
Their little brood. I hear the summer wind  
Among the flowers in the garden beds,—  
Sweet-smelling pinks, old-fashioned mari-  
golds,  
And lilies, each a cup at early morn,  
Brimmed with cool dew for sunshine-elves  
to drink,  
And after that a cradle for the bee,  
Rocked by the wind. And I can hear the  
song  
Of mowers in the valley, and the ring  
Of sharpening scythes, and see the fragrant  
grass

Tremble and fall in long and billowy  
swaths,  
As if green waves from some advancing tide  
Broke at the mower's feet; and I can see  
The meadows over which swift shadows pass,  
As clouds go by between it and the sky,  
And fancy it a sea whene'er the wind  
Blows over it, and crinkling billows run  
From isles of shade to golden shores of sun :  
And one white mullein seems the filling sail  
Of a fair shallop on this summer sea,  
Freighted with fancies from some far  
Cathay,  
Where dreams are gathered as we gather  
flowers  
In idle mood, scarce knowing what we do.

It all comes back to me like yesterday,—  
That summer hour, across whose sunshine  
fell  
The lonesome shadow of an unmade grave.

In those long days, when sense of coming loss  
Hung like a cloud between me and the world,  
And seemed to shut me in, a prisoner there,  
Away from those who had no care to vex—  
No grief to bear—I used to sit and think

Of what must be.—I saw dear mother's face  
Grow thinner, paler, like a sail that fades  
In the gray distance, and I knew full well  
That she was drifting out upon the tide  
That sets toward the Infinite Sea, and soon  
Where her dear face made sunshine in the  
room

The shadow of dread Azrael's wing would  
fall.

Where was the Heaven she was going to?  
So far away that she could no more see  
The children she had loved and left behind?  
When trouble came to us, could her warm  
heart—

No less a mother's heart in Heaven than it  
had been

A mother's heart on earth—know of it all,  
And understand our sorrows as of old?  
What Heaven was I hardly understood,  
For childhood's thoughts are vague ones at  
the best

About the mysteries of life and death;  
But I was sure that Heaven would not be  
The Heaven of my fancy if it shut  
Our mother and her love away from us.

Mother would often talk with Rob and me  
About her going from us. Never once

She spoke of it as dying, for I think  
“Going away” has not so sad a sound  
As “dying” has, and in that thoughtful love  
Which always sought to spare her children  
    pain,

She chose the simple phrase in daily use  
Among us when we speak of those who go  
Upon a journey. If we think of them  
As *gone away, not dead*, we do not feel  
That awful sense of loss which death sug-  
    gests ;

We, someway, do not feel their absence so ;  
A little time of parting from our friends—  
A parting all must know—and then  
To be with them again. Sometime, some-  
    where,

The sundered paths will meet, and love will  
    have

Its own again,—its own forevermore.

But if we think of them as *dead*, we seem  
To stand upon the brink of a great gulf  
Too wide for us to cross, and feel that they  
Are separated from us by a sea  
That breaks upon a shore of mystery,  
And they are lost to us. At least to me  
It always brings such dreary fancies up  
To speak of death, or absent friends as dead.  
So, when our mother talked with Rob and me

About her going from us, I would feel  
That after she was gone, 'twould be as if  
Her feet had climbed a long, steep hill, and  
    she  
Was on the other side, just out of sight,  
But never far away. The thought was sweet  
With comfort for a childish heart like mine,  
Perplexed by thoughts of what I felt must  
    be,  
The mystery that I could not comprehend.

Years have gone by since then, but to this  
    day  
I always think of mother and of Rob  
As on the hill's far side. When I have  
    climbed  
The pathway to the summit, I shall see  
The dear ones I have loved and missed so  
    much,  
For just beyond the hilltop it is Heaven.

It was at sunset when she went away.  
The robin sang, high in the cherry tree,  
A little vesper song; sang soft and low,  
As if he feared the silver sound might break  
The spell of peace that rested on the world.

We heard the drowsy tinkling of the bells  
Of cattle coming homeward down the hill,  
And pleasant sights and sounds were every-  
where  
About us and above us.

All at once

She called us, and we went to her. She put  
The mother-arms about us, folding close  
Her children to the mother-heart once more,  
And kissed us many times, while whisper-  
ing o'er

The tender names her love had given us,—  
The dear pet names that never sound so sweet  
As when a mother speaks them to the child  
Upon her breast,—between each one a kiss.

“Dear little Ruth and Robbie,” mother said,  
“At last the time has come when I must go  
Upon the journey I have told you of.”  
And then she held us closer to her heart  
As if to ward away the unseen hands  
That sought to part us.

“But, when I am gone,  
In times of trouble,—and such times will  
come,—

When you would talk to some one who can  
give  
The sympathy you need, come to my grave.



And there above the grass that covers me,  
Tell mother all about it,—she will hear;  
Remember that, my children,—I shall know.  
Oh Ruth, dear little Ruth, be very kind  
To Brother Rob, for he'll have no one else  
To look to for the love that he will need  
When I am gone. I leave him in your care,  
And henceforth you must be to him, my  
child,  
Mother as well as sister."

Then she kissed  
My eyes, and called me "mother's own  
good girl."

—I love to think of that.—

A little silence fell  
While I cried softly on her breast, and Rob  
Was still, awed by the mystery in the air,  
His eyes full of vague wonderment as he  
Looked up in mother's face. The sunset lit  
The room with sudden splendor, and I  
thought,—

Strange how such thoughts will come at  
such a time,—

Of something in the Bible I had heard  
My mother read: The Revelator's tale  
Of what he saw in visions, when the gates  
Of Heaven were opened. And I wondered  
then

If the great gates had not been swung apart,  
And sunset's sudden glory was a glimpse  
Of what the poet-prophet saw. The hills  
Were crested all with fire, and every tree  
Seemed to have changed its leaves of green  
for gold.

The branches of the cherry at the pane  
Kept tap, tap, tapping, as if unseen hands  
Were there, and I remember wondering  
If messengers from God's white city stood  
Outside the window, waiting to come in.

The glory of the sunset died away,  
And shades of twilight filled the silent room.  
I thought that mother slept, but suddenly  
She stirred and spoke my name. I put my  
face

Close to her own, for answer, in the dusk.

“And Robbie, is he here?”—I laid his head  
Upon her breast. She kissed him many times.

“Be good to him, my little Ruth,” she said;  
“Be good to him,—be mother's own good  
girl.

God bless you both and have you in His care  
Forever—ever—”

Then her voice was still,  
And I was sure that mother slept again.

Mysterious sleep—from which none ever  
wake  
To tell us what they dream of, if they dream.

The robin by his nest sang all at once  
A little strain that trembled through the  
dusk

In sounds that were like ripples on a pool—  
Fainter and fainter as the circles grow,  
Until they touch the shores. So softly died  
The ripple of the robin's song away  
Upon the shore of silence.

Who shall say  
He did not hear some echo of the song  
The angels sang when mother went away,  
And sang because the music was so sweet  
That he could not be silent? Ah, who knows?

From that strange slumber mother did not  
wake. [away,"  
They told us she was dead,—said "Come  
And covered her white face.—

I could not stay  
Where faces were so curious, though so kind  
And full of sympathy for us, and so  
With Robbie's hand in mine I went away  
Where none but him and God would see  
my grief.

“Gone—gone away” seemed whispered by  
the wind,  
As if it told the night about our loss,  
To stir its heart with tenderness for those  
Whose dearest, truest friend had gone from  
them  
On the long journey all must sometime take.  
The darkness seemed to fold us to its breast  
As if in pity for our loneliness ;  
It seemed to me as if our mother's love  
Pervaded all things in the silent night,  
As fragrance from a flower fills the air.  
You may not see the flower, and yet you feel  
Its presence by its sweetness. So it seemed  
That all about us, earth, and air, and sky,  
Was eloquent of mother and the love  
That is as strong and steadfast as the sea,  
And most like God's.

Next day they let me in  
To mother's room. They fancied I would be

Afraid of the still form from which the soul  
Had flown away, as the long-captive bird  
Flies from the cage behind whose prison bars  
So long its home has been, when some kind  
    hand  
Sets wide the door.

    I bade them go away  
And leave me with my dead. Afraid? Not I.  
What was there I should fear?

    They shut the door  
And left me with the mystery of death.

Filled with an awe that was akin to fear,  
I lifted the white cloth that hid her face.

Was *that* my mother? Had I ever kissed  
These lips of marble, upon which the seal  
Of an eternal silence seemed to be?  
The dead face wore that awful, sphinx-like  
    look

Which gives such dignity to death. It  
    seemed

As if behind the frozen mask was hid  
All wisdom, and the secret no one knows  
Until he learns it from the lips of God,  
In that supremest moment when the soul

Puts off the garments it has worn, and stands  
Naked before its maker.

Long I stood  
And looked on that white face.  
At last I felt  
A crushing sense of isolation creep  
Upon me, for it seemed as if no more  
Would mother comprehend the things of  
earth.

Remembrance of it must be blotted out  
In the great transformation death had made.

I hid my face—I could no longer look  
Upon the form before me, and I wept  
In heart-sick, hopeless sorrow.

---

By and by  
I heard a step, and thought to run away  
To hide my grief. But as the steps drew near,  
I knew who came, and checked my sudden  
flight.

The door was opened softly, and John Earle  
Looked in. Upon his thoughtful face I saw  
An earnest look that touched me like a word  
That goes straight to the heart because it  
means  
So much.

He saw me standing in the gloom,  
And came and stood beside me.  
“See,” he said,  
“I brought some pansies,” and held out his  
hands  
Full of the flowers most like human things  
Of any flowers that grow. “I brought them,  
Ruth,  
Because I knew she loved them.”

That was all,  
But it was quite enough. He understood  
My sorrow's sacredness. Such sympathy  
Is sweet as rain is in the time of drought  
To parched and thirsty meadows. It was told  
In language wordless, but more eloquent  
Than any words can be.

I took his flowers—  
Purple and azure, with such golden hearts  
It seemed as if they had condensed the  
warmth  
And brightness of the June in them, and  
put

Some in my mother's hand, some on her  
breast.

They seemed to take away the far-off look  
The marble face had worn, and make it more  
Like mother's face to me.

He turned away  
In silence, with grave eyes; and I went out  
With him, and shut the door upon the dead.

Next day they buried mother on the hill,  
Where father's grave was, underneath a tree  
Where birds built nests and sang their  
summer songs

As if they had no thoughts of death or loss,—  
No sorrow such as comes to human hearts,  
Sooner or later.

Up the hillside road  
We followed her whom kind hands bore  
away

From the old home. We might go *after* her,  
Not *with* her, as of old, to the grave's brink:  
But there our feet must pause; we might not  
pass

The boundary of this world. We must await  
God's own good time before we entered in  
To know the mystery of that Other World  
Which lies so close to this,—a sod between  
The Here and the Hereafter.



As we went,  
John walked with us, with Robbie's hand  
in his;

And when they let the coffin down, I saw  
That he had coaxed the boy to look away  
From the sad sight made by a closing grave.  
Such a kind, thoughtful heart was his that he  
Would always seek to keep from other eyes  
The sad sights of this life.

When the last sod  
Was heaped o'er mother's face, I turned  
away

With Robbie from the spot, and we went  
down

The old path to the river, where the trees  
Would hide from sight the new grave on  
the hill.

I dropped down in the grass and hid my face,  
And sobbed out "Mother—mother."

Did she hear?  
Or was her heart so filled with solemn awe  
Of Heaven's ineffable glory and of God  
There was no room, just then, for thought  
of me?

"Won't mother come back to us any more?"  
Asked Robbie, creeping closer to my side.

“How can she?” was my answer. For my  
grief  
Was like a cloud that stretched across the  
sky,  
Hiding the sunshine of a childish faith  
In what the mother I had lost had taught  
Me to believe.

“But don’t you know she said  
That we could tell her things? If she has gone  
’Way off, and won’t come back, we can’t do  
that.”

“I know she told us so,” I answered him;  
“But oh!”—the world-old cry of sorrow,—  
“she  
Has gone out of our life.” And then I dropped  
My tear-wet face down in the grass that  
seemed  
To listen with a silent sympathy,  
And leaned to touch my cheek with fingers  
kind,  
As if it knew the comfort a caress  
Can give to grieving hearts.

“Then, Ruth,” a voice  
Said close beside us, grave and gentle-toned,  
—John’s voice—“you must not think there’s  
no one left

To love you, now your mother's gone away,  
For, Ruth, *I* love you."

"Yes," I made reply,  
"But not as she did."

"That is true," he said ;  
"No other love is like a mother's love,  
And yet there may be love as strong and  
true.

You'll let me love you as your brother does,  
Won't you, dear Ruth ?"

"Yes, if you will," I said ;  
"But all the love I ever have to give  
Shall go to Rob. I'll keep it all for him."

Then Robbie looked at me with wondering  
eyes,

And asked, "Won't you love Johnny, Sis-  
ter Ruth ?

*I* love him, lots and lots."

"I'll be his *friend*,"

I said, "one of his best and truest friends ;  
But mother would not like to have me share  
The love I promised I would give to you  
Between you and another. All for you,  
For you, dear Robbie, will I keep my love,  
But John shall stand next to you,—as a  
*friend*."

In those long days of loneliness and loss,  
John's friendship was the staff on which I  
    leant.

He understood me as no other did.

He often came to talk with me of her  
Whose feet had crossed the threshold of the  
    world

Invisible to us, and when he spoke  
Of her as out of sight, yet near—so near—  
And knowing, as of old, our needs of her,  
His words were very sweet to listen to.

“She comes to you in other than old ways,”  
He said to me. “She tells you in a flower  
That she remembers; and you dream of her,  
And think that she is near you. Who shall  
    say

'Tis nothing but a dream? I always see  
Her face in pansy blossoms, for you know  
She loved the pansy best of any flower.  
My mother loved no other flower so well  
As lilacs; and each year at lilac-time  
I feel a strange, deep gladness, for it seems  
As if my mother had come back to me  
In the sweet blossoms. I have sometimes  
    thought

It may be that the flower we love the best

When we are here on earth, becomes, when  
we

Are dead, the messenger of tender thoughts  
To those we left behind us, and we tell  
In bloom and fragrance, messages of love  
That Heaven makes sweeter. So, in lilac-  
time,

I whisper to the blossoms, and it seems  
As if they understood me. When a breath  
Of fragrance comes, at morning or at night,  
To greet me from the lilacs at the door,  
I think, 'She has a loving thought for me,'  
And I am glad—so glad."

His eyes were bright  
With pleasure at the fancy.

"I shall try  
To think my mother comes to me like that,"  
I said. And when, next morning, I went up  
To sit by the new grave beneath the elm,  
I found a bunch of pansies blossoming there,  
And knew well where they came from. Every  
flower

Seemed beckoning me, as if in eagerness  
To tell me something. I knelt down beside  
The grave o'er which the summer's gentle  
hand

Had spread a coverlet of green, whereon  
The June's deft fingers wrought a broidery

Of fairy-fine conceit, and kissed each flower  
As if I kissed my mother's face. It seemed  
—Perhaps it was but fancy, or the wind,  
Maybe, among the branches of the elm—  
As if some voice in whisper spoke my name,  
And, to my ear, it sounded like *her* voice,  
Far-off, as out of Heaven. And I was glad.  
Our fancies, though we know them to be  
such,  
Make little spots of beauty in our lives ;  
And God be thanked that fancies come,  
say I,  
To cheer us all along the road of life.

It seems to me, whenever I look back  
To childhood, that the years that lie between  
The cradle and the time when we are grown  
To man's and woman's estate, are like a  
dream.

It is like drifting down a sunny river,  
From morning to the noontide, past the  
shores  
That slip away behind our little boat  
Unnoticed, unregretted. Not a cloud  
Of care to blot the sunshine as we look  
Ahead, but never back, with eager eyes,  
Imagining that the hills whose peaks we see

Beyond us, and far off, are fairer far  
Than those receding from us, as we drift  
All dreamily down the windening stream of  
time.

Before we are aware the morn is past—  
Has vanished like the rose of yesterday,—  
And we have reached the hills that seemed  
far off

A little time ago. No dreaming for us now.  
“Dreams are for childhood and old age,”  
we say.

It is for us to do the work of life  
As best we may, and with brave, hopeful  
hearts

We look about us, eager to begin.

Alas, how many weary in the strife,  
And long to have it over, and lie down  
Beneath the shelter of the grass to rest.

So from our dream of childhood Rob and I  
Woke suddenly, one day, to find that we  
Were man and woman.

“Do—you comprehend  
The mighty meaning in that little word,  
A man,” I asked. “God grant that you  
may be

A man in deed and thought as well as name.”  
“God helping me, I will,” he said, and put  
His loving arms about me with a kiss,  
As if to set the seal of love upon  
The promise he had made.

No one can know  
How much I loved my brother. Upon him  
I lavished the affections of my heart,  
Giving him all, and keeping nothing back.  
With him to love, I felt no need of friends,  
And so my friends were few. Now, looking  
back  
Along the stream on which we drifted down  
To manhood and to womanhood, one face,  
And only one, looks out of memory,  
Beside Rob's face, and that one is John  
Earle's.  
It brightens and blends in with all my  
thoughts  
Of childhood's time, as oft a memory  
Of melody heard on some happy day  
Comes back to haunt us in some after year.  
Always, when Robbie was away from me,  
He was with John; two boon companions,  
they;  
I often felt a pang of jealousy :



When Rob would come from some long talk  
with John,

Or row upon the river, or some tramp  
Among the woods and hills, because he spoke  
Such eager and enthusiastic words of him.  
I could not bear the thought that Robbie  
cared

For any one but me. I cannot tell  
Why I was selfish as I was, or why  
I so ignored all others for his sake  
In such a selfish fashion. It was not  
Because he wished to have it so, for he  
Had many friends, and friendship for them  
all.

And I knew, too, he would have liked it well  
If I had given to each one a share  
Of the affection kept for him alone.

As I look back, to-day, I see wherein  
I erred in keeping all my love for him.  
God does not mean that we should give to one  
The whole, when others justly claim a share.  
The friendship of the human heart belongs  
To many, not to few. The meadow rose  
May have one bee it cares for most of all,  
And therefore keep its sweetest sweets for  
him,

Because of that it should not close its cup  
To every other one.

Sometimes, the thought  
 That some day there would come a change  
     would cross  
 My heart like a dark shadow. It might be  
 A fairer face than mine would come between  
 Me and the brother that I loved so well,  
 And weave its spell about him, and would  
     claim  
 Part of the love I wanted wholly mine.

Something of this I said to him one day,  
 In laughing way, my arms about his neck ;  
 My words were lightly spoken, but I meant  
 Them all, and more.

“ Afraid of losing me ? ”

He laughed, and kissed the dimple on my  
     cheek—

His “ kissing-spot ” he called it—(To this  
     day

I let none kiss me there, because it seems  
 His, and his only.) “ Do not worry, Ruth;  
 No one shall come between us.”

Brother mine,  
 Over the hill upon the Heaven-side,  
 Nothing *has* come between us, and I know  
 That nothing ever can. Thank God for that.  
 The only difference that the years have made

Is, that he who was mine on earth is now  
Mine in the world of God.

One day when Rob stood with me on the  
porch

Beneath the brier roses, where the bees  
Were humming slumbrous music as they  
sucked

The nectar from the fragile, fragrant cups  
That seemed o'erflowing with the sun's rare  
wine,

He put his arms about my neck and said :

“You've often talked to me as if you feared  
Some one would steal away my love for you;  
As if they could,” and then he bent to kiss  
My face in boyish fashion. “Now I think  
I am the one who should be most afraid,  
Because,”—and then he took my face  
between

His hands, and looked into my eyes,—  
“because

I know of some one whom I count as friend  
Who'd like, I think, to rob me of my Ruth.”

I felt a wave of color rise and break  
Across my cheek. I knew full well he meant

That John, his friend and mine, had showed  
to him  
His heart, in some unguarded hour, and  
there  
Rob read the story of a love untold,  
As yet, in words.

A woman often feels  
The coming of a love before she hears  
Its footsteps on the threshold of her soul,  
And, standing there, timid yet bold, it  
knocks  
For entrance at the portals of her heart,  
As those who sit in silent thought alone  
Will feel a presence that they have not seen  
Or heard, and lift their eyes to meet the  
glance  
Of some one standing near.

Though to myself  
I had not said, in just so many words,  
That John Earle was my lover, I had felt  
His friendship had a tenderer quality  
Than ordinary friendships have. No word  
Of his had ever told as much to me,  
And yet, I knew it. I could feel the truth.  
I felt, as any woman will, a thrill  
Of pleasure at the thought of being loved

In such a way. When her first lover comes,  
A woman's heart is like a bud that feels  
The sunshine on its folded leaves—a stir  
Of new, strange gladness in its hidden  
depths,—

And then some burst into a sudden bloom  
And yield their fragrance to the subtle  
power

That opens the waiting flower; but I said,  
“I have no love to give him in return;  
It all belongs to Rob.” So I would keep  
My heart shut 'gainst the warmth of love's  
sweet sun.

“We will be friends,” I said, “the best of  
friends,  
But nothing more, for fate has willed it so.”

The nation's time of trial was at hand.  
We heard, far off, the mutterings of a storm,  
And in the Southern heavens we beheld  
A cloud of threatening blackness gathering  
Along the horizon, and all men felt  
Forebodings of the evil days to come..

One April afternoon I leaned across  
The window-sill to watch the world grow  
green,

While I was waiting for Rob's coming home,  
And wondering why it was he staid so long.  
At last he came, and ere he reached the gate  
I noted an excitement in his face,—  
A pale stern look whose strangeness fright-  
ened me.

“Something has happened to him,” was my  
thought,

And I ran out to meet him anxiously.

“What is it, Rob?” I cried. “How pale you  
are!

I never saw you look like this before.”

He took my hand in his, and from his eyes  
Flashed out the story he had come to tell  
In eager and impetuous words: “O, Ruth!  
There's going to be war. You'll scarce  
believe,

But it is true,—they've fired upon our flag  
At Sumter. They have dared to do a deed  
That sets the hearts of Northern men on  
fire,

And we will not sit down with folded hands,  
And wonder at it. We're not cowards yet!  
We will not see the old flag in the dust,  
Trodden by traitor feet, and make no sign.  
We'll prove to them the old blood courses  
yet

In Northern veins.”

I answered not a word,  
But sat down on the door-step, white and  
faint.

I closed my eyes. Before me swiftly passed  
A vision: and I saw a lonely hill,  
And on its sunny side, beneath a pine,  
A low, green grave,—unmarked by any  
stone,  
Or aught to tell who had found slumber  
there.

“What is the matter, Ruth?” my brother  
asked.

“Why, you are pale as death. Ruth, are  
you ill?”

“Not ill, but frightened, Rob,” was my  
reply.

I saw what was to be. I'd often feared  
Some fairer face than mine—some woman's  
face—

Would lure my brother from me. Now I  
knew

The face whose power I had dreaded so  
Was the stern face of Right—our Country's  
face.

I put my hand in his, and sunset fell  
About us peacefully, but the old peace was  
gone.

Henceforth the days would never be the same  
As they had been.

We sat there, speaking not,  
Till the last glow of crimson faded out  
In gloom in the far west, as on the hearth  
The flame dies out in ashes.

“Ruth,” he cried  
At last, with flashing eyes, “*can* it be true?  
I can’t help thinking of it.”

“Don’t,” I said,  
And put my hand over his eyes to hide  
The excitement in them. “Surely it can  
make  
No difference with *us*.”

Then he cried out  
In eager way—I hear the brave words yet—  
“Ruth, would you have your brother stay  
at home  
If he was needed by his Country? No!  
I know you would not. You’re too brave for  
that.

You would despise a coward.”

How his face  
Kindled, as if the sunset lingered yet  
Above the hills, and flashed its light on him,



My loyal-hearted brother, as he stood  
On the home threshold over which his feet  
Would soon go forth, never to make again  
The music of beloved footsteps there.

“But you are all I have on earth,” I cried.  
How can I let you go?” and all my heart  
Was in the cry.

From other hearts than mine—  
So many, many hearts in North and South—  
That same sad cry went up in those dark  
days,

When the land waited with abated breath  
The breaking of the storm so close at hand,—  
The dread simoom that strewed the hills  
with graves,

And made the valleys places of the dead ;  
When Sorrow sat by every hearth, and tears  
Were dropping swiftly like the sands that  
mark

The passing moments in the glass of time.

We heard a step. John Earle came up the  
path,

And said “Good evening” to us. Silently  
We made room for him on the step, and he

Sat down beside us. Ere ten words had  
passed

Between us, Rob broke out about the news  
From Sumter, and one glance into John's  
face

Told me that he was in the mood to feel  
And sympathize with Rob's excitement. I  
Rose up and went away. I did not care  
To listen to them, for I knew full well  
What they would talk about. So I went  
down

The garden path, bordered by two long rows  
Of stately lilacs, growing faintly green  
In the sweet weather of the April days,  
And sat there, thinking, thinking, while  
the sound

Of their eager voices broke upon my ears  
Discordantly. The night was filled with  
peace,

But not my heart. For me all peace had fled;  
The shadow of a parting lay across  
The way before me, and I could not see  
The ending of the pathway. But I saw  
Again that green hill, sloping to the sun,  
And the low grave upon it, 'neath the pine.

I never shall forget the day when Rob  
And John enlisted. It was in the May,

When all the world was beautiful to see.  
The trees were putting on their summer dress,  
And here and there, in little wayside nooks,  
Pale violets bloomed, and shy wakerobins  
made

Bright spots among the shadows, and the air  
Was full of delicate odors, and o'erhead  
The restless bluebird soared, and seemed  
to be

Embodied song, that God had dowered with  
wings,

And all about us larks and robins sang  
In bush and treetop, in the warm, bright sun,  
As if their hearts were running o'er with joy.  
The bees were gathering in their early stores  
From willows by the brookside, and I  
watched

Them flying to their hives, with laden thighs,  
All covered with the gold of pollen-dust.  
Sweet sights, sweet sounds on earth and in  
the air,

As if there was no sorrow, and grim war  
Was something dreamed of, that could never  
come

To break the peace about our little world.

I sat there sowing 'neath the cherry tree—  
Sewing and thinking. Suddenly I heard

A sound like distant thunder, low and deep,  
And mingled with it was another sound  
That made my heart stop beating when the  
wind

Blew toward me from the village. Faintly  
shrill

Above the beat, beat, beating of the drums,  
A strain of martial music rose and fell.

I shuddered at the sound. In it I heard  
The words and tears of parting, and the sob  
Of those who lingered by the hearth of home  
When those they loved had gone away to  
fight

The battle for their Country; and I heard  
The cry of dying men on battle fields,  
Where blood ran like a river; and I saw  
The vacant places in the stricken homes;  
The widow with her children, bowed in  
grief,—

The mother mourning for the son she  
loved,—

The maiden widowed ere she was a wife.

The sun was low when Rob came home to me.  
I heard his footsteps on the hillside road,  
And went to meet him at the gate. I knew,  
In one swift moment, when I saw his face,

That he was mine no longer. I could keep  
My Rob no longer in the nest of home.  
His wings were fledged for flight toward the  
south.

“You’re going, Rob,” I cried, and reached  
a hand

To draw him to me. “I can read the truth  
My brother, in your eyes.”

“Yes, dear,” he said,  
And put his arms about me and bent down  
To kiss my cheek. “I cannot linger here  
And hear my Country calling, in her hour of  
need,

Vainly for help. You would not say one  
word

To keep me here, if it were left to you,—  
I know you would not. Better than yourself  
I know the brave and loyal heart that beats  
This moment in your bosom. Duty calls,  
And you would be the last, dear Sister Ruth,  
To bid me turn deaf ears to such a call.  
I go away, but some day I’ll come back,  
God willing, but if not——”

He said no more,  
But lifted up my pallid face to his,  
And looked into my eyes, and in that look

I read so many things! I saw how hard  
It was for him to leave me, and I drove  
The starting tears back to their fount again,  
Resolved to bear my share of sorrow's load  
As bravely as I might. I would not add  
One feather-weight to make his burden  
more,

By weak repining or by selfish grief.  
My love for him should give me strength to  
make

Myself a helper in this hour of need.

"And John is going too," he said, as we  
Went up the path together, hand in hand.

"Oh, he is such a noble fellow, Ruth—  
You should have heard him when he spoke  
to-day.

Such ringing, earnest words. They thrill  
me yet.

It was as if the very voice of Freedom spoke.  
They cheered and cheered him when his  
speech was done.

"I practice what I preach," he said, and  
put

His name down first on the enlistment roll,  
And—mine stands next—I could not help it,  
Ruth.

You do not blame me—and you under-  
stand?"

“Yes, Rob, dear Rob, I understand,” I said;  
“I cannot blame you.” And a thrill of pride  
In him, my hero, made me almost brave,  
And for one moment—one—I half forgot  
The sorrow and the lonesomeness of life  
Without him.

Then tears came and hid his face  
Away from me. I could not see the hills  
For many moments.

By and by John came.  
His hands were full of pansies. “See,” he  
said,  
“I found them on her grave and gathered  
them  
For you.”

I took them, thanking with a look  
The kind, true heart that had such tender  
thoughts  
For those he loved; and some I gave to Rob,  
For were they not sweet messengers of love  
From mother to her children?—some for him  
And some for me,—and each should have  
his share.

I left them, by and by, to talk of plans  
I could not listen to and hold my peace.  
It seemed as if I must cry out, “No—no,”—

Beat back the threatening sorrow with fierce  
hands,  
And bid it not to cross the threshold stone;  
Cry, "Seek some other home, but oh, spare  
mine—  
Spare mine and me."

And then a sense of shame  
For selfish thoughts like these came over me.  
What was I, more than others, that the pain  
Of parting and of loss should pass me by?  
I wandered down the lilac-bordered path,  
And, curiously, while I thought of other  
things,  
I saw the blossoms nodding on the branch,  
The pale, white moonlight silvering the  
world,  
And heard the brook's low song, as down the  
hill  
It ran to find the sea. Strange, is it not,  
That in an hour of grief such common things  
Force cognizance of themselves?

At last  
John came to join me in my restless walk.  
We did not speak at first, but to and fro  
We paced among the lilacs. Then I thought  
About his fancy of the fragrant flowers  
And his dead mother's love, and broke a  
branch



And put it in his hand. He understood  
The thought that prompted me to give the  
flower,

And smiled, and held the branch against his  
face

In a caressing way. Then by and by  
He reached and took my hand.

“Dear Ruth,” he said,  
“There’s something I must say to you to-  
night.

I love you, Ruth. Though never put in words,  
I think you must have known for many a  
day

The truth I tell you now. I want to take  
Away with me the tender memory  
Of one who waits for me, who prays for me,  
Who loves me, and will be my wife when I  
Come back, if that should be. Oh, may I,  
Ruth ?”

The love-light kindled in my lover’s eyes,  
And made me think of nights when up the  
sky

I saw the silver glory of the moon  
Leap from behind the hills and drive away  
The darkness and the shadows, till the  
world

Was like a new-created one, all pure  
As if just from the great World-Maker's  
hand.

“Dear John, best friend I ever had,” I said,  
“Save Robert and my mother, I can give  
Friendship for friendship, but the love you  
seek  
I keep for Robbie, and for him alone.”

“I ask no love like that,” he said. “I want  
A different love. You can love me as I  
Would have you, Ruth, and love Rob none  
the less.”

“You cannot understand me, John,” I said;  
“I'm sorry for your sake, so sorry, John—  
But what you ask it is not mine to give.”

“I will not take an answer now,” he said :  
“Think over it. Before I go away  
I'll ask for your decision.”

“It will be  
The same,” I answered.

All that night I thought  
Of what he said to me, and I was filled  
With a strange gladness and a deep unrest.  
The memory of his words made pleasant  
sounds

Among my wakeful dreams, as if a song  
Was tangled in my heart strings, making  
there

Sweet, vibrant echoes of the music's theme,  
And I would half forget all else to hear  
The melody. Then suddenly the thought  
Of Rob would come, and I would feel untrue  
To him. And so I made myself believe  
That I could never love him as I ought  
And love another : In my heart was room  
For one, and only one.

Oh, those last days,  
When parting's shadow hung o'er every-  
thing.

I felt it in the garden and the house,  
And sunshine could not frighten it away.  
Not all the sunshine in the world, it seemed,  
Could make a brightness in the long day's  
gloom.

It made the spring seem like the lonesome  
days

Of fall, when all the loveliness of earth  
Is passing from us. I knew well enough

When I saw Rob look into the old rooms,  
And linger by the places where we played  
When we were happy children, that he  
thought

It might be the last time. Oh, these "last  
times."—

And always, when I saw it, I would hide  
Myself away from him, and in my room  
Would "have my cry out," as we women  
say,

Before I joined him.

The day came at last  
When they must go—when good-byes must  
be said.

Rob came home from the village in his suit  
Of "army blue." How brave the dear boy  
looked.

And then the swift tears came and blurred  
my eyes,

And through the mist I saw him with a glow  
Of light about his head, like aureoles  
The saints wear in old pictures.

Of those hours,  
My last with Rob on earth, I cannot talk,—  
Their memory is too sacred.

By and by,  
John Earle came in to say good-by, and ask  
What answer I had to give him.

“Is it yes  
Or no?” he asked. “I hope, Ruth, it is yes.”

“But it is not,” I said. “Forgive me, John,—  
Oh, friend of many years, tried friend and  
true!

It hurts my heart to think I give you pain  
When you have asked for love.”

His eyes had been  
Full of a hopeful light, but at my words  
That light died out of them. I saw his lip  
Quiver like a grieved child’s before he spoke.

“Well, if you cannot give the love I ask,  
’Tis better I should know the truth,” he said,  
“Than go on hoping when the hope at last  
Must come to nought. Oh Ruth, the hope  
was sweet—  
So sweet.”

He paused, for tears were in his voice,  
And choked him for a moment.

“But you know  
Your own heart best. Oh, are you *sure*,  
Ruth,  
*Quite* sure it cannot be?”

“Quite sure,” I said,  
 And made the words as tender as I could,  
 For pity made my heart ache for the man  
 Whom love made tenderer than a woman is  
 In any mood, save that a mother feels  
 When on her breast she holds the little child  
 God has just given her.

“Remember, John,  
 I’ll always count you as my dearest friend,  
 My one friend next to Rob. Try to forget  
 You ever thought of me as else than that.”

“It is not easy to forget,” he said.

“Love dies at no one’s bidding. But enough,  
 I’ll trouble you no more with useless talk  
 Of hopes and dreams that never can come  
 true.”

“You do not blame me, John?”

“Why should I, Ruth?  
 There’s nothing I can blame you for. If I  
 Have reared a house on unsubstantial sand  
 What blame belongs to others if it fall?  
 Blame you, indeed! No—no! But always,  
 Ruth,  
 Remember that I am your truest friend,  
 And come to me for proof in time of need.  
 Now shall we say good-by?”

I put my hand in his.  
“God bless you, John,” I said in broken  
words.

“For my sake, John, take care of Rob, and  
bring

My brother back to me. God bless you both,  
And keep you safe shall be my hourly  
prayer.

Good-by—good-by.”

He bent and kissed my cheek :  
“For what I hoped might be,” he said. It  
was

As if a mourner should stoop down to kiss  
His dead before the grave hid it from sight.  
Alas, for all the hopes that fade and die  
As flowers do, in the frost.

“I’ll care for Rob  
For your sake and for friendship’s, never  
fear ;

He is *my* brother by the kin of love  
If not of blood.” And then—“Dear Ruth,  
good-by

For a long time, and, it may be, forever—  
God knows, not we. I leave you in His  
keeping.”

And then he went away.

Ere long, Rob came.

“It’s time for me to go,” he said. “Come,  
Ruth,  
I’m going by the churchyard, for once more  
I want to see her grave. So come with me,  
There’s where we’ll say good-by.”

And hand in hand,  
As we had gone so many times before  
But never would again, we two went out  
Through the old garden and the gate,  
And up the winding hill-road, speaking not,  
But each was thinking over sorrowful  
thoughts  
For which there is no name, and which can  
find  
Utterance in but one word, and that “good-  
by.”

When half way up the hill he stopped and  
looked,  
With yearning, wistful eyes, back to the  
house  
That he was going from forever.

Then my heart  
Forgot its bravery,—all but its grief,  
And made its moan, “How can I let you  
go?”

“Don’t, Ruth,” he said; and I choked down  
my tears—



Or made a mighty effort to, and failed,—  
And we went on together up the hill  
And into the old churchyard. Mother's grave  
Was purpled o'er with pansies. He knelt  
down  
And touched them with caressing hands,  
and said,  
“Dear little things! I wonder if she knows?”  
And then a wind stirred all the blossoms  
there,  
And set them nodding, nodding “Yes, she  
knows.”  
“Dear Ruth, if I should die—” And then  
a sob  
Choked him, and for a time he could not  
speak,  
While in my ears kept ringing like a knell,  
“If he should die.”——

At last, he spoke again :  
“If I should not come back, don't think of  
me  
As so far off you cannot hear my voice  
Or see me, but close by, as mother is,—  
She told you how it was. Death cannot break  
The tie that binds your heart and mine,  
dear Ruth.

You may be here, I in the world of God,  
But all there is between us is the sod  
That covers me, so near the two worlds are,—  
So near will we be to each other still.  
My love will be the same it is to-day,  
In Heaven or here. Remember that, dear  
Ruth.”

My brother, I remember evermore !

He took me in his arms, and lovingly  
Looked down into my face and said to me—  
Oh sweet words to remember all these  
years—  
“What a true, faithful sister you have  
been.”

And then—and then—

I cannot tell you more  
Of those last moments, for the swift tears  
rise  
And blind me, till I cannot see the page,  
And all the lines are blurred, as if the rain  
Blew in upon the words; but through the  
mist

I see my brother's face. No tears can hide  
*That* from my loving eyes—not even the  
grave.

When Rob had gone, I could not make it  
seem,  
For many days, as if he had not died.  
That awful sense of absence and of loss  
Which follows death was all about the  
house.

I listened in the silence for a step  
That never came—a voice I could not hear.  
I saw his vacant chair, his empty room,  
The clothes that he had worn, as we see  
things  
Belonging, once, to those we loved, but now  
No longer theirs, because they have no need  
Of earthly things. Then I would strive to  
put  
Such thoughts away, and bear with hopeful  
heart  
The burden of my loneliness. At night  
I dreamed of Rob, and woke from dreams,  
at morn,  
With thoughts of him. I wondered where  
he was,  
And what he thought about. Of me,  
perhaps,—

And all the livelong day, on tireless feet  
My thoughts went tramp, tramp, tramping  
after him.

At evening, I would sit and watch the stars  
And think that maybe he was watching too,  
And there was something pleasant in the  
thought

That we could see the same things, though  
apart.

It made him seem more near to fancy that.  
Each night I knelt down in my little room  
And prayed for the brave boy I loved so  
well,—

Prayed God would keep him safe, and send  
him back ;

And never once did I forget to pray  
For John.

And so the lonesome days went by.  
How many, many women, North and South,  
Know what they were to me. They know,  
because,  
Like me, they waited by the hearth of home.  
And oh ! how many of them wait to-day ;  
But what they wait for is no more of earth.  
Oh weary hearts, some day, some happy  
day,

Your waiting will be over, and the touch  
“Of vanished hands” will gladden you  
again,  
The “voices that are still” be heard once  
more,  
And then—oh—then—!

I tried my best to be  
Brave, cheerful, patient. Often letters came,  
Bright, loving letters, like a beam of light  
That falls in shady places, and they made  
Me stronger for the work I had to do.  
If those I loved could with unfaltering  
hands  
And willing hearts do what the soldier must,  
Could I not pray for them at home, and  
wait?  
That was my share of work; and if God heard  
But one out of the many prayers I made  
And answered it, then am I very sure  
It was well done.

So two long years went by.  
Then Rob's discharge came:  
“Honorably discharged,”  
I say to-day, with pride. Thank God for that.

It was in May that the news came to me

That he was mustered out. The earth was  
like  
A child that wakes up from a pleasant sleep,  
All flushed and radiant with joy. The rose  
Was breaking into bloom beside the gate,  
Pink as the cheeks of maidens when they  
hear,  
With glad, down-dropping eyes and beating  
hearts,  
The words of love a lover has to tell ;  
The gnarled, gray branches of the apple trees  
Were like great arms, filled by the laugh-  
ing May  
With flowers to lure the bee, and freight the  
air  
With odors dreams are born of, and each  
breeze  
That blew across the orchard scattered down  
A shower of white petals on the grass,  
Like a belated snow-storm. In the elm  
The robin's nest, just finished, could be seen,  
And he was singing from a cherry bough  
A roundelay of gladness to his mate,  
Who by the nest was dreaming happy  
dreams  
Of unfledged wings. The world was glad  
at heart  
Because of song and sunshine, and the May.

How much, that afternoon, I thought of Rob !  
He loved the blossoms and the birds so well  
That I kept wishing, wishing he could know  
About them. All day long he seemed to be  
Close by me,—sitting with me,—watching  
me

About my work as he had used to do,  
And I was strangely happy. Once, indeed,  
His presence seemed so real I spoke his name,  
Half thinking—though the fancy made me  
smile

At its own fancifulness, that I would hear  
His voice in answer to me. But instead  
The listening robin in the cherry tree  
Broke into jubilant song, and sang until  
It seemed as if his little throat must burst  
With melody. Perhaps the robin knew !

I heard a boy's blithe whistle down the road,  
And thought, I have remembered since, how  
light

A boy's heart is, a thing of thistle-down  
Tossed hither, thither, by each breeze that  
blows,

Knowing no care, no longing, no regret,  
Content and happy just to breathe and be.

The little lad stopped at the garden gate,

Holding a letter up for me. I ran  
To get it, wondering if it was from Rob.

“A telegram,” the boy said; “it just came.  
It’s from somebody in the war, they said.”  
A telegram! I reached a trembling hand  
To take the message, half afraid to touch  
The folded paper, for too well I knew  
What army telegrams had come to mean  
To those who read them in their lonely  
homes.

I leaned against the gate, grown dizzy, faint  
With terrible foreboding, while I tore  
The message open.

There I read these words :

“ROBERT WAS KILLED IN BATTLE YESTER-  
DAY.”

Only six words! But those words seemed to  
grow,

And grow, and grow, till all the peaceful sky  
Was covered by them, and the hills were hid  
Beneath their blackness as beneath a pall;  
And everything about me seemed to cry,  
“Killed—killed in battle,” till the world  
was full

Of that one sound, with room for nothing  
more.



I did not cry out in that awful hour  
With the sharp agony that rent my heart—  
It seemed to make me dumb. I turned away  
From round-eyed wonder in the lad's grave  
face,  
And groped my way back to the house like  
one  
Who feels her way in darkness.

All the light  
Had gone out of the world, for me, with Rob.

I sat down on the threshold where his feet  
Would never fall again, and laid my head  
Down on the old, worn sill, and said,  
“Dead—dead——”

---

In the white silence of the summer night  
I went to mother's grave. There I knelt  
down  
In the tall grass, and dropped my tearless  
face  
Among the pansies that were blossoming  
there,  
All wet with dew. The touch of the dear  
flowers  
Was like a kiss—her kiss—upon my cheek.

“ Oh mother, do you know ? ” I cried ; and  
then

I sobbed out on her grave my grief and loss:  
And lying there beneath the pitying stars,  
With pansy-kisses on my face, it seemed  
As if she held me on her faithful breast,  
And spoke to me in low and loving words  
To comfort me.

And by and by it seemed  
That Rob was with us, and the mother-arms  
Were round us both.

---

A letter came to me  
From one of Robbie's comrades, and it told  
How he had met his death :

In the fierce charge  
Rob and John Earle went forward side by  
side,

The letter said, and nobly did Rob fight.

“ Fought like a hero, like a hero fell.”

Those were the very words, and there were  
more

Of praise for him who was beyond all praise.

I read that letter often, and I feel

To day, as then, a strange, exultant thrill

Of pride in my dead hero, and I think  
I see the battle-fire in his brave eyes,—  
His stern-set lips,—the courage that would  
dare

The storm of death without a thought of fear.

“Fought like a hero, like a hero fell.”

Who needs a nobler epitaph than that ?

And then the letter told me of John Earle :

“He tried to shield your brother from a blow  
A rebel aimed at him. He took the sabre  
stroke

On his uplifted arm,—he would have saved  
Your brother’s life with his. The surgeon  
says

His wound is a severe and dangerous one,  
But they report that he is doing well.

He made a hero of himself that day,

And we are proud of him,—of him and Rob,  
Who was a favorite, you may be glad to  
know,

With every one who knew him.”

How my heart  
Swelled when I read that tribute to my  
dead,

So eloquent because so true.

“I saw  
John Earle to-day. He bade me write to you  
And tell you that he could not; and he said,

‘Tell her I *tried* to make my promise good,  
And save Rob for her, but it could not be.’”

Day after day I sat down in the door  
And thought it over. Henceforth I must  
tread

A lonely path. And looking down the  
years

It seemed so long before the end was  
reached!

Long pathways are not lonesome ones when  
those

We love are treading them with us; but when  
The dear, familiar footsteps die away

Into the silence of the other world,

Then are they very lonely; and at times

We falter in the way, put out our hand

To grasp another hand, and in our need

Lay hold on—nothing. Then do we remem-  
ber

There is no arm to lean on except God’s,

And at such times, that seems so far away

We cannot reach it.

Then my heart would turn  
To John, as does the little, frightened child  
Left in a strange room turn to him who shows  
The kindest face, and tell him all its grief,

And trust him for the help it needs. When I  
Thought of the future, Rob in Heaven  
seemed far,

So very far away, and my heart ached  
For loving words and a familiar face.

I wanted some one I could talk to—one  
Whom I could *see*, and *hear*, and *touch*; and  
John

Was all the friend I had, and he must fill  
The place made vacant by my brother's  
death.

In all the world—this world, not God's, for  
there

I had dear friends—he was the only one  
That I could turn to in my loneliness  
And find the comfort that the sore heart  
needs—

The balm of sympathy that friendship's  
flower

Yields in abundance, healing up the wounds  
That death makes when it takes the ones  
we love.

Two weeks went by; and in that time I heard  
No tidings from John Earle. “He may be  
dead,”

I said, and waited in that sad suspense

Which tries the heart as much as grief, or  
more.

“God, must I lose him, too?”

At last there came  
A letter, and it told me that my friend  
Was fading slowly, surely out of life;  
For many days he had not known the face  
Of any comrade; in delirious hours  
He called for Ruth. Ruth, Ruth, was all  
his thought.

“We think it best to tell you this,” they  
wrote,

“For if you care to see him this side Heaven  
There is no time to lose, the doctor says.  
The end, perhaps, is nearer than we think;  
We know it's not far off.”

Till I read that,  
And felt how near death was, I did not know  
How much I loved John Earle; but then I  
saw

The truth to which my love for Brother Rob  
Had made me blind. The love that John  
had asked

My heart would give him now, but ah! too  
late

Would come the boon his steadfast heart  
had craved.

Alas, too late! What need have they who go

Away from us to Heaven, of earthly love?—  
The love that would have made a Heaven  
here

For them and us. “Too late, too late, too  
late,”

Kept ringing in my ears to torture me  
With hopeless longing and with vain regret,  
By the monotony of its refrain, “alas, too  
late.”

No time to lose. Perhaps he would be dead  
Before I reached him. “Oh, if love had  
wings,

Swift wings and strong, to bear me to his  
side,”

I cried, and all my thoughts went flying  
south

Like birds in autumn, to my dying friend;  
And but one prayer was mine—that God  
would spare

His life till I could reach him.

Like a snail

The train seemed creeping on its southward  
way.

“O, faster, faster, faster,” I would cry;

“He must not die before I hear him  
speak

My name once more. O, shut the gates of  
Heaven  
Against him, God, for yet a little time."

So ran my thoughts through all the laggard  
hours  
Of the long day and the still longer night  
That made my journey seem a lifetime long.

But all things end at last. The Sabbath  
peace  
That lay upon the field where death had held  
Fierce revelry so short a time before,  
Stole in upon my heart as I went up  
The hill to the old church which they had  
made  
A hospital, and calmed the tumult there,  
As if the voice of God said, "Peace, be still."

I met a soldier half way up the hill.  
"I want to find John Earle," I cried, and  
then  
My heart stood still for fear of what might be  
His answer to me.

"In the old church there,"



He said, and sudden joy thrilled through my  
frame,  
For he was living yet, and I should see  
My friend once more, this side the gates of  
God.

Beside the broken fence, a lilac grew,—  
A poor, gnarled bush with scarcely life  
enough,  
It seemed, to put its scanty garments on  
Each year, and yet it could not die. Perhaps  
My life was symbolized by this hapless plant,  
I thought, and then a little warm south wind  
Blew one poor branch across my path, and lo!  
A cluster of sweet flowers, born out of time !

I thought of John's old fancy of these flowers  
And his dead mother's love; and then it  
seemed

As if she stood beside me, welcoming me,  
And I bent down and touched the lilac  
blooms

As meeting friends clasp hands, and I was  
sure

His fancy was a true one, for the branch  
Broke in my hand, and made it seem that she

Would have me bear the message of her love  
To John.

With swiftly-beating heart I climbed  
The steps, and paused beside the open door  
For one brief moment, with a wordless  
prayer

Upon my lips. I know not what it was,  
But God did, I am sure. It matters not  
What shape we put our prayers in, if He  
hears.

I crossed the threshold. Peace was in the  
room.

“God’s house” it seemed, as ne’er did  
church before.

On either side the aisle I saw a row  
Of narrow beds, and on some sick men lay,  
And some, alas, were empty.

Some one came  
And spoke to me. “You came to see a  
friend?”

“I want John Earle,” I cried. “O, tell me  
where  
To find him, please.”

“I think you must be Ruth,”  
The soldier said and bade me follow him.

A strange excitement thrilled me, as a wind  
Makes the reed quiver, and I felt my cheek  
Grow pale and paler, and breath came and  
went

In gasps—for I was near to John once more—  
One moment, one, and I should see his face,  
And hear his voice.

Since then, I've often thought  
That when my feet have found the way to  
Heaven,

And I stand waiting for the jasper gates  
To swing apart and let me in to God  
And all the dear ones in the deathless land,  
That I shall feel the same excitement there  
That filled my soul in the old church that  
day,  
As I paused, breathless, eager, at its door.

Beyond the long aisle and the chancel's rail  
One bed stood by itself.

“John Earle's,” he said,  
Who led the way.

I saw a thin white face  
On the rough pillow, and it made me think  
Of snowdrifts fading in the April wind,  
So wan it was—quite like the thistledown  
That vanishes at lightest breath of air ;

And at the sight of it my feet stood still,  
As they will stand when I get into Heaven,  
And come before the King, adoring him.

I saw John's face once more.——

And then I saw  
Another thing : where John's right arm had  
been

There was no arm now, and I knew that he  
Had lost it when he tried to save Rob's life.  
O John, my hero!——

“I will leave you now,”  
The soldier said. “He'll wake up soon, I  
think.

Be quiet, ma'am; he's weaker than a child,—  
Don't let him talk much.” Then he went  
away,

And I knelt softly down beside the bed  
And looked upon the poor, pale, patient face  
Until tears came, and made me suddenly  
blind.

I laid the flowers on his pillow. He  
Stirred in his sleep, and presently awoke.

“I thought I smelled the lilacs. Is it spring,  
And are you here, my mother?”

Oh, that voice,  
So weak it was a whisper, but as sweet  
In my ears as the Heavenly Song will be.

“Oh John,” I cried out softly, “*I* am here—  
The Ruth you wanted. Don’t you know me,  
John?”

He turned towards me in a startled way,  
As if a voice spoke to him from the dead,  
And then—I see it yet—the light that filled  
His wistful eyes, and shone through his  
white face,  
And made it seem so like an angel’s that  
The sight was full of a sharp agony for me.

“Ruth, Ruth—dear Ruth,” he cried, and  
tried to reach  
His one poor hand in welcome.

Then I dropped  
My face upon it, and I covered it  
With kisses, and a silence deep and sweet  
Was round us many moments. Neither cared  
To break it, for heart spoke to heart, and  
words  
Are poor, weak things in such a time as that.

---

“I’ve thought of you,” he told me, by and by,

“So much, dear Ruth, for I knew that you’d be

So lonely—*after that*.” And then his lip  
Quivered, and the blue violets of his eyes  
Were blossoms, wet with sudden summer  
rain.

“I *tried* to save him, Ruth. I wonder why  
My life would not have answered, just as  
well?

I wish it might have been so, for your sake.”

Oh most unselfish soul! How poor, how  
weak,

I felt before the man who would have died  
For love’s sake, gladly. Unto me it seemed  
As if the heavens opened, and I saw  
The cup of the Holy Grail—a soul abrim  
With wine of love like this—a soul so pure  
It was a symbol of divinest things.

“I am so glad you came, so glad,” he said;  
“I want to tell you many things of Rob  
Before the end comes. Ah, the end!” and  
then

A strange and far off look grew in his eyes  
As if already he could see beyond  
The lights and shadows of this lower life  
Into the mystery of the life with God.

“Oh John,” I cried, and put out both my  
hands  
As if to hold him back from Heaven’s door,  
“I cannot give you up! In all the world  
I have no one but you—live, live for me!”

“It is in God’s hands, Ruth,” was his reply,  
“And He knows best.”

I saw how weak he was  
And bade him talk no more, but try to rest.  
I stroked the brown hair backward from his  
brow,  
And laid my fingers on his eyes, and he  
Smiled as a pleased child does, but the smile  
Was such a wan and white one that it made  
My heart ache when I saw it.

By and by,  
His hand found mine, and holding it, he  
sank

Into a quiet sleep. The doctor came  
While he was sleeping. He bent down to  
hear  
The sick man's breathing, and to watch his  
face.

“I think the sight of you has done him  
good,”

He said, and seemed well pleased. “Perhaps  
—who knows ?

It may be possible to save him yet ;  
A woman's care does more than doctors can  
In such a case as this, nine times in ten.”  
A hope sprang up, that moment, in my heart,  
And flooded it with brightness as the sun  
Breaks suddenly from behind a cloud, and  
fills

The world with wonderful beauty. “God,”  
I cried,

And lifted up my face toward the Throne  
And Him who sits thereon in majesty,  
“Oh spare him, spare him, spare him.”

Who shall say  
That God heard not my prayer and answered  
it ?

I love to think so : but it may have been  
Willed in the Eternal Wisdom he would live



And that he would have lived, had I not  
prayed ;  
But still I love to think God heard my  
prayer  
And answered it. I know He answers some,  
And why not mine ?

When morn's first ray stole in  
Along the aisle, as comes on noiseless feet  
A Sister of sweet Charity, scattering gloom  
By the soft radiance of her saintlike smile,  
I thought John's face wore quite a different  
look ;

There was a faint, vague color in the cheeks,  
A hint, a memory, of the ruddy hue  
That had been there before that battle-day  
When he laid down his strong right arm  
for Rob,  
And dared all for his Country.

In his round  
The doctor sat awhile, to talk with me  
And nodded his gray head, in hopeful way,  
At sight of John's changed face.

“I'm glad to see  
That new look there,” and then he felt  
The sick man's pulse. “A stronger, steadier  
beat  
Than yesterday. I tell you what, my boy,  
There is no tonic like a friendly face.

I've seen it do what skill of mine could not  
Time and again, and here's another case  
Of wonder-working, if I read aright  
The signs, to-day; and my poor, baffled skill  
Steps back and gives the credit all to Ruth,  
Where it belongs. So, Doctor Ruth, keep on,  
And maybe in a month, if all goes well,  
You'll have this soldier on his feet again."

The doctor's words were sweeter in my ear  
Than any music I had ever heard;  
Through happy tears I looked the gratitude  
I could not trust myself to put in speech.

Days came and went: and as a little boat  
That drifted seaward on an ebbing tide  
Is shoreward blown by some land-loving  
    wind,  
So John's life was blown back to earth and  
    me  
By favoring winds of God's great mercy; and  
My heart was full of happiness—so full  
It seemed there was enough for all the world.

I never shall forget the summer days  
I spent in that old church. To me they are  
Among the best days of my life.

Ere long

We had it mostly to ourselves, for those  
Who were not wounded unto death, grew  
strong,

And went to join their comrades in the field;  
And those whose battle-days were done,  
went out

To join their comrades in the land of peace.

I stood by many a dying soldier's bed  
And spoke such words of comfort as I could  
In that most solemn hour. I read to them  
The promises of God, and tried to show,  
To eyes grown dim, the glory shining out  
Through Heaven's door, across the night of  
death,

To light the way that leads the wanderer  
home.

I wrote for them last messages of love  
To dear ones in the homes they longed to see  
Before they went away. When they were  
dead

I shut the lids down over sightless eyes,  
And laid a blossom or a leaf between  
The folded hands; and often tears would  
fall

On the still faces as I thought of those  
Who waited, far away, in hopeless hope,  
Some tidings from the dead.

In those long days,  
When o'er our little world between the hills  
Peace spread its wings, making it seem to me  
War must be all a dream, we talked of Rob.

“Oh Ruth, we were so proud, so proud of  
him,”

John said ; “No braver soldier ever lived,  
Or died, then he was. Everybody loved  
The boy. If you could but have seen his face  
That moment when we made the last wild  
charge,

It would have thrilled you like a trumpet-  
blast.

So brave—so grand ! It set my soul on fire  
With courage I had never felt before.

Our standard-bearer fell, and like a flash  
Rob sprang and seized the colors, and above  
Our heads he waved the flag, and cried,

“Come on—

They shall not drive us back,—come on,—  
come on !”

How John's eyes kindled at the memory  
Of Rob's brave deed ; and I could see it all  
As if it passed before me, watching him,  
For his pale face would grow more eloquent  
Than any words are.

“Some day we will go  
To see his grave,” he said. “The last thing I  
Remember, is the volley that they fired  
Above it. Then the red sun seemed to fade  
Until it was a spark, and then went out  
In utter darkness, and I knew no more.”

One day John called me Sister Ruth.

“You’ll let

Me be your brother, now that Rob is gone.”  
He said, and smiled in his grave, earnest  
way ;

And then he put his hand upon my own  
As if to seal the compact. Then I knew  
He had no thought of ever calling me  
By any dearer name. What I had said  
In answer to the plea he made for love  
He had set down as final. He would ask  
For such a love no more, because, he thought,  
She knew her own heart then, and if for me  
There was no love there such as that I sought,  
There is none now. She holds me as a friend,  
And loves me as a brother, that is all ;  
And if I can not have the thing I sought,  
With what I *can* have I must be content.

Oh John ! I *did* think that I knew my heart,  
When from his plea of love I turned away,

But now I knew it better. From my eyes  
The blindness was dispelled, and I could see  
The truth he could not. But I could not say  
To him, "If you should ask of me to-day  
The question that you asked me long ago,  
My answer would be different." I must let  
Him learn the truth some other way. And  
yet,

I wonder that he read not in my face  
The love that was not like a sister's love.  
Ah, men are sometimes blind when they  
might see!

Such men as John must always judge, I  
think,

All others by themselves. Their "no" to-day  
A year hence will be "no," and never "yes."  
They understand themselves before they  
speak,

But not all women do; we make mistakes  
In our own judgment of ourselves, I know,  
And only time and change bring us to see  
The truth. Alas, how many times too late  
The knowledge comes to set the error right.

One still October day we climbed the hill  
Behind the church to find Rob's nameless  
grave.

The air was full of Indian Summer haze  
That softened all harsh outlines, near and  
far,  
Making the world of men a world of dreams,  
Because it was so shadowy and so vague,  
So far away from all the din and fret,  
The want and work and worry of men's  
lives.

We climbed the steep hill slowly. I broke  
off  
Some purple asters growing by the path,  
And a great plume of golden-rod, to lay  
Upon the grave of him who loved such  
flowers  
As if they were akin.

“Ruth, shut your eyes,  
And I will lead you to the spot,” John said,  
And trustingly I did as I was told,  
And with my hand in his, he led me on  
A little distance. Then he stopped, and  
said,  
In tender, reverent way, “Here is his  
grave,”  
—As I have heard some men say, “Let us  
pray,”—  
Then went away and left me there alone.

And on the hillside sloping to the sun,  
Beneath the branches of an old pine tree  
That whispered ever to the roving wind  
Of something sorrowful as death—or life—  
I saw, low at my feet, all covered o'er  
With a snow of autumn daisies,—Robbie's  
grave.

---

The sun was low when John came back to me.

“Is it too soon?” he asked, and came and  
stood

Beside me, looking down upon the grave  
With thoughtful eyes.

“I knew, dear Sister Ruth,  
You'd have so much to tell him.”

“Yes,” I said,  
“And I have told it,”—smiling through my  
tears,

At him who stood there with his empty sleeve  
Across his breast. How brave, how grand  
he looked !

“If *I* were lying here, and to my grave  
You came, dear Ruth, what would you have  
to tell ?”

He questioned, looking gravely in my eyes.



“Oh John,” I cried, my heart upon my lips,  
“I’d tell you that I loved you.”

Like a flash  
Of sudden light, the meaning in my words  
Broke in upon him, and with eager eyes  
He scanned my face.

“Oh Ruth, what do you mean?”

“Oh, are you blind?” I cried in sweet, swift  
shame,

“I told you, once, I could not give such  
love

To you as that you asked for. I was wrong.  
Oh, let me be right hand to you, dear  
John,—

I’ll take the place of the strong arm you gave  
For him whose grave is here. Oh, may I,  
John?”

“Ruth, Ruth,” he cried, in voice that  
trembled so

With doubtful joy, the words seemed close  
to tears,

“Do you say this because you pity me?  
For love’s sake only would I take the gift  
You offer me.”

I looked into his face,  
With honest eyes, and answered truthfully,  
“Believe me, John, I say it for love’s sake.”

He answered not a word, but in his eyes  
There was an eloquence that in one look  
Told more than all the words a man could  
    speak  
In a whole lifetime.

    Then he put his arm,  
His one dear arm, about me, drawing me  
To him in love’s embrace ; and I could feel  
The swift and happy beating of his heart,  
And looking up into his earnest eyes  
I seemed to see his brave soul shining  
    through,  
As through a rifted cloud one sees the sky  
Beyond, bright with the beauty of the sun,  
And oh, what joy shone on me in that look !  
He kissed me, whispering softly, “Oh my  
    Ruth,  
If this is earth then what must Heaven be ?”

And overhead I heard the pine’s low voice  
Telling its troubles to the wandering wind,  
While in the rustling grasses at my feet

I seemed to hear a voice all jubilant  
With gladness, and I think it was Rob's  
    voice,  
And he was telling me he knew, he knew !

Ah yes, he knew, and for love's sake was  
    glad,  
As was the bird that from its little nest  
Upon his grave soared singing up the sky,  
To tell the story at the gate of Heaven.

**THE END.**

















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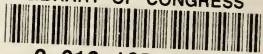
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