

**LETTERS OF SIDNEY
LANIER: SELECTIONS FROM
HIS CORRESPONDENCE,
1866-1881. WITH PORTRAITS**

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Letters of Sidney Lanier: Selections from His Correspondence, 1866-1881. With Portraits by Sidney Lanier

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BY MARY DAY LANIER

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A POEM-OUTLINE

BY

SIDNEY LANIER

Are ye so sharp set for the centre of the earth, are ye so hungry for the centre of things,

O rains and springs and rivers of the mountains?

Towards the centre of the earth, towards the very Middle of things, ye will fall, ye will run, the Centre will draw ye, Gravity will drive you and draw you in one:

But the Centre ye will not reach, ye will come as near as the plains, —watering them in coming so near,—and ye will come as near as the bottom of the Ocean, seeing and working many marvels as ye come so near:

But the Centre of Things ye will not reach, —

O my rivers and rains and springs of the mountains.

Provision is made that ye shall not: ye would be merged, ye could not return.

Nor shall my soul be merged in God, though tending, though tending.

Prefatory Note

It may be assumed even within the brief formality of an introductory note that Sidney Lanier was a rare good writer of letters. Whereas a volume of poems, say, may bring forth the extremes of condemnation and approval from esthetical judges possessing, apparently, an equally high critical equipment, the gift of letter-writing, curious and capricious as it often is, becomes manifest to readers at large in a paragraph, a sentence, a glance. The philosopher, the poet, the novelist, the great journalist may be hopelessly dull in these private compositions, unmeant for publication; and every one has known some alert, gossippy old lady, seemingly with genius only for pastry crust, and obviously with no mental pabulum above the Sunday newspapers, whose letters were delightful.

The most important object of this volume is, doubtless, to give the poet's audience a clearer and closer glimpse of Lanier the man, and to show how nearly synonymous with him was Lanier the poet and musician. The letters have no comprehensive range to aid in this endeavor, but they have this lively and intimate style which serves

at once to picture the poet-writer with strength, if with haste, and to give an intrinsically entertaining quality to the volume.

In Sidney Lanier's case several things combined to insure the presence of this human interest in his letter-writing. His mind was almost preternaturally alert, his sympathies ready and keen, his gift of expression facile and naively daring. Picture such a young man of genius, confident of his genius, coming fresh from the provinces to hear, for the first time, Wagner and Theodore Thomas, — to meet, for the first time, the men whose God was his God. There was not a sophisticated fibre in his being to cheapen the joy of the new sensations, as he wrote of them, exuberantly, to his wife and his friends. It reminds one of what Thackeray said of Clive Newcome, that a mere glass of claret seemed to give that young man more pleasure than other people could get out of it.

It is as well to remind readers of this, that Lanier was writing from the standpoint of the artist who is suddenly transferred from a region desert of art, in which he has been groping and struggling throughout his life, to his country's centre of music and letters. It explains a degree of ecstasy which to a casual reader might seem inexplicable, and it adds a distinct pleasure to the reading; every one knows the delight of sharing with a companion of sensibility his first occasion of great dramatic or musical art, and the pleasure