

**RELIGIO CLERICI,
AND OTHER POEMS**

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Religio Clerici, and Other Poems by Alfred Starkey

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ALFRED STARKEY

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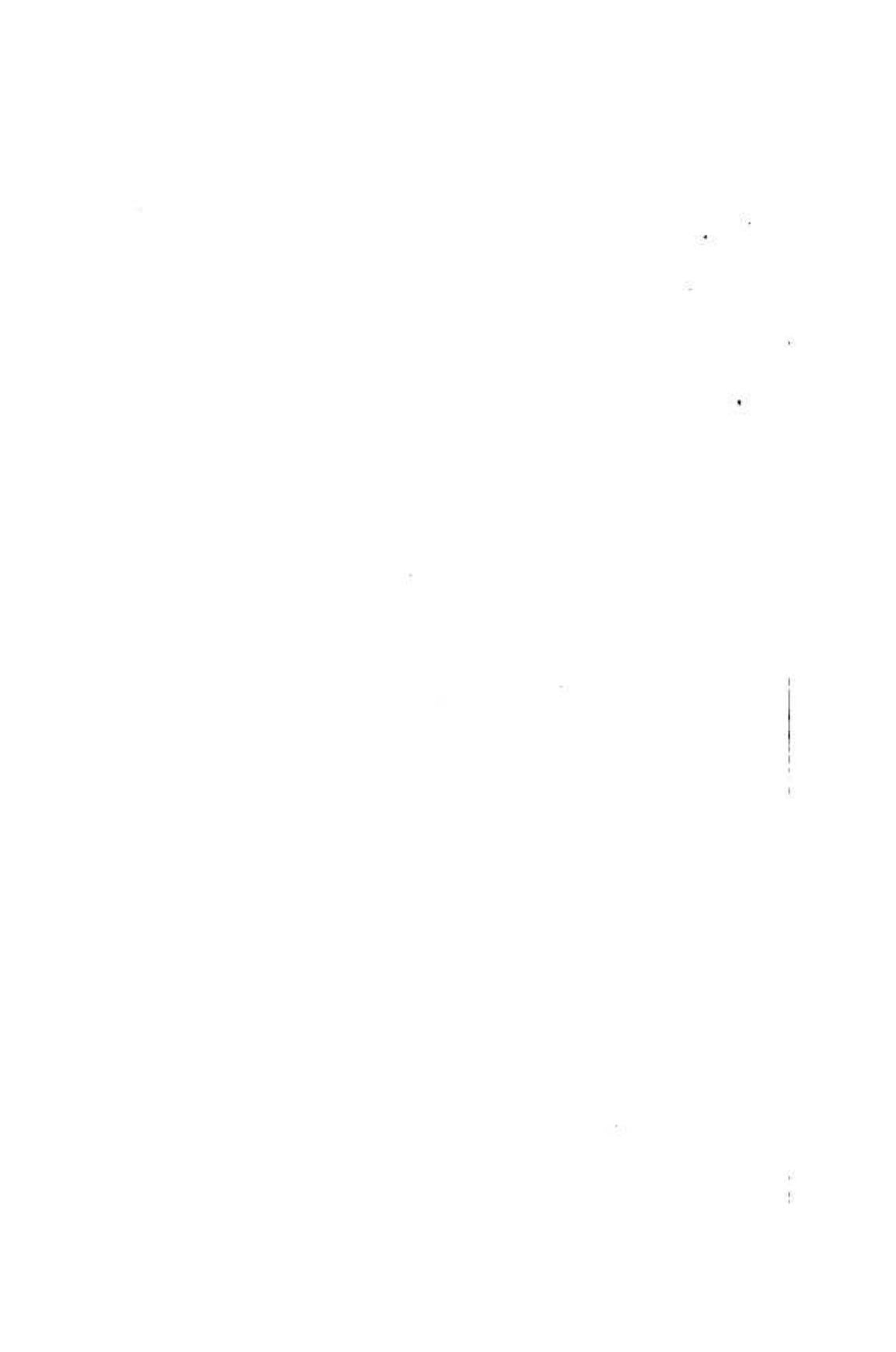
The Gift of
Mrs. William W. Corrigan

19 June 1908

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INTRODUCTION.

RELIGIO CLERICI.

ATTENTIVE readers of the first poem in this book will perceive that the two great truths on which the structure of the verse is built are the immanence of God in the world—made manifest and authenticated by the Divine appearance of Christ in it—and the existence of a great antagonist to God, working, like Him, in and by means of Nature. Thus, to the poet, what constitutes the inspiration and the strength of the individual soul, and, socialized and diffused, of progressive humanity, is the spirit of law and order, love and beauty, which, in whatever form revealed, can only come from God. On the contrary, all deformity and discord, whether moral or physical, proceed from a mysterious will working in opposition to the heavenly counsels. Hence it comes to pass that the nature we possess is a complexity of mingled and discordant powers. In the *champ clos* of the heart the two antagonists wage a deadly war, and call on our

wills to act in mystic arbitration, or, rather, to elect the side on which we will stake the eternity of our personal fortunes. The issues, however, of the fatal strife are far wider and deadlier than the ruin or salvation of the individual soul. Our separate struggles are but duels in the universal battle, and no man sins only for himself, neither does he conquer solely for his own advantage.

Few histories are so instructive as those of the competitions and struggles of a man's true self, the fall and rise of the moral empire within him, the intermixtures of the energies of the spirit with the contingencies of outward fortune. Glassed in the mirror of our brother's fate we behold the satisfactions or the defeats of our own. In his impassioned struggles we read the story of all men's experiences, which may be written out elsewhere in less detail or larger character, but are everywhere the same in essence and result. He opens the doors of his heart and leads us into its chambers of imagery, its retreats of thought, its cells, may be, of dark remorse and penitential sins. Nevertheless, all the time that we are discovering the secrets of his nature, we are unveiling the reserves of our own. Hamlet *is* the play, for all the rest of the *dramatis personæ* are but the shades of one infinite character.

Still, as before said, the interest is by no means entirely centred in ourselves or in humanity at large. The affilia-

tions of human interdependency soon, by necessitated coordinations and extensions of thought, stretch beyond our temporal sympathies, and connect themselves with what is absolute and eternal.

Then comes the awful question: Are not sin, moral disorder, wickedness (specific and *per se*), involved in the very constitution of nature—a substantial part, a necessary, even if only transient, element thereof? Is not evil inherent in the world, born with its birth, crescive with its growth, imperishable amid its changes? Or is man alone alien in heart and sinful? Is he the sole peccant part of an otherwise healthy whole? Do morality, and therefore sin, first emerge in him? If he is not what the writer calls him,

The crowned disaster of Nature's dread offence,

he is undoubtedly the ultimate expression of her mind and will. He rings her bells to their full peal. Through him, consequently, Evil may be traced back to her original defect, as from the flower we may pass downward to the root. He could not be a sinner if sin were not already living and working in the line of succession of which he is, in this world at least, the last representative.

There is no more terrible word in Scripture, though few more instructive, than the assertion of Christ, that out of the heart of man proceed evil thoughts, fornication,