REMINISCENCES OF FAMOUS GEORGIANS

EMBRACING

Episodes and Incidents in the Lives of the Great Men of the State

ALSO

AN APPENDIX

Devoted to Extracts from Speeches and Addresses

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BY

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DEDICATED

TO

MY CHERISHED ALMA MATERS
GEORGIA AND PRINCETON

AND TO ONE

OF

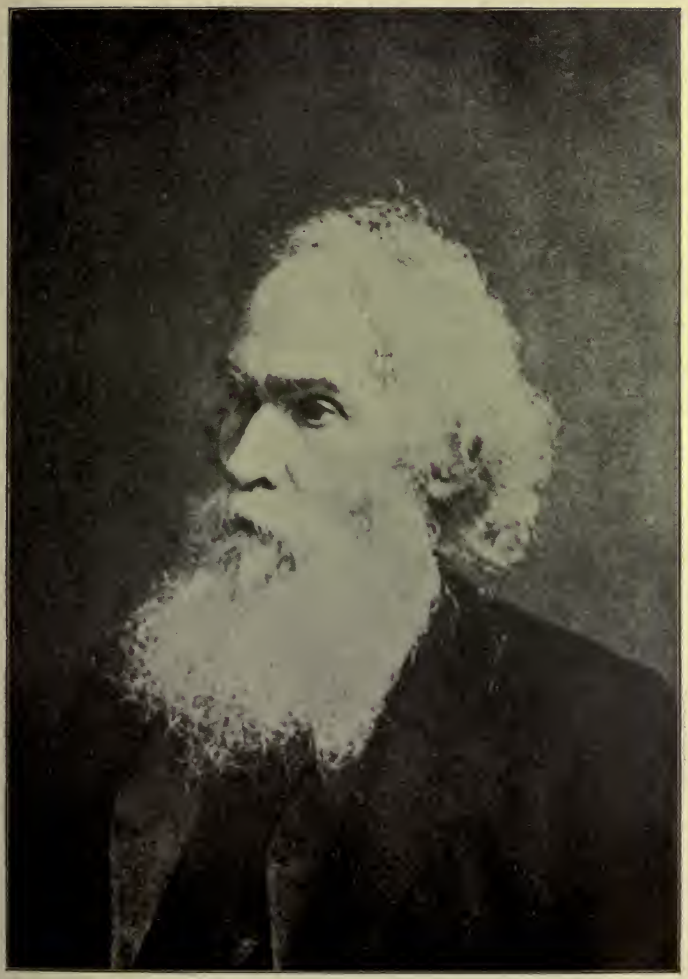
Gentle Voice and Velvet Footstep
Whose Smiles Have Been Transferred
From Home to Heaven:
The Sweetest Mother of All

CHAPTER XII.

John and Joseph Le Conte: The Gemini of the Scientific Heavens.

UNDER the spreading boughs of an ample shade tree on the campus of the State University at Berkeley, California, stands a memorial which bears the familiar names of two of the most noted of American scientists; John and Joseph Le Conte. They sleep upon the neighboring hillside, which slopes toward the Bay of San Francisco; and, through the leafy vistas of the luxuriant foliage, may be caught occasional glimpses of the Golden Gate. They are not forgotten tenants of the little, silent village which occupies the green escarpment. The students who idolized them in life still honor them in death by visiting the graves of the old professors at whose feet they sat; and all Californians cherish the memory of the brilliant brothers who, besides contributing to the scientific world some of the richest achievements of the nineteenth century, laid the foundations of one of the greatest institutions of learning west of the Rocky Mountains.

But the Le Contes were not enrolled among the native sons of the great West. On the far side of the continent, among the trailing mosses and the whispering live oaks of



JOHN LE CONTE.

old Liberty county, in the Georgia lowlands, the parish registers disclose the following entries: "John Le Conte, born December 4, 1818; Joseph Le Conte, born February 26, 1823." Consequently, in the Indian vernacular, which the natives of the Pacific slope still apply to the newcomers, they were classed among the tenderfoots. However, the sturdy stock from which they sprang and the pioneer life to which they succeeded on becoming residents of the new Eldorado soon transformed them into seasoned veterans of the warpath.

Born of an exceptional Georgia parentage, which on the one side was French Huguenot and on the other English Puritan, the fusion of the two historic strains doubtless accounts for the strong religious bias which characterized the scientific work of both men. They beheld the imprint of the divine signet upon the minutest particle of matter; and, though they took no ecclesiastical orders and wore no canonical vestments, they were nevertheless interpreters of the divine thought, ordained by the invisible anointing of genius. They dealt more largely with the material than with the supernatural oracles of revelation, because they ministered in the sphere of the natural sciences. But no member of the Aaronic priesthood could have been more devout in maintaining the true worship of Jehovah; and, if they delved in the deep geological quarries, it was only to ground the kingdom of righteousness upon the sure testimony of the rocks.

Throughout the vicissitudes of more than fifty years of studious research, the Le Contes were permitted by the happiest of fortunes to labor side by side. Both honor graduates of the University of Georgia, they were

colleagues in the faculty at Athens during the early fifties. Prior to this time they were separated during the brief season which each gave to the practice of medicine; but never afterwards, except for one year when John was professor of chemistry in the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York. This was the professional alma mater of both men. John practiced medicine in Savannah until called to the chair of physics in Franklin College. Joseph practiced medicine in Macon, where his most intimate friend was his wife's uncle, Eugenius A. Nisbet, the great jurist. But he did not long remain in Macon, being attracted to Cambridge, Massachusetts, by the fame of the renowned Agassiz, whose genius was the most precious asset of Harvard. Accompanied by his cousin, William Louis Jones, who suggested the idea of post-graduate work at the New England school, he put himself under the tutelage of the great scientist and enjoyed the rare privilege of cruising with his preceptor not only along the New England coast, but among the Florida reefs. On returning to Georgia he served his novitiate at teaching for one year in old Oglethorpe College, near Milledgeville, and then hastened to join his brother in the faculty of Franklin College. Thus began the lifelong comradeship of the two Le Contes in the scientific ranks. In 1856 they were jointly called to the South Carolina College at Columbia, and in 1869 to the California University at Berkeley; and they remained together until death dissolved the bond of union.

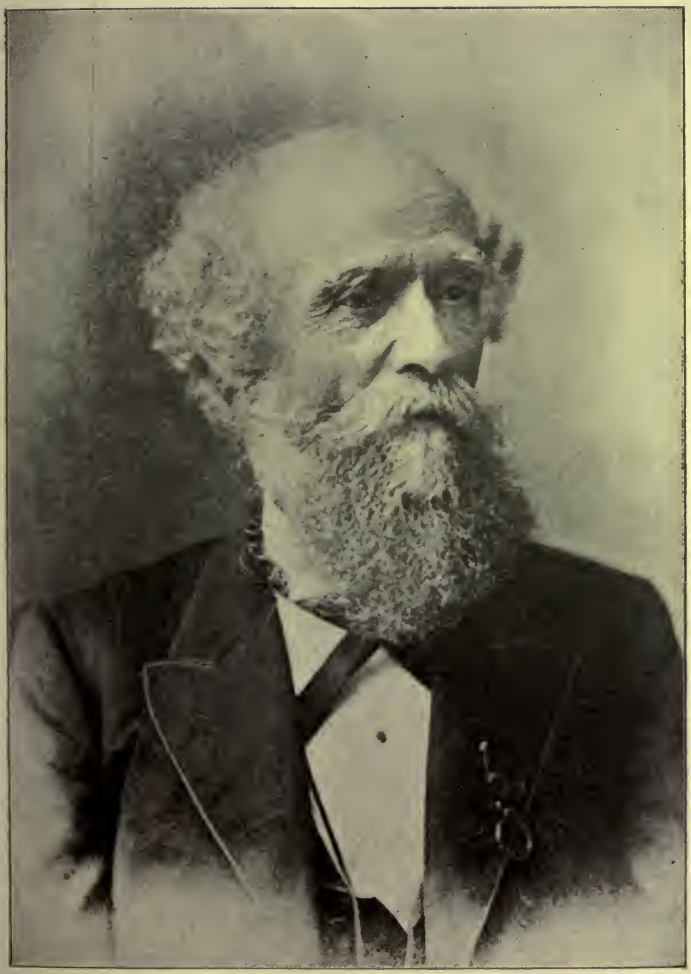
Nothing could have been sweeter than the mutual attachment of the two brothers who were bound together not only by the ties of blood, but by the affinities of genius. Together, for more than fifty years, they bent

over the crucibles and roamed the fields and mused upon the great problems of the universe. Boys together in Georgia, they seemed, in spite of gray beards and wrinkled foreheads, to be again boys together in California as, adjusting the microscope to the granite rocks of the Sierra ranges, they reviewed the story of the planet's childhood and read the fairy tales of the great wonder-book whose magic lore surpasses even the mystic charm of the Arabian Nights. And together they predicted comets and weighed worlds and measured stellar distances until they became known in the furthest universities of Europe as the Gemini of the scientific heavens.

The adventurous days of the old stagecoach and the lightning era of the steam locomotive were just beginning to overlap, when the long distance across the great plains was made on the first transcontinental line, whose trailing smoke threaded the Rocky Mountains. Both the Indian and the highwayman still menaced the lives of the passengers along the perilous route. But the trip appears to have been made without serious mishap. John was upon the scene some six months in advance of the opening of the institution to take part in the work of preliminary organization. Except as superintendent of the old nitre plant at Columbia, South Carolina, during the Civil War, he could lay claim to little experience as an administrator, but he possessed executive ability of the highest order, seeing which the regents insisted upon putting him at the head of the institution for the first year. But the responsibilities of the president's office were supplemental to the duties of the professorship;

and, being above everything else a man of science and a scholar, he refused to bear the administrative burden any longer than was necessary to launch the great enterprise. He then concentrated his energies upon the department of physics. However, it became apparent, in the course of time, that his strong hand was again needed at the helm. This time an assistant was given him; and he once more assumed the office of president, which he held continuously from 1875 to 1881. He then retired, to assume no more the executive responsibilities. The infirmities of age were creeping on apace, and he wished to spend the tranquil eventide of his life in the untrammeled pursuit of his favorite studies. He died in 1891 at the ripe age of seventy-three; and, considering the valiant pioneer service which he rendered to the institution, he well deserves to be honored as the Father of the University of California.

During the half century which he gave to scientific research and experiment, he published over one hundred papers on scientific subjects. He specialized in the domain of physics; but his mind ranged and his interest extended over the whole realm of natural phenomena. Dr. Joseph Le Conte says that, even in his own department of geology, especially when it bordered upon physics, he consulted him with the greatest confidence. "In a word," added the great geologist, "whenever clearness of thought or accuracy of statement, on any scientific subject, was required, I instinctively turned to him as to an encyclopedia. He wrote an elaborate treatise on physics which was destroyed in the burning of Columbia, South Carolina. He pondered long before he took the pen; and the amount of his published work bears no re-



JOSEPH LE CONTE.

lation to the abundance of his knowledge or to the wealth of his original thought."

But Joseph Le Conte was destined to attain the widest celebrity and to occupy the largest place in the public eye, by reason of his masterful effort to harmonize the scientific theory of evolution with the Biblical story of Genesis. He, too, like John Le Conte, was perfectly at home in all the varied fields of natural science. But geology was the department in which he specialized; and from the pen of Joseph Le Conte have come the standard authorities of the present day. He could read the rocks as readily as he could read the newspapers or the magazines upon his study table; but the wonderful characters in which the record of creation was lettered he recognized to be the handwriting of the Great Author, who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth.

To quote the autobiography of Dr. Le Conte, he was extremely reluctant to accept the new theory of evolution. He recognized the scientific credentials which it bore, but he possessed the religious instinct and cherished the orthodox traditions. He finally accepted the unpopular doctrine; but, on the principle that between the daughters of Truth there can be no family quarrel, he sought to harmonize the apparent conflict. The result was an adjustment which completely satisfied the mind of the great scholar. Construing the new theory in the light of the book of Genesis, he beheld law proceeding from God; and, interpreting the Book of Genesis in the light of the new theory, he beheld God operating through law. "Let there be light" was to him the very language of evolution itself: the primal command of the divine Crea-

tor addressed to second causes. He took the position that either the days themselves were prolonged geological periods, or else that the intervals which separated the days were such; and, in support of this contention which seemed to be reenforced by the poetic character of the book, he found that the word "day" was given various shades of meaning within the limits of the Bible itself. But he adduced arguments from countless sources to show that he had reached the true basis of hermaneutics.

On account of the mediatorial office which he assumed toward the great controversy, he became the live target for orthodox religious criticism on both sides of the water. It was claimed that he was perverting the truth of Scripture in the interest of modern atheism. He resented the hostility of the church, not only because he was himself devoutly religious, but because he was doing what he conceived to be fully as much for religion as for science in reconciling the apparent contradiction between two divine revelations. However, he was only suffering the fate of the forerunner; and, if he was not spared to see the hostility of the religious world completely subside, he lived long enough to see eminent theologians acquitted of heresy for adopting the scientific view. He witnessed the turn of the new century and died in 1901 at the advanced age of seventy-eight years, having filled the geological chair at Berkeley for more than three decades.

Whatever may be said in flippant humor of the Darwinian theory that men are descended from monkeys, it must readily be admitted that the doctrine of organic evolution has been embraced and defended by some of the world's greatest intellects. The honor of introducing the doctrine belongs to the celebrated French savant,

Jean Lamarck, who sacrificed his eyesight by constant peering into microscopic dust, and spent his last years in Miltonic blindness. It was the office of Darwin by continued research and experiment to commend it to the scientific mind. The work of Huxley was to present it in attractive garb to the popular reader. While upon Herbert Spencer was laid the task of generalizing the doctrine into a universal law of nature. But the functional part assigned to Joseph Le Conte, in the grand scheme of development, namely, the duty of presenting it to the world's religious thought, was scarcely less important; and, in the event the theory of evolution is ever universally accepted by the church, he will rank above them all in the homage which he will claim from admiring Christendom. For, if he was not the first great American scientist to link his name to the championship of the theory of evolution, he was at least the first man of eminence, on either side of the water, to baptize it with the sacred rites of the church, and to bring it into the fold of the faith.

The Le Contes were scientific scholars by right of inheritance as well as by virtue of distinguished attainments. This statement is sufficiently attested by the bare fact that they were the sons of Louis Le Conte, the celebrated naturalist, for whom the Le Conte pear was christened. Than Louis Le Conte there were few original thinkers who made larger or richer contributions to the scientific thought of the world, during the first half of the last century; but he failed to publish his discoveries except through the medium of private letters. The result was that men less gifted in the line of original

research but more dextrous in the use of the pen, were given the credit which rightfully belonged to the elder Le Conte. He was born in the State of New Jersey, attended Columbia College and studied medicine under the celebrated Dr. Hossack. But, eventually coming to Georgia, he settled in Liberty county, near Walthoursville, and wooed and won Ann Quarterman, who belonged to the famous old Midway settlement. Inheriting large means, he operated more than two hundred slaves on the rich alluvial bottom lands and proceeded to astonish the old settlers by the application of advanced methods to the art of farming. Mathematics, astronomy, geology, zoology and physics were included among his accomplishments; and, like the Village Schoolmaster, he caused the rustics of the neighborhood to marvel in wide-eyed wonder "how one small head could carry all he knew." But his favorite studies were chemistry and botany. In the attic of his farmhouse he fitted up a chemical laboratory in which he often worked far into the night; whilst included among his plantation novelties was a botanical garden, in which he cultivated many rare bulbous plants, some of which were brought from the Cape of Good Hope. Though he took little pains to exploit his achievements, it was nothing unusual for him to entertain foreign visitors who were attracted to Liberty county from all parts of the world to witness the experiments of the modest Georgia scientist.

But the genius for scientific investigation which Louis Le Conte transmitted to his children was derived from ancestral sources still further remote, and was shared by collateral kinsmen. Scarcely less gifted than himself was his brother John Eaton Le Conte, who is even bet-

ter known at the present day in some respects because of the voluminous literature by which he is represented in the scientific libraries. He entered the United States army as a topographical engineer whose duty it was to make surveys; but he eventually retired with the rank of major to devote himself to the study of natural history, for which he possessed an inherited aptitude and in which he became one of the recognized authorities of the time, writing and publishing many valuable papers. John Lawrence Le Conte, the distinguished entomologist, who rose to be president of the American Association for the Promotion of Science, was his son.

But not the least talented of the scientific scholars who have illustrated the Le Conte connection was Dr. William Louis Jones, whose mother was, by marriage, a half-sister of Louis Le Conte. With the varied accomplishments for which the Le Conte family is noted, Dr. Jones has filled, at different times, the chairs of chemistry, geology and history at the State University, and has been the executive head of the agricultural station. He occupied the chair of biology during the writer's undergraduate days at Athens; and, while the mischievous boys nicknamed him "Icthyosaurus" in honor of the famous prehistoric lizzard, and called him "Icthy" for short, they possessed very great respect for Dr. Jones, and enjoyed the recitation hour which they spent on the top floor of the old library building. Though Dr. Jones has written many valuable papers, evincing his rare culture and his original research, it is much to be regretted that he has never concentrated his energies upon the production of some elaborate masterpiece like the famous geological work of Joseph Le Conte. Two of his sons are

the inheritors of his scientific bent of mind. Dr. Louis H. Jones, the well-known physician, and Samuel Percy Jones, the accomplished geologist, while another son, Alexander R. Jones, is one of the leading lawyers of Seattle, Washington.

Except for an unfortunate policy which, measured by present-day institutional standards, was exceedingly narrow, the Le Contes might have remained in their native State and have given to their alma mater the distinguished talents which have placed them in the front rank of American scientists. But Dr. Church, though in many respects an administrator of rare excellence, was ultra-conservative. In the exercise of discipline he took the position that the university system was too advanced to meet the needs of the immature students who attended Franklin College, and he sought to keep the boys in check by means of the primitive instrument of juvenile torture concerning which Solomon on one occasion spoke in very high terms.

But the Le Contes refused to cooperate with Dr. Church in applying kindergarten methods to the control of matriculants many of whom could have sprouted beards as long as Ingomar's had not the barbarian appendages been somewhat out of fashion at the time in gentle Athens. Against the policy of paternalism the brothers rebelled. They regarded such measures of discipline not only as below the standard of the ordinary high school but as little removed from the tactics of the nursery, and they declined to execute orders which they thought were calculated to suppress rather than to encourage true manliness. Consequently, Dr. Church complained to the board

of trustees that the Le Contes were guilty of insubordination; and, since some of the members were fossils who belonged to the Paleozoic period, the Le Contes were subjected to the frown of the august powers.

Another matter which served to accentuate the breach lay in the sphere of doctrine. The Le Contes accepted the geological theory of creation which Dr. Church abhorred as the rankest heresy and attributed to the Machiavellian craft of old Nick himself. But the doctrine was distasteful at the time to all the orthodox churchmen; and the Le Contes were regarded as the sowers of dangerous seed. This in spite of the fact that both were men of blameless lives and pure morals. Too proud to remain in the faculty, under such adverse conditions, the brothers resigned, and Franklin College awoke eventually to realize that, worse than the base Indian who threw away only one pearl of surpassing value, she had been blind enough to relinquish two. More in grief than in bitterness, the Le Contes quit Georgia, first to become joint instructors of the youth of South Carolina, on the opposite side of the Savannah River, but eventually, upon the Sierra slopes, to become twin-giants in the Titanic group of the great Sequoias.

But the story is not yet fully told. The Le Contes were not the only members of the faculty who withdrew from the classic groves of Athens in consequence of the famous rupture of 1856. Upon the issues already indicated, the faculty seems to have been divided into two hostile factions. William LeRoy Broun and Charles S. Venable were also among the advanced thinkers who felt the chill blast of the northwest wind; and they, too, decided to

carry their wares to other markets. Professor Broun eventually returned, but Professor Venable took the path of the raven. He went to the University at Charlottesville, became the noted adjutant on the staff of General Robert E. Lee during the Civil War, and afterwards compiled the popular text-books on mathematics.

At the time of the upheaval in the faculty, Mrs. John Le Conte was one of the reigning belles of Athens; but another rare beauty with whom she divided the social scepter was Mrs. Craig, formerly Miss Lizzie Church. She was old Dr. Church's daughter. This meant that the war which divided the Areopagus was carried into the town and renewed under the chandeliers of the Athenian parlors. It recalled the rumpus which once occurred in Jupiter's dining-room. But unhappily there was no Paris to award the prize. Each lady possessed a host of enthusiastic followers who toasted her as the queen paramount. Not only the men but the women themselves took up the fight, and Mr. Gus Hull says that it was only the conservative influence of the elderly element which prevented another War of the Roses.

Leaving Georgia together in 1856, the joint fortunes of the two Le Contes continued unbroken until 1891. At last, when the lifelong comradeship was dissolved, it was John who led the way. This was to be expected. He was the elder of the twain. Bereft and disconsolate, Joseph now walked alone in the shadows. Despite the happiest of home surroundings, he missed the companion with whom he had roamed the starry meadows. Though he made frequent trips to his lodge in the Yosemite Val-

ley he was never quite the same. Nor were the Berkeley students slow to mark the change in "Professor Joe." In place of the buoyancy of spirit there crept a languor and a weariness. But they understood, and, whenever he grew strangely silent or failed to hear some question which was asked, they knew he was thinking of John. Under normal conditions, the old scientist was the liveliest of boon companions. He loved Milton and Burns. He could play the flute. He could dance the highland fling. He could narrate the prize anecdote and spin the blue-ribbon yarn at any gathering of the old settlers. Moreover, he possessed the Georgia darkey's keen sense of the ridiculous, and the peal of his laughter around the campfire awoke the merriest echo in all the mountains. But gradually the old man grew more and more reticent. It was no ordinary grief which he nursed; and, while he kept his great brain and his active pen busy to the last, he was like one who sat in the purple hazes of the twilight at the water's edge and waited for the soft dip of the muffled oar.

What memories of the forgotten by-gones come back like the fireflies to illuminate the eventide of life only the aged dreamer with the silver locks can possibly tell. Then it is that the reminiscent fancies seem to be given the freest wing. Yesterdays come trooping back in an endless caravan of spectral phantoms. Springs are pressed; and, from the hidden chambers of thought, imprisoned images leap forth like the fabled genii of the vase. The charter of the winds permits the old man to borrow from every hedge of hawthorn. The faded photographs are retouched; the withered leaves are again fragrant in the

rose-jar; and the lost companions of another era step from the portraits on the wall to move in the rhythmic circles of the dance. Perhaps, best of all, some voice long silent awakes once more upon lips of coral and some queen of hearts returns from Canterbury to be crowned again at Westminster.

Joseph Le Conte was not too busy to make frequent drafts upon an old bank in which all men are depositors —the bank which never suspends specie payment in hard times—the bank which is proof against fire and theft and panic—whose surplus grows as the years multiply, and whose hoarded coins still sparkle when the luster upon the baser gold is gone—the bank of Auld Lang Syne. Step by step he retraced the intricate windings of the path which ran in and out among the shadows and which stretched from the day-dreams of two beardless boys in the Georgia lowlands to the realized ambitions of two bent old graybeards on the Sierra slopes. Even excluding the softer colors which were borrowed from woman's touch, it could hardly be said that the retrospect lacked in any degree the prismatic hues of romance; for the marriage tie itself is not closer than the bond which exists between two strong men whose lives are in perfect unison.

However, the backward look was not more satisfying to the old scientist than was the forward. He often penetrated into the realm of eschatology. The insatiate instinct of the eager searcher after truth made him long to tear aside the veil. But, in brooding upon the great problems of the future life, it was not to voice the morbid doubts of the melancholy Dane. Like the great Sir Isaac Newton he not only recognized the limitations of the human intellect but he felt the sense of finite dependence; and

such questions as he was not able to solve by the flickering light of reason he calmly and quietly adjourned to the mysterious Sometime when the slow deductions of logic should be at last supplanted by the immediate grasp of revealed truth. If there was one thing more than another which characterized the great scientist it was an implicit belief in the unseen realities. He possessed an unfaltering trust. In an age of materialistic philosophy he sounded the minstrel note of Bryant's Thanatopsis; and, just as the forest oak when the storm is abroad grips the gray granite of the hillside, so Joseph Le Conte, amid the howling winds of atheism, gripped the eternal verities. His cruse of oil never lacked and his lamp of faith burned so high above the fog-belt that it fairly illuminated the open book of nature and lit the path before him like the magic star that blazed the way of the Magi.

At the foot of the scaffold poor Barnaby Rudge said to the simple companion, who was soon to follow him through the iron door: "Hugh, we will know what makes the stars shine now." It was substantially the thought of the great scientist. Out in the green fields and among the grey rocks he had often looked up to the spangled arch and said: "Some day it will all be plain." The wisest as well as the simplest minds have felt the bewildering pressure of the great mysteries. The best estate of reason is only the hazy twilight of the early dawn. Even hope itself is but the herald-lark among the hemlocks. But faith is the morning star on the world's horizon; and the same benignant ray, which splendored the dungeon gloom of the humblest child of the brain of Charles Dickens, enabled the great scientist to thread the shadows when Joseph went to meet John Le Conte.