
Her Soul and Her Body

Hale Louise Closser

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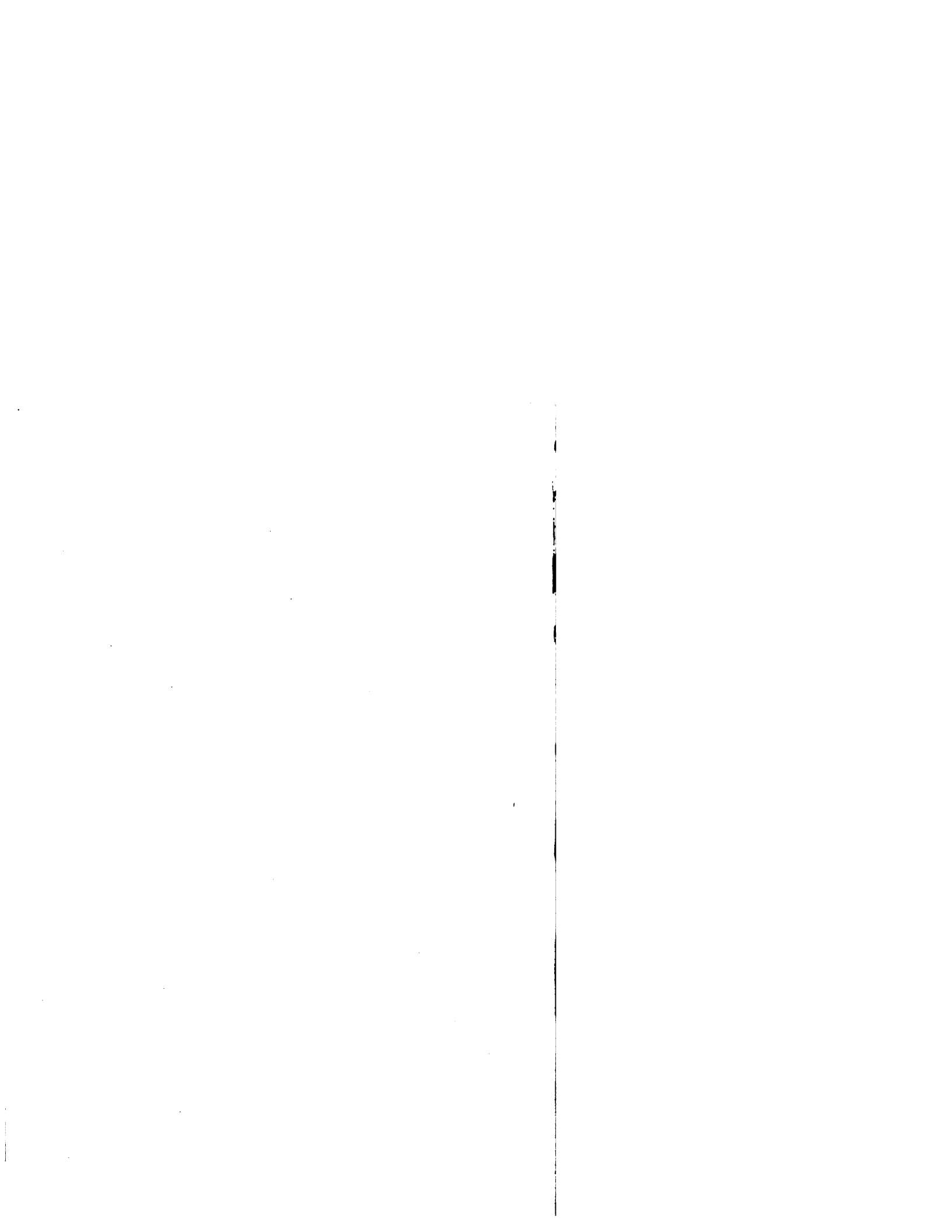
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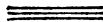
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BY
LOUISE CLOSSER HALE

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HER SOUL AND HER BODY

PART I

I

WHEN I was a little girl my father often tried to kiss my mother but she would draw away from him, and say, "Not before Missy." And then father would laugh a little, and sigh out, "What a queer lot we Yankees are!"

I thought they were too old and respectable to care about each other. But one day I saw him with his arms about her and her head on his shoulder, while he rubbed his cheek against hers. He had come home from a trip to Boston and mother had met him in the hall. I was upstairs looking over the banisters. She had worn a wonderful look as she ran to him, but first she had closed the front door.

My heart beat, and I was very proud to have such a thing happen among us. But I knew I should never be able to boast of it to Everett Austen, my playmate in the next house. It wasn't like having money to brag about as in Everett's case.

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HER SOUL AND HER BODY

I thought about it a good deal — too much, I expect, for a girl of eight. I grew very sad and wondered if I had better kill myself rather than always be in the way when my parents wanted to kiss each other. Some nights I believed that I was an adopted child and that she couldn't kiss him before me because I wasn't one of the family. As I grew older and compared notes, I found that almost all of the girls at one time or another thought they were adopted. Of course, not any of us had been.

I never told mother that I feared I had been left on the doorstep. Once when I was dragging myself to bed without offering to bid her good night, she said, "What's the matter, Melissa Robinson?" — but kindly — and at that I climbed into her lap and cried myself to sleep. She cuddled me, which was what I wanted. And she always kissed me, even before strangers. In that way I learned that loving a daughter is different from loving a husband — at least in New England.

I was not very bright in school, but I found out some of the mysteries of life — felt them — quicker than other girls did. I can't remember when I didn't know about such things, yet a number of my friends had to be taken aside and told by their mothers. "Advanced mothers" they are called in New Washington.

My mother died when I was nine, so we didn't

have a chance to grow very intimate. But even had she lived, we would have been embarrassed when speaking of such things. It is much better to know of it all the time, and not have to go begging your family, and then whispering about it with the other girls at the foot of the garden behind the currant bushes. I always hid any wonderful secrets like that. I seemed to be able to put them in my heart and lap it right over like a leather purse.

Had my father not been a man, I mean had he been a woman, I could have talked freely with him. But then father had a weak strain. He was a lawyer but he didn't make as much money as did Everett's father. Everett's family still live next door to our old home and Mr. Austen has the finest hardware shop in the north. When Everett and I were quite little he taunted me because we didn't make much money. I used to wonder why father couldn't manage to do as well as Mr. Austen, and at last I discovered that he wrote poetry.

A verse about "The Joy of Being Alive" was printed in the *New Washington Banner*, I remember, and there was a word from the editor which ran something like this: "We are glad that the contributor finds it sufficient reward to be alive, as any pressing obligation to pay for this piece of poetry would have resulted in its return. Write again, 'Anonymous.'"

4 HER SOUL AND HER BODY

I recall it, for mother read out loud that part of the "Vox Populi" column even before she did the stanzas. "But read the lines," father had replied — eagerly — like a boy.

She put down the paper in a flash and whispered to him: "You've written that piece of poetry yourself. Don't deny it. Of course I'm proud of you, but for goodness sake, don't let it get round that you make up rhymes. You'll lose all your practice."

He tried to reassure her, and said that no one would ever know, that he kept them locked up in his desk. And I don't believe any one ever did find out, but still we never had much money. I guess the quality that makes one write poetry keeps one from selling it.

I didn't tell mother because I wasn't supposed to have heard — besides it would have discouraged her so much, but I wanted to be a poetess for a long time after that. Sometimes I wrote things while hiding by the currant bushes but I always buried them in the earth so that the secret wouldn't get out. Now that I am sixteen and can look back upon life, I find that almost everything that we do which we like has to be buried in one way or another.

Mrs. Andrews had come to help with the housework a year before mother died. She was a widow with very slender means and the arrangement was excellent. Even so, mother continued

to fail, and one night while I was asleep she passed away very quickly. No one, not even father, realized how ill she was, although, one may be sure, mother knew.

Father didn't make any effort whatever to hide his grief, and for years afterwards I could hear the ladies at the sewing circle discussing under their breaths the way he sobbed at the funeral; he wouldn't leave the grave, although it kept the minister standing about. They used the same hushed tone that they employed when speaking of Ellie Morton who ran away with a troupe once. And when poor father died (kissing me but still going), they were all indignant. They thought he ought to have stayed on if only to look after me.

"Perhaps he couldn't help it," I once screamed out rebelliously. "He had typhoid fever."

Even though they were sorry that I had overheard, they wouldn't give in an inch. "He should have tried more," was the general suggestion.

Father's weakness in going away seemed to be a sort of stigma which I would have to live down. At times I got mixed from puzzling over things so much. I seemed to be the stigma itself. Whenever I was careless, and forgot to buy the bread, or stayed out in the woods until I was late to supper, I would seem to feel that the weak part of him was going on and that people would al-