The story begins in turmoil. A young man is frantically digging a hole in the ground. And though the air of spring is sweet, what he breathes is sour with war. It’s June 14th, 1861. Missouri, a divided state. The young man dumps a load of metal type into the pit. Now he is running. The young man running is Ed Taylor. He’s only 22, already the editor and printer of the Boonville Observer.

The next day soldiers arrive. Taylor sits at his desk, secure until an Army major bursts in, clutching copy to print. Armies print proclamations, orders. But Taylor has no type, and isn’t about to tell where it’s hidden. So the major pushes him outside, leads him to a tree, throws a rope over a limb, and loops it around Taylor’s neck. He hoists Taylor up until his toes barely touch the ground. The young man is angry and resolved. For 20 minutes he stays suspended. Then the major, with no thought of compassion, but wanting to get his printing done, lets Ed Taylor down. But Taylor is resolved to do no printing, and he’s strung up again. Fifteen minutes pass and the young man senses his future is greater than type. He leads the major to the pit and gains his freedom.

And so began the amazing life and adventures of Edward Robeson Taylor (1838-1923). In time he became a physician, lawyer, poet, Mayor of San Francisco, and Dean of Hastings Law School.

After his narrow escape from the immediacy of war, he fled first to New Orleans, then to Panama, and on to San Francisco, where he worked as a typesetter, then as a purser on a steamer ferrying passengers from San Francisco to Sacramento. One passenger, a doctor, inspired young Taylor to enter medical school. By 1865, the former editor of a small town newspaper was transformed into a Doctor of Medicine.

Treating the sick was not, however, as satisfying as he had assumed. Early medical procedures were crude and Taylor had other interests. So in 1870 he entered law school, and after two years was admitted to the California Bar. He immediately set about reforming California’s medical laws, which was not without political difficulties. He was also responsible for building several libraries, both medical and public.

During these busy days, Taylor focused more and more on his literary efforts. All through his varied career, he preferred above all else to be known as a poet. Oddly, one of Edward Robeson Taylor’s best

---

known books was a translation of the sonnets of Jose-Maria de Heredia (1842-1905), a French poet born in Cuba. If translations reveal anything of their translator, it's appropriate to include this translated verse published in a revised 1898 edition:

**Rising Sea**

The sun a beacon seems with fixed, white light.  
From Raz far as Penmarc'h the coast's in fume,  
And only wind-blown gulls with ruffled plume  
Through the mad tempest whirl in aimless flight.

With ceaseless roll and fierce, impetuous might  
The glaucous waves, beneath their mane of spume  
Dispersing clouds of mist to thunderous boom,  
The distant, streaming reefs with plumes bedight.

And so the billows of my thought have course—  
Spent hopes and dreams, regrets for wasted force,  
With nothing left but mocking memory.

Ocean has spoken in fraternal strain,  
For that same clamor which impels the sea  
Mounts to the gods from man, eternal, vain.

Certainly, from what we know of him, Taylor cannot be said to have experienced "spent hopes and dreams." As an old man—he lived into his mid-eighties—his memories never mocked, always seemingly rich and lively. In fact, a poem he wrote, in his 70s, testifies to the enjoyment he found in law. It appeared in a 1911 issue of the *Green Bag*.

**Non Fuit, Sed Est et Fuit**

Out from the storehouse vast of legal junk,  
Where maxim jostles against dictum old;  
Where ancient axioms of worth untold  
Are mixed with myths as rank as Chinese punk,  
Where jargon grim of mediaeval monk,  
Queer French, the heritage from Normans bold,  
And quaintest Saxon, redolent of mold,  
Are mixed in one inextricable hunk,  
Comes that queer collocation: *Nunc pro tunc*,  
An onomatopoeia brave and strong  
Yet gentle as a Kentish maiden's mien.
Just speak it, and you hear the plectrum’s plunk,
On golden lyre that sounds to sombre song,
The definition, “Ah, it might have been.”

Worried perhaps about the obscurity that he may have slipped into, Taylor uses one of his poems to muse upon what “we cannot know.” It’s from his Selected Poems, published 1907. The poem entitled,

**Whither**

Ah, my songs beloved,
Whither do ye go?
O beloved Poet,
That we cannot know.
Who can tell what roses
Will tomorrow bloom?
Or what wings be folden
In relentless gloom?
We abide the future,
As the greatest must—
Sure to find the laurel,
Or be less than dust.

As we look more closely at Taylor’s career in law, the poet’s quick rise to prominence is remarkable. He worked as secretary to the governor of California, Henry Huntly Haight (1867-71), while studying for the Bar. He was admitted in 1872, and quickly joined Haight to form Haight and Taylor, a new law firm with considerable political influence. Upon Haight’s death in 1878, Taylor was joined by Haight’s uncle, giving the firm a new name, Taylor and Haight. The firm prospered, as Taylor took on clients involved in disputes and criminal matters.

In one such case, Taylor brought a life-size skeleton into the courtroom, causing quite a stir. It was an early use, in California, of “demonstrative evidence.” In another case, Taylor’s use of poetry in the courtroom did not carry the day. He represented a group claiming rights to a deceased millionaire’s fortune: the millionaire had left no will. A competing claimant was a supposed illegitimate daughter who had been brought over from England. Judge J.V. Coffey presided, and commented on Taylor’s use of poetry:

Counsel for defense . . . quotes more or less appositely from Mrs. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem of ‘Aurora Leigh’ in which he says
all the phases of life are seen with the eye of a poet . . . . These lines of poetry, says the counsel, express the whole law of adoption . . . .

On July 31, 1890, Judge Coffey rendered an opinion of 125,000 words, believed to be the longest in any California superior court. The entire estate of $2,000,000 went to the child. Taylor’s claimants received nothing.

Taylor continued practice until his duties as Dean of Hastings College of the Law demanded primary attention. When his law office was consumed in the fire of 1906, he never opened a new one.

“During a time when cleverness was more likely to be admired than ability, Taylor’s career at the Bar is impressive. He conducted his practice in accordance with highest ethical standards, yet he was never dull. He always had a story or a poem to enliven technical legal issues. The law may have been a mistress to him, but she was an indulgent rather than a jealous mistress.”