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ALCESTIS  
and Other Poems

SARA KING WILEY





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# ALCESTIS

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# ALCESTIS

and Other Poems

BY

SARA KING WILEY

Author of

“Poems, Lyrical and Dramatic :  
Cromwell, a Play”

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To My Husband  
Frederic Lindsley Drummond  
I Dedicate this Book

The author desires to thank the Editors of  
Harpers' Magazine, The Outlook, and  
The Churchman for permission to re-  
print verse first published in their pages

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# ALCESTIS

## CHARACTERS

ADMETUS, King of Thessaly

ALCESTIS, his wife

THE FATHER of Admetus

THE MOTHER of Admetus

THE PRIEST OF APOLLO

HERACLES

DEATH

THE CHILDREN of Admetus and Alcestis

SERVANT, Steward of the Palace

CHORUS, composed of men and women, the friends  
and servants of Admetus

THE SPIRITS OF THE DEAD IN HADES

# ALCESTIS

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## ACT I

SCENE I. Within the palace of Admetus. The first court with a fountain and basin in the center, surrounded by the peristyle, six Doric columns being visible across the end of the court, and three on either side. At the back, in the center, is seen the corridor leading through to the peristyle about the court of the women's apartments. On the left, at the back, between the pillars, is the curtained opening to the master's chamber, within which is the couch of Admetus. At the left front is a colossal statue of Apollo. At the right front is an altar and tripod. About the wall hang silver shields.

When the scene opens, the entrance to the master's chamber is covered by a curtain. The chorus of men and women enter through the corridor, singing and dancing in honor of Apollo.

### PÆAN

#### *Strophe 1.*

Hail, O Apollo, that guidest the sun with the coursers  
of light!

Hast thou forsaken thine ancient home, and the hills  
and the halls once beloved?

Sending with dreadful falling of shafts upon us dark  
death, the night,  
Say, hath thy beauty and blessing so far and forever  
removed?

*Anti-strophe I.*

Golden-bright god, thou that bringest the order that  
rulest our day,  
Thou the sweet sound from the smitten lyre, and the  
song from rude speech dost release,  
Forth from the carven stone fair forms, and urns  
from the yielding clay;  
Healer, we pray thee, restore us from tumult of  
pains unto peace!

*Epode I.*

Thou didst conquer Marsyas  
By thy mighty sounding strain,  
Force the cruel Death to pass—  
Coming in pain!  
Loxias, thou lord of light,  
By thy golden arrow's might,  
Give back, O ruler of kings, our king to his kingdom  
again!

*Strophe 2.*

Thou that didst love Hyacinthus, and seeing his  
blood, on the grass,  
Purpling the tender new green of spring, and across  
the white limbs spreading slow,  
Mourned till the flowers opening blue were marked  
with thy cry "Alas,"  
Silently joined thy lamenting all drenched with thy  
tears as they flow.

*Anti-strophe 2.*

Thou the sweet Daphne pursuing with love of her  
swifter than wind,  
Clasping her close as her trembling ceased and her  
softness grew roughened and cold,  
Stripping with kisses the slender leaves around thy  
bright brows to bind.  
Lifted by love she forever the symbol of honor shall  
hold!

*Epode 2.*

Ah, for Asclepius, woe,  
Deep revengèd, sore deplored,  
By wrath of Zeus struck low,  
Death conquering lord!

Spouse's love and children's love,  
Both shall here thy pity move ;

Lover and father and friend art thou—be thy pas-  
sion outpoured !

*Full cho.*

Across the hills of Pherae gold-shafted falls the  
light,

But weary are the watchers that told the hours of  
night—

Sunk ever in deeper sorrow as day reveals again  
Heavier on their master the wasting touch of pain.

*Semi-cho. (women).*

How fares Alcestis? Tell to me who love her?

*Semi-cho. (men).*

Fears more than ye, and more than ye she hopes.

*Semi-cho. (women).*

Anguish drives up her courage, as great wind  
Exalts the flame from embers fallen gray.

*Cho.*       What intolerable weight  
              Shall the minutes bear  
              When the hastening fate  
              Shall approach us there



Golden with hope or dyed black with the hue of  
despair.

*(The curtain before the entrance to the  
master's chamber is drawn, showing Ad-  
metus upon the couch, and Alcestis bend-  
ing over him.)*

*Admetus.* Is there no hope?

The black gulf yawns before my sliding feet,  
The cold, deep-clutching, hungry hands of death  
Drag me on weakening. Less and less I strive.  
The thickening horror presses down my breath.  
O save me, save me, mercy, pitying gods!

*Alcestis (going down before the altar and kneel-  
ing).* He suffers! Every breath he draws in pain  
Is sharper than quick swords within my breast.  
Send help, O Zeus, my heart is at thy feet,  
My life is all a prayer that he may live,  
My agony is an enfolding cloud,  
I draw my breath as one that breathes in fire,  
I move bowed down beneath a grievous load,  
My voice is but to cry and to beseech,  
O spare my husband, spare my best beloved!  
Is there no sacrifice can move thy mercy?

*Cho.* Alas, alas, no answering fire is here.

*Alc.* (*returning to Admetus*).

They say the halcyon bears her sinking mate  
On wings outspread, above the raging waves,  
In power of love prevailing with the sea.  
So let me bear thee sheltered on this breast.

*Cho.* As the gathering night  
That thou canst not stay,  
As the waning light  
And the speeding day,

Thus the departing life that hasteth away.

As Leander strove  
In his strength to attain  
To his waiting love  
While the mortal pain

Gathered and overwhelmed till he struggled in vain.

In the Lethe wave  
The life vanisheth,  
And no love can save  
The foredoomèd breath,

For deeper than seas of the earth are the waters of  
death.

*Semi-cho. (men).*

The priest is here, O King.

*(Admetus tries to speak, but fear masters him and he hides his face on the breast of Alcestis.)*

*Semi-cho. (women).*

Too much he fears, he cannot hear his fate.

*(The priest enters and stands alone, all drawing away from him in awe. The father and mother of Admetus enter.)*

*Father (to Admetus).* What hope, beloved son?

*Adm.* I cannot ask.

*Cho.* From Apollo's shrine  
May the prophet bring  
Such a word divine  
As the learnèd spring,

As Helicon clear and bright, to our suffering king.

*Alc.* Come forth, O priest and speak with me  
apart. *(The priest refuses by a sign.)*

*Priest.* Dreadful the choice my fated word im-  
parts;

O ye that love the king, search now your hearts.

*Father.* I am no weakling; speak, I love my son.

Though I am old, yet is my courage high ;  
I fear no foe, I am a warrior still.  
I shall dare boldly, now, to save thee, boy,  
And if my strength is less, my skill is more.

*Mother.* What may thy mother give and what  
endure,

Whose life was one with thine, whose yearning love  
Brooded about thee first of loves that were.

*Alc.* (*who is holding her husband, to the priest*).  
What need that he should hear? Come thou aside,  
Let him not know until we bring him health?

(*To Admetus.*)

Sweetheart of mine, until we bring thee health?

*Adm.* No, no, I'll hear the word—I am the king.

*Priest.* Thus spoke Apollo of the golden lyre,  
The golden arrows and the gold sun-fire,  
Forth from the gloom on rushing wind out-blown :—  
“Who giveth life to thee shall give his own.”

*Semi-cho.* (*men*).

O dreadful word; who shall abide this test?

*Semi-cho.* (*women*).

Not I, alas, although I love my king.

*Father.* Were there a fight, I should not hesitate,

But here is never a chance or hope for life,  
A certain dark and hideous overthrow.

*Mother.* Pheres, my lord, I cannot have thee  
die—

*Father.* What evil dost thou prate, thou foolish  
priest?

Apollo loves no bloody sacrifice.

Thus shall his meaning be interpreted :

What is "our own"? The power and glory of life.

I'll hang Apollo's altars with new gold,

Till, like to beaming orbs perpetual,

They flash and sparkle on the dazzled eye.

Or I will fight and win a thousand lives,

And shackle them to be Apollo's slaves.

*Mother (to Admetus).* And I will spend my days  
in sighs and tears,

Bathing his altars with that piteous rain,

And only live to plead and pray for thee.

*Father (to Admetus).* Look up, my son, for I  
will bring thee health.

*Mother.* O I would die for thee, but that thy  
father

Would then be left in age companionless.

Sweet son, believe me, I would die for thee.

*Father.* Speak not of such a folly. I shall go  
To storm Apollo's altars for thy health.  
And have the swollen waters of my might,  
Augmented by my love and by my fears,  
Shrunk to so small a current suddenly  
They cannot sweep this sapling from my path?  
Why, priest, thou darest not oppose my will.

*Both.* Farewell, dear son, we shall return rejoicing.

*(They hesitate and begin to weep as they go forward to embrace him.)*

*Mother.* Say thou art easier now, beloved son.

*Father.* Thy strength is fast returning, is it not?  
*(Admetus shakes his head and hides his face.)*

*Alc. (to parents).* Be not sad, I think he will not die.

*(Admetus starts and looks at Alcestis fearfully.)*

*Alc. (avoiding her husband's eyes).* Go to  
Apollo's altar and there pray,  
I think indeed that he will hear thy prayers.

*(The father and mother look significantly at each other, and embrace Alcestis. Admetus sinks back half disappointed.)*

*Adm.* No, no; there is no hope, there is no hope.  
*Father and Mother (embracing Alcestis).* More than our daughter, be thou ever blessed!

We go to pray; we go to beg for mercy.  
Take heart, Alcestis, we will give much gold.

*Semi-cho. (men).*

Alas, alas, life only pays for life.

*Semi-cho. (women).*

Alas for us, the king will surely die!

*Father.* Get hence, ye peevish maids, your evil song

Troubles the king. Hence, all ye croakers, hence!  
*(He drives out chorus. The father and mother go out).*

*Alc. (putting her hand on Admetus' forehead).*

Thy brow burns like a brazen cup thrice heated,  
That holds within the throb of boiling liquor.

*(Takes him in her arms).*

Come, lay thee here, and lulled by the low motion,  
Sleep like the robin rocked in summer zephyrs.

This breast stirs in the wind of love, soft blowing;  
Forget the world, remember how I love thee.  
And I will sing of love and night and spring.

Through clustered bloom of orchard trees  
Murmurs the evening breeze,  
And rippling like a shallow stream  
Lulls to a drowsy dream.

In the pale sky the moon hangs pale,  
The apple petals sail  
And sink in deep grass, gleaming green,  
Where darkening shadows lean.  
The robins twitter, settling slow;  
The nearing cattle low;  
Their herders whistle as they come,  
And children scamper home.  
All that went forth to toil and quest  
Gather to love and rest.

*(Admetus sleeps. Alcestis goes down to  
the altar and prays, standing with up-  
lifted arms.)*

*Alc.* Refuse not, O ye gods, that solemn courage  
Ye breathe on warriors marching into battle,  
For these defend their country, I my husband,



That is to me my home, and is my country.  
Lift up my heart above the fear of dying.  
Receive my yielded life, and spare my lover.

*(The flame leaps upon the altar. Alcestis bows in silent prayer, and then, rising, turns toward Admetus.)*

*Alc.* O, thou more precious than the light of heaven,

Than all the cheerful unknown days to be  
That beckon me to stay, accept my life!

*(After a minute's pause she goes forward and draws the curtains, returning to the altar, before which she sinks weeping. The fire grows dim.)*

*Alc.* A cold breath strikes upon my happiness  
Like sudden fierce spring winds on early flowers.  
I hear the heavy plashing of his oars  
Who comes to take me to the realms of death.  
Admetus, I have lost thee in the gloom,  
I shall not ever feel thy clasping arms,  
Nor the soft pressure of my children's lips,  
Nor hear their bird-sweet callings at the dawn,  
Nor watch them grow in beauty and in strength,  
Nor guide and guard their tender steps from harm.

My heart grows faint, my body chills and fails;  
Alas, I am too weak. Give courage, Zeus!

*(The fire leaps up.)*

*Adm.* Alcestis!

*Alc.* Belovèd voice!

Like the sudden song of a bird in deepest night,  
That through the lapsèd senses subtly steals,  
Exalting on a flood of ecstasy  
The dulled heart to the ringing silver heaven.

*Adm.* Nicias! Erechtheus!

*(Enter, hastily, the chorus of servants and friends, who draw back the curtain.)*

*Adm.* Draw back these curtains, let me see the  
sun!

Bring wine, my heart revives; why did I fear?  
Come hither, my Alcestis, come in joy,  
Strength courses through my veins like sap in spring.

*Alc. (to chorus).* Give me the wine. *(She raises the goblet.)* Asclepius, to thee  
I pour libation forth in prayer and praise  
Whose love in saving man from death brought pain  
On thee that loved, and death from jealous Zeus;  
For the all-glorious Dorian, thy sire,

Slew in revenge the instruments of wrath  
And in the expiation of that deed  
Dwelt in these halls a servant to the king—  
Whom yet as friend surpassingly he loved—  
And in our misery hath pled for us  
And won from Zeus this oracle of life.  
The runner, sinking, passes on the torch  
And in the swifter hand the glory speeds—  
Thy love, Asclepius, gives hope to mine.

*(She pours a libation and goes up to Admetus with the goblet.)*

Say thou dost love me, say thou dost, my lord!

*Adm.* No need to say those words, thou knowest  
I do.

Thy cheek grows pale, Alcestis.

*Alc.* It is joy,  
Excess of happiness, as the bright rain  
Fallen after drouth bends down the shining flowers.

*Adm.* Thy hand is cold. Rest on this couch a  
space. *(He rises.)*

Bring wine; haste, haste! Alcestis, O my wife!  
Look up, thy husband calls, Admetus calls.

*Alc.* Be not dismayed, Admetus, grieve thou not,

I shall but sleep awhile, but sleep awhile.  
Yet kiss me, my belovèd, it grows dark.

*Adm.* Nay, the bright sun still shines upon thee,  
sweet. *(In agony he cries:)*

O Zeus, the striving pinions of my prayer,  
Heavy with terror, cannot rise to thee!  
Shall I accept the priceless sacrifice?  
Nay, rather let me die that am foredoomed!

*Alc.* Forbear; for all is done. It is my will  
And Zeus hath sanctioned it.

*Adm.* No more, no more!  
My mind is frozen with the chill of grief,  
And I am dumb save for the bitter cry,  
“Is there no remedy in earth or heaven?”

*Alc. (faintly).* Protect our children; love them  
for my sake  
With double love, care for them tenderly.

*(Admetus weeps and cannot answer her.)*

Admetus, yonder cometh one in black,  
A great and formless thing—I fear, I fear!

*(Controlling her shuddering she tries to  
smile on Admetus.)*

Yet fear not thou for thee it cannot harm.

*Adm.* Alas, sweet wife, alas can I not save thee?

*Alc.* The worst is past; the pain will cease so soon;

Belovèd, thou art strong, O hold me close.

Bend nearer, now I cannot see thine eyes.

*Adm.* Alcestis, do not leave me!

*Alc.* The summer evening comes, serene and sweet,

The birds are calling softer, one by one,

The cool woods loose their perfumes on the air,

The golden glimmer sinks in greening gloom.

The stillness deepens and I rest alone.

*Adm.* O not alone, canst thou not feel my hand?

*Alc.* Farewell, farewell, how easy 'tis to die.

## ACT II

SCENE I. Before the palace of Admetus. Enter from the palace the funeral train, bearing Alcestis, covered, to the tomb, and followed by Admetus, in mourning garments.

### DIRGE

*Semi-chorus of women.*

Come every tender maiden,  
Your purple garments tear,  
Your eyes with teardrops laden,  
Steel-shorn your curling hair.

Grief is a quenchless shower,  
For she, all praise above,  
Lies like a fallen flower  
Trod by the foot of Love.

As when the sharp sun, stooping,  
In summer blazes bold,  
Her golden head is drooping,  
A golden marigold.

A woman, unrelying  
On strength of sword or spear,  
Love-panoplied, defying,  
She met the mortal fear.

To hero hearts compare her,  
For love alike that died,  
Fair in her life, but fairer  
In laying life aside.

*Admetus.* Set down your burden, let me see her  
face. *(They uncover Alcestis.)*

Thou makest even death thy servitor,  
His icy fingers crown thine excellence,  
O peerless queen. Serenely fair thou liest,  
Thy lily's pallor lovelier than the rose.  
Bring here her children, that have wept all night,  
For if they look on her as now she lies,  
Perhaps in the long motherless years to come  
They shall remember her, how fair she was!

*(Attendants bring in the children, who cling  
in terror to their father and hide their  
faces when he tries to make them look  
upon Alcestis.)*

*Adm.* Alas, they know the mother's heart is still;  
Take them away, and ye, take up your load.  
To-morrow shall we light the funeral pyre.

*(He goes up the steps of the palace, and they lift the body of Alcestis.)*

*Adm.* O gentle wife, whose days were blessed-  
ness,  
Thou hast first caused me grief in leaving me.  
These palaces that thou hast left forlorn  
Shall be a temple consecrate to thee,  
That was a home—no more forever a home!

*(They all go out, leaving him alone.)*

*Adm.* I cannot live without her any more;  
I cannot bear the daily lonely life.  
My kingdom is no more than parcelled earth;  
Subjects and friends pass by in happiness,  
I cannot rule nor reign nor care for them;  
And duty is a word for other men.  
I am a coward and take a coward's way.

*(He draws his sword and is about to kill himself when the Steward enters.)*

*Steward.* Great Heracles is come, the son of  
Zeus,



Passing from Thebes on mighty conquest bound,  
Who split the jaws of the Nemean lion,  
And tamed the fearful steeds that belched forth fire,  
Wrestled with Titans monstrous as the clouds  
And cleansed the stables of the Augean herd.  
So great is he our fear is topped with awe;  
The crowds run not but freeze in wonderment.  
Shall we not bid him hasten on his way  
And leave this house of mourning?

*Adm.* Nay, not so.

She would not have it so whose open hand  
Fulfilled the rites of hospitality.  
Strew flowers, set the tables and bring wine.

*Steward.* Alas, how can we bear his merriment!  
No weariness can blight that joy of his,  
He will carouse and laugh the whole night through  
Till all the house rings with his roaring songs.

*Adm.* Do as I bid thee and forbear thy speech;  
Thou didst not prate before thy mistress thus,  
Nor pause upon her bidding to confer.

*(After a moment he adds kindly:)*

Good, faithful lad; I know—it is thy grief.

*(The Steward goes. Heracles enters and Admetus with a great effort conceals his sorrow.)*

*Herac.* All hail, Admetus, king of Thessaly!

*Adm. (embracing him).* Be welcome, O Alcides.  
Glad the day

That sets thy feet toward thy friend's abode.

*Herac.* I heard a sound of weeping as I came;  
I fear my visit breaks upon some grief.

*Adm.* At thy approach I lay my grief aside:  
Be welcome, honored guest and dearest friend.

*Herac.* I am thy friend, and mark thine altered  
face.

Cheat me not, dear Admetus, with fair words.

What sorrow is on thine house? Where are thy  
children?

*Adm.* They play within. I pray thee, come and  
dine.

*Herac.* Where is Alcestis? Ah, thou canst not  
speak.

Thy mantle of concealment falls aside.

Alas, alas, Alcestis is no more!

*(Heracles weeps.)*

*Adm.* Tears from thine eyes, Alcides, from thine eyes,

That looked on countless dreadful deaths unmoved!

*(Heracles takes Admetus in his arms.)*

*Herac.* Weep here, my friend.

*Adm.* Alas, I cannot weep!

Listen, she died for me, I let her die;

I took my life that dared not face my death.

I say, she died for me, I let her die.

And now I taste of death each hour I live.

I have my life, thou sayest, and life is sweet—

They cry it after me along the ways—

“Behold the man that let a woman die!

See where he goes, that loved his wife so well.

The coward, the coward, that feared and dared not die!”

*Herac.* Thou hast thy children.

*Adm.* Yea, they do accuse me.

They cry for her that shall not come again,

And by a thousand lovely, careless ways

They bring remembrance like the bitter lees

That I must drink who quaffed the golden wine.

What's life to me, who have no joy of life?

My vacant home, my arms that grope in vain ;  
Why, what is left of life that is to come ?  
All that remains is ashes of the fire,  
All that remains is scentless dust of flowers,  
All that remains is but a brook run dry—

*(He checks himself suddenly.)*

But thou art weary, friend, come in and rest,  
I see thy heavy leaning on thy staff.  
Thou hast a little eased my heart with speech.

*Herac.* Where is thy sweetness now, Alcestis,  
where?

She cast a radiance round her like the moon,  
Gentling the rough dark world with silver rays.

*Adm.* I cannot bear her praise: I pray thee,  
cease.

I knew not how I dwelt within her love  
Sheltered from rude alarms and horrid hate  
In all-sufficing blissful certitude  
Till I was thrust forth naked and bereft  
Across the barren world a wanderer.

*Herac.* Admetus, I have loved thee heartily  
And now in this thy grief am knit to thee  
And shaken with thy pangs. What love may do

That would I do or suffer. Words are weak,  
But deeds are scarcer and more eloquent.  
I'll say, "Despair not yet." Lean on my heart;  
Here is a power that many have sought to quell—  
This little throbbing force that shall not cease  
However pain and fear shall thrust at it  
Till when my father shall command an end,  
And through the serving of mine enemy  
I wrest my godhead from reluctant heaven.  
Surely an end shall be to all our grief.  
Bear strongly then; survive in confidence.  
Death may be less a thing than we can know;  
His chiefest terror lies in our poor hearts—  
Shrinking from the unknown as children do  
That people the unfriendly dark with fears.

*Adm.* And thou at least wouldst live.  
Come in and dine.

*Herac.* Farewell, Admetus, I must forth again.  
Give me thy promise, as a friend to friend,  
Thou wilt await me here till my return.

*Adm.* Where wilt thou go, that art so weary  
now?

*Herac.* I go to serve one that my heart loves  
more  
Than rest or food. My heart sustains my feet.  
I must go forth and labor till the end.

### ACT III

SCENE I. The abode of the dead. Barren cliffs rising from a waste of sand. An intense and pallid glare lights the scene. Miserable creatures of grey and starved countenance hurry to and fro, gazing in one another's faces with curious hatred.

*Cho.* O for escape from the unpitying light!  
O for a rest for the unflagging feet!  
O let us sleep, and for the time forget!

*Herac.* Say, who are ye, tormented thus, that roam?

*Cho.* We are those creatures tortured with regret;  
The gentle deed undone, the word unsaid,  
The hand of help withheld, the love ungiven,  
Float like mirage above the quivering air,  
Shining impalpable and swiftly gone—  
The joy of giving now forever lost.  
We are the cowards and the renegades,  
The misers and the cold and dry of heart;  
Not hastily nor of a single hour  
Wrought we our doom, but through neglectful years,  
Piled like the sifting grains of arid sand.

Ourselves secure we cared not for earth's pain,  
We aided not the wretched, nor consoled,  
We let the vicious wander unredeemed.  
We shrugged and sauntered on our easeful way,  
And now we see, in clear, intensest light,  
The barren semblance of the life we lived,  
And each upon the other looks to find  
The meanness and the shames himself doth bear.

*(Darkness falls upon the scene, then the clouds lift until in a deep gloom is seen the second hell. Here lie creatures silent and motionless, in postures of agony. Though very dim, it may be perceived that their eyes are fixed and opened wide.)*

*Herac.* Say, who are ye, that lie immovable?  
Can ye not speak, nor sigh, nor stir, nor see?

*(His own voice alone is heard. It's echoes die away.)*

The awful stillness hangs upon my breath—  
I must go forth!

*(The voice of Death without.)*

*Death.* O Hero, these lie sunk in their remorse,



Each heart, weighed into stillness, knows itself,  
And of itself alone contemplative  
Broods chained in deep unswerving agony.

*Herac. (approaching them).* Drawn brows and  
writhen lips immovable,  
Faces of frozen anguish, and blank eyes,  
Wide stretched, that stare unseeing.

*Death.* They look within.  
These spirits turned high powers to deeds of ill,  
Tipped with the poison of a festered heart  
Their gifts, like arrows, fell among mankind.  
This now they think on; each looks on his own,  
Deep in the blackness of his evil sunk  
In pain that cannot seek relief from pain.

*Herac.* O horror—let me forth—Where are the  
blest?

*(The scene darkens and grows light, displaying aisles of a great forest. The branches meet overhead, the sky above them being of the clear and shining palor of a summer evening when the sun has just fallen below the horizon. Beneath the trees it is neither dark nor*

*bright, but a green twilight shines through the leaves. Pillowed upon the deep green moss lie many white-robed forms easily disposed in sleep. Alcestis lies in the foreground. There is a sound of light wind, and the branches stir and sway. A drowsing bird calls softly.)*

*Death.* Hero, there lie the good in peaceful sleep.

In yonder deep green shade, serene and fair,  
They rest enfolded in beatitude,  
In dreamless sweetness of accomplished toil,  
Lapped around with all the love they bore on earth.

*Herac. (advancing to Alcestis).* How deep she  
sleeps, and, smiling in her sleep,  
Moves now a little, and her easeful breath  
Comes gently in soft comfort to and fro.  
Never had one on earth such pure repose.  
Almost I do repent me of my task.

I feel a presence near me in the air,  
I feel and cannot see, but know it near,

By the cold sweat that gathers over me,  
The trembling and the horror of my flesh,  
I know thee, Death.

*Death.* Thou canst not see me till thine hour has  
come.

*(Heracles shakes himself, lion-like.)*

*Herac.* I am that Heracles, the son of light.  
Decay and foulness and devouring wrong  
Cannot oppose me, nor can suffering stay,  
Nor swarming evil sap my patience.  
I am unresting as the falling streams,  
And patient as the hills beneath the snow,  
And tireless as the quick and soaring flames,  
For in my veins there flows the blood of God.

*(Death becomes visible.)*

*Death.* Behold me, Heracles. What wouldst  
thou have?

*Herac.* Give back Alcestis to her mourning  
house.

*Death.* Not so; who cometh here cannot return.

*Herac.* I shall compel thee.

*Death.* Pause, O Heracles;

Then shalt thou die, and yet be saved alive,  
Tasting thy death decreed a second time.

*Herac.* Thus let it be; Alcides serves his friend.

*(Heracles wrestles with Death, and is seized  
in an agony, tearing at himself. He  
wrestles the more violently as he suf-  
fers.)*

*Herac.* I burn! I burn!—yield—O thou cruel  
tyrant!

My flesh is unconsumed—O let me die!  
Light, light the funeral pyre, and let me perish!  
Think not to conquer in mine agony,  
I shall prevail before thine hour is come,  
And though I die yet shall Alcestis live!  
The bleeding heart and terror-darkened eyes  
Of the tormented race of man in me  
Rouse energies that like the streams of spring  
Swelling in flood across the sunken fields  
Upbear me on great tides invincible.

*Death. (conquered).* Thou hast prevailed. Al-  
cides, take thy prize.

*(Heracles falls spent into the arms of Death,  
who sustains him.)*

*Herac.* Merciful Death, O give me thy repose;  
Let me now rest.

*Death.* Arouse thee, Hero, much is yet to do;  
The world has need of thee; Admetus waits.

*Herac.* O let me rest with thee, benignant spirit

*Death.* Now thou hast known me kinder is thy  
speech;

Not yet, however, is the appointed time;  
Thou must go forth and serve mankind, Alcides.

*Herac. (rousing himself).* Yea, I shall go. Yet  
tell me, ere I leave thee,

If those that roam without may ever pause,  
And those in stark, unmoving pain be free?  
Yea, even if these blest sleepers shall awake?

*Death.* Look in thy hero-heart, O Heracles,  
There hast thou found forever hope, for love  
Drives thee still forth to labor for the world.  
Love works in death in ways diverse from life,  
Yet ever works on to an end unseen.

## ACT IV

SCENE I. In the great garden of Admetus. Beyond are rolling meadows to the east. The light is that of a spring morning before the dawn. As the scene proceeds the dawn breaks and the sun rises.

*Admetus (alone).*

O changing sky,  
Thou canst not bring my dawn;  
Returning day,  
My light forever withdrawn.

Awakening year,  
Bloom visits not my spring,  
My joy of life  
Not ever wakening.

Can ye not bide away or fade before ye blow, ye  
flowers?

Can ye not weep forever, O silver April showers?  
And thou, O fair May moon, do not awake,  
For at thy lover's light this heart shall break.

Sweet-throated choir of spring, let all your music  
fail;

And thou come not, come not O nightingale—  
Love's voice—come not; be mute, O nightingale;  
For Love's own sake, come not, O nightingale.  
Surely the spring shall cease, the days grow drear,  
I cannot bear the spring—she is not here.

Return Alcestis!

How canst thou leave me here thus desolate?  
My cry goes forth to the un pitying air—  
I know that I must live till death alone.  
Heart of my heart, since love did make us one,  
Live on in me, O spirit of my love.  
Thy nobler soul shall purify my soul,  
And my low life ascend to meet thy life.  
Come, then, a second bridal of the soul,  
And let the mystic bond be consecrate,  
So shall I live in thee forevermore.  
Receive this life, O love, that turns to thee.

The dim, dark heaven waits solicitous,  
The distant cock-crows ring upon the air,  
And stillness flows, heavily flooding in.

The grey-green leaves in shadowy mysteries  
Float up and settle. A bird calls sleepily,  
And now another, and now a stirring throng.

*(Enter Heracles, supporting Alcestis, who  
is completely veiled in white.)*

I see a form against the shining sky,  
Look! slowly coming from the brightening east  
Walks Heracles, with lingering steps of woe,  
Returning sadly to this sorrowing home.

*(As Heracles and Alcestis draw nearer, Ad-  
metus calls to Heracles.)*

*Adm.* Whom hast thou there, that hangs upon  
thine arm  
As hangs the white-flowered vine against the oak,  
Fluttering in every breeze, and like to fall?

*Herac.* One that must pass from my support  
to thine.

*Adm.* Take her within and bid them care for her,  
Since thou hast brought her she shall nothing lack.

*Herac.* I bring her unto thee, and thee alone.

*Adm.* What dost thou mean, O friend?

*Herac.* Receive a bride.



*Adm.* Thou art my friend; thy thought is hid  
from me,

But even in this I trust thee, as I know  
So deep the perfect fountain of thy heart,  
There cannot flow therefrom polluted tides.  
Such word to me had been another's death.  
This lady shall be honored for thy sake,  
But even for thee I cannot take a bride—  
Her place that is no more cannot be filled,  
Nor shall I mock my sacred memories.

*Herac. (commandingly).* Take yet her hand, and  
love her for my sake.

*Adm.* Give me thy hand, O stranger; for his  
sake

That brought thee, thou art precious in my eyes.

*(Admetus takes the hand of Alcestis.)*

*Adm.* This hand! This hand!

A touch of fire that flashes to my heart.  
I know each fold, each yielding of this flesh;  
Each motion is more eloquent than speech;  
The pressure of thy fingers passes through me.

*Herac.* Admetus, I must go. Farewell, dear  
friend.

*(He approaches them, but they do not move  
nor see him.)*

In mystic, perfect loneliness they stand,  
Cut off from men farther than space can move.  
Through many blissful years hallow the earth,  
That mankind turn from wrong by seeing love.  
O happy pair, bless by thy happiness!

*(He goes slowly out.)*

*Adm.* I dare not lift thy veil, lest I awake,  
O sweetest dream, yet must I see thy face.

*(He lifts her veil as the sun rises.)*

Alcestis!

*Alc.* Admetus! My husband!

*Adm.* Belovèd. *(Pause.)* Alcestis!

*Alc.* *(Pause.)* Admetus!

*Adm.* Come heart to heart and let throb answer  
throb,

We live together and together love.

*(He takes Alcestis in his arms.)*

*Alc.* We live together and together love.

*Adm.* Fair morning, clear across the shining  
green,

Meseems the sun was never so gold before,  
Nor the light air so delicate and sweet,  
Nor all the birds so gay.

*Alc.* O blessèd morn that brings me unto thee,  
Not thee alone, but all the world I love.

*Adm.* The golden cup of joy is overrun,  
Become a living fountain for the world.

*Both.* O hasten, all ye people, and rejoice,  
For love is proven conqueror of death.

*(The chorus enters.)*

*Chorus.*

What Love shall do who may foretell?  
Stricken he seems, and suddenly displays  
New ardors irresistible to quell  
That the astonished fates compel

Unto his praise.

The night that gathers on our ways  
Is terrible no more, nor dread therof

Shadows the coming days ;

For like a torch among us Love has passed  
And on beyond the appalling dark at last  
Far beaconing behold the face of Love.

## IPHIGENEIA

[The scene is at Aulis, before the tent of Agamemnon.]

IPHIGENEIA :

CHORUS : Consisting of Greek warriors and the maidens who have accompanied Iphigeneia from Mycenae.

*Chorus of Men.*

When fierce through Hellas Menelaus ran forth  
Calling the Greeks, swift to our arms we sprang,  
Impatient to avenge him of his wrongs  
And bound by solemn oath of Tyndareus.  
Behold at Aulis hath our haste and rage  
Been wasted impotent, till Chalcas bids  
We offer Agamemnon's daughter here  
A sacrifice to ruling Artemis,  
That we may win a favorable breeze  
To waft our galleys through the azure sea.  
Long hath the king withstood our dread demand,  
Perforce hath yielded and the maid is come  
Lured from her quiet home by a pretense,  
A summoning to be Achilles' bride—  
She, who must bleed on the appointed stone.

Ye bright tressed girls whose cheeks are wan with  
fear,  
No harm is purposed you, but she shall die.

*Chorus of Maidens.*

We mourn for her we serve and dearly love.  
Alas, how blithe has been our journey here  
That ends in tears. We sported through the fields  
Where hoary olives in the breeze and sun  
Flashed into silver, or we rested cool  
In the deep shade of solemn cypresses  
That pace the pale green hills in dark stoled march.  
White ran the road to urge us on our way  
With scarlet poppies beckoning in the heat.  
Iphigeneia, ah, alas for thee!  
Lured in thine innocence to dreadful death,  
Caught in the coil by Helen's beauty spun  
That like a floating web ensnares and binds  
How many, many more that yet shall fall.

*Men.*

We shall avenge her, blood for blood  
When Paris pays for love with life  
And over the tall towers of Troy

## Iphigeneia

42

Her last sun flames on fiercer fires  
Forth leaping under pitch black smoke.  
When on the purple couches' pride  
The gilded beams crash sundering ;  
When Hector's sword no more shall gleam,  
And white haired Priam deeper sleeps,  
And shield and helm are red with gore  
And hung with gems and plundered gold.

*Maidens.*

O Helen, are thy slumbers sweet?  
Do not the ghosts untimely dead  
Gather about thy perfumed feet  
And cry above thy golden head?  
Dost thou not wake in chilly dread  
While loud thy startled pulses beat?

O Helen, are thy slumbers light?  
Is not the darkness tongued with flame,  
The thunder groaning through the night  
For thy god-fated sin and shame,  
The miseries on Troy that came  
Therefrom to purchase thy delight?

*Men.*

Let be! Iphigeneia from the tent

Comes forth with brow serene and quiet face  
Gazing as one that looks on distant lands.

*Iphigeneia.*

Across the fields I see the morning light  
Dawn clearly after rain.  
The scented meadows shining silver white,  
I shall not see again!  
I hear the spring winds calling me to come,  
Calling me home,  
O happy home I shall not see again.  
I hear the drowsy birds stirring to sing,  
Low twittering,  
Till, hark! a single strain soars out above.  
Often I dreamed a golden dream in vain,  
That song, the song of love;  
Love was its prophecy,  
Love with its peace and its pain,  
Love, the unknown drawing nearer to me.

*Maidens.*

She smiles in visions of her nuptial day  
Whereof we sang and whiled away the hours  
Stepping beside the slowly swaying car.

## Iphigeneia

44

### *Iphigeneia.*

Then as I roused in the clamor of song  
Rapture of birds as the sun shone in heaven,  
Jubilant, strong,  
Spread like the dawn, visions slumber had given ;  
I should go forth to the sound of gay song,  
Circled by light-footed dancers that throng,  
Teasing the horses they guide,  
Garlands of flowers above and beneath,  
Trumpets to ring on the echoing air,  
Laughter to ripple and rise—  
I should go forth all adorned and called fair,  
Happiest bride.  
Not in dark pageantry drawn to my death,  
Crowned and hymned for the sacrifice.

### *Men.*

Let not Achilles hear her as she speaks.  
He cried aloud to us she should not die,  
And drew his sword until we drove him back,  
With stones upcast, a roaring multitude.

### *Iphigeneia.*

Then, my belovèd, glorious shall come



To lead me home,  
And lifted o'er the sill with spells and charms,  
And sugar plums in showers,  
And warning if he slips,  
How shall I lean within his clasping arms  
And feel his kisses fall like light blown flowers  
Soft on my face, till on my lips his lips  
Cling and are still.  
And in the silence for all speech too sweet,  
When shining eyes with shining tear drops fill  
Shall our two hearts strike answer beat for beat.  
Alas for me, fate hath not these to give.  
How shall I die that never yet did live?

*Maidens.*

Our tears are all with thine, most hapless maid,  
Born in thy beauty to a queen's estate  
Imperilled by how dark a destiny.

*Iphigeneia.*

Nor shall I lie soft on a loving breast  
Cherished by those that weep,  
Sinking into my rest  
Till peacefully

## Iphigeneia

46

Goes out the ebbing life,  
For death comes often gently as a sleep,  
But, ah, the smoking altar waits for me,  
The tightening cords, the horror of the knife!

*Maidens.*

She shrinks away and beats upon her breast!

*Men.*

Erect she stands and wipes away her tears  
And looks upon us with unflinching eyes.

*Maidens.*

Yea, now she smiles and slowly lifts her head.

*Full chorus.*

Some hope hath come to her, or happiness.  
She beckons unto us to hear her word.  
Draw near and listen and forbear thy speech,  
Surely a god hath whispered unto her.

*Iphigeneia.*

Even I this day the oracle have heard;  
In answer to my cry,  
There came a solemn call  
From where the Pythoness in horrid strife

Hung in the fume and then the sudden word :

“Unfit to live, unfit to die,

He shall not live that dares not die.”

And hath it come to me that comes to all—

Is this my dream that now the high gods give

In fashion new?—

The hope in every woman’s heart that lies?

Then shall I make the eternal great reply :

“In power of love I shall not die but live

If so my life shall give the world new life.”

Goddess, receive a willing sacrifice.

Joyful, O Greeks, I give my life for you!

## SPRING WINDS

The wind of March has the call of the sea  
    (O wings of the wind, do they never tire?)  
It hurries the cloud and it harries the tree  
    With the flutter and roar of a leaping fire.  
Cold and wild and eager to flee,  
Is the lure to loss or to liberty,  
    Light of the eyes and my Heart's Desire?

The April wind has the scent of the rain  
    (O wings of the wind, do they never tire?)  
Softly it whispers and hushes again,  
    Warm as the kiss of the pale sun fire—  
Promise of bloom and the green of new grain;  
Is peace but the drowsy surcease of pain,  
    Light of the eyes and my Heart's Desire?

The wind of May tosses the petals white  
    (O wings of the wind, do they never tire?)  
White as the love-moon silvering the night,  
    Pure as the dew and the heart's new fire.  
Balmy blessing and strong sweet might,  
Liberty, peace and the sure delight,  
    Light of the eyes and my Heart's Desire?

## AGE

(Rembrandt's "Philosopher.")

The air is heavy in this vaulted room,  
The empty corridors are damp with mold,  
I shall not seek again their tortuous gloom  
Nor dare the outer cold.

Sunk in my chair, content where thought may lead  
I muse on One that comes but comes so late,  
And gazing at the book I cannot read  
I wait, and still I wait.

Dim through the dusty casement falls the light  
And on the floor a ruddy sunbeam glows:  
Yet even there, to cage the yearning sight,  
The barring lattice shows.

Touching the first steps of the soaring stair  
A gleam glides where the spirals outward lean,  
And like a signal torch it wanders there  
Into the dark unseen.

## Age

50

O where, O where? for I am tired and blind,  
Obeying heavily a heavy heart ;  
I am not joyous to remain behind  
Nor zealous to depart.

Meseems I have but faint hopes any more,  
My spirit quests no gay imaginings,  
Desire has dwindled so since first I wore  
Those versi-colored wings.

The slowly narrowing cell that holds this mind  
Pain-filled and dark with solitude intense,  
Will it crush out what spark I still can find,  
Or drive it living hence?

So far away began my pilgrimage  
I have forgot how far, for time no more  
Befriends me—all at enmity with age  
Shoves to the gaping door.

And ever as the sunbeams wane and wane,  
And glimmering the hueless dusk draws near,  
Night throws my bleak face from the blackened pane,  
And calls the mortal fear.

The heavy chronicle of vanished days  
Seems like a dust-smear'd scroll of little worth,  
Like smoke dissolved in air is human praise,  
    Like earth returned to earth.

In rapt communion with the solemn sky  
And stars like trembling dewdrops crystalline  
I searched the rhythmic laws that underlie  
    Their influence benign.

I sought the fount of youth through deserts wide,  
And wrought in earth to charm the golden pelf ;  
Alas, I followed no diviner guide  
    Than the imperious self.

All memories of triumph and all powers—  
How lost they are, how colorless and cold!  
Only the loves of unforgotten hours  
    Their gathered sweetness hold :

The love wherewith I strove to serve and save,  
To find and follow hidden harmonies ;  
The gold that I rejoiced in as I gave  
    True and untarnished lies.

## Age

52

The glorious love and lore and strength I took  
From hearts beside my heart, or great ones gone,  
Beams like the light irradiate from this book  
And I am not alone

Companioned by that fellowship of eld  
That in sincerity paused not to dread,  
By love inspirèd and by love upheld  
And ever comforted.

Subtle of foot steals on the night of time,  
Shrouding the forms and phantasies that were;  
O Love, lead on the way that I must climb—  
Light on the lowest stair!



## THE CLOCK

### I

Like to a miser weighing with slow skill  
    Recorded patiently, his precious store;  
    Or a magician sunk in perilous lore  
And pondering the sum of mortal ill;  
Or leech whose potions drop by drop distil  
    To hush the heavy pain; or like the score  
    Of debtors set upon the tavern door  
That lengthens as their parching throats they fill.  
Thy never-seen commodity men spend  
    As it were valueless or could not cease.  
For me, I use thee as a journeying friend,  
    And when from thy discourse I have release  
Then shall my lonely wandering find an end  
    In meeting loves or sink in senseless peace.

### II

Helpless I stand and beckon silently  
    To all that crowd and hurry past my face.  
    Do they not know they run a fixed race

## The Clock

54

And never shall return as they go by?  
Why use they not my moments ere they fly  
    To hallow and adorn this dwelling place?  
    So should the essence of exceeding grace  
Abide in perfume though the makers die.  
They should not load their free limbs chain by chain  
Trembling as criminals condemned to pain,  
    But like the lordly vessel steering home  
    Freighted with star-imprisoning jewels come,  
And my last call should be a glad refrain  
That soars to meet a final splendid strain.

## POCAHONTAS IN ENGLAND

The larks are in the azure air,  
Trilling a-wing,  
And cuckoos in a deep-embowered lair,  
Their dull and plaintive beat  
Waveringly repeat,  
While bloomy may scents every breeze with spring!  
But she, with listless mien,  
Through lanes of drooping green,  
By rose-hung lodge and ivied hedge goes wandering.  
The sunset gold is in the little rill  
That by the square church-tower slips, glassy still,  
A mirror for the dark and writhen yew ;  
Far, sweetly chiming bells the curfew ring,  
The red-roofed village sleeps below the hill,  
And off against the blue  
A ruined abbey rears a gray-arched nave  
By froned columns tall,  
And through the shadowed cloisters, cool and grave,  
A group of shouting school-boys play at ball.  
She sees, not with her eyes, but with her heart,  
The stalking braves, the peaked wigwams brown,  
The pine fire's ruddy smoke ; and slow tears start

## Pocahontas in England

56

And on her unmoved Indian face slip down.  
Her spirit seeks the wild, wide woods,  
Sweet with the scents of fall,  
Where whirring partridge chase their broods,  
And in the gold and scarlet solitudes  
The chipmunks call.  
Hark, the great deer is crashing his fierce way!  
The milk-white birches bend, the maples break,  
Till tossing tops tell where his pathway lies.  
And lo, beside the liliated lake,  
Where the blue herons wade and quick kingfishers  
    play,  
She starts the feeding doe, that halts to shake  
A dripping head, and stamp the pool to spray  
In wondering surprise,  
Gazing at her the while with splendid, fearless eyes.

Wakening she looks upon the peaceful scene;  
The level walks and gardens seem a part  
With the brocade that sweeps the daisied green,  
The white ruff cutting at her bronzy chin,  
The pressure of her bodice, and within  
The sick and mordant anguish at her heart.

## Pocahontas in England

57

She lays a laurel leaf in one hot palm,  
The smooth, cool touch a symbol of sweet calm,  
And vaguely still she searches in her mind :  
“Once for a paleface risked I life and limb ;  
He was the bound, and I the fearless free.  
Does this one know how greater far for him  
The gift I gave, when that I left my kind  
And lost my liberty ?  
Ah, would that I might sleep at last at home !”  
The gravel cracks beneath a hastening tread ;  
Her sad eyes light, she lifts the sunken head,  
Swiftly she turns to see her husband come.  
Clasped in his arms and looking in his face,  
With head bent back for kisses falling fast,  
She has forgot the present, lost the past ;  
Nor would she move  
Ever from out that instant’s dear embrace,  
Nor wish to rove,  
For unto Love there is no time or place,  
Nor anything but Love.

## THE MOCKING BIRD

The long-drawn echo of the solemn sea  
Wakes in the wind-thrilled pines and wakes my  
heart

With the green plumes astir, to shudder and bend  
To vague emotion sadder than that sound;

Till, wandering apart,

I hear a mournful murmur ceaselessly,

And from the deeps profound

Comes the unbroken cry :

“Wherefore, and to what end?”

A warbling flung into the quiet air

Shivers the sullen stillness. Like bright spray

The crystal trills drip through the branches there.

High poised against the beaming sapphire sky,

His throbbing throat lifted in ecstasy,

A mocking bird repeats his varying roundelay.

This is the very chant of brooks that run,

A gift the freely happy-hearted give;

“O, sing in the sun,

Fear not but sing,

This is the call of the spring,

## The Mocking Bird

59

Awake and live!’  
The airy whistle shrills and turns and calls,  
Ripples in fairy laughter silver thin,  
In soft and cooing notes answers and falls,  
Pauses to taste an instant’s hush and then begin.

## ENVOY

Lightly I cast my wildflowers on the sea  
While the slow surges swelling turn and break  
And sinking suck them down to depths unknown,  
Unnoted specks in the tremendous gulf.  
Some waif, afloat at chance of wind and wave,  
May Time that old and crabbèd mariner  
With cold slow fingers thrust uncertainly  
Draw out, and weave within the coronal  
That binds Athene's bright immortal brows.



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