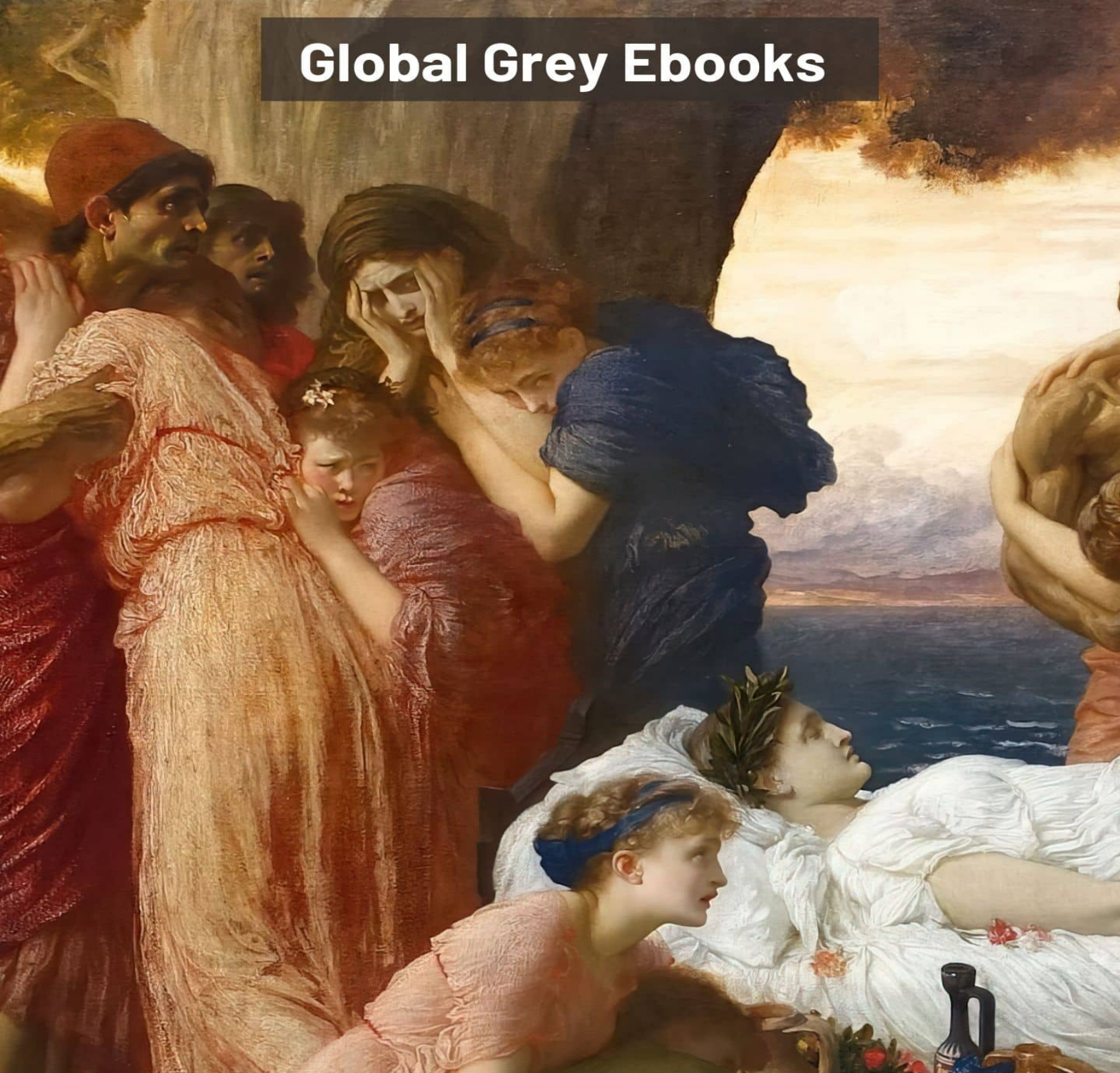


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ALCESTIS

EURIPIDES

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Alcestis
by Euripides

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Introduction

The *Alcestis* would hardly confirm its author's right to be acclaimed "the most tragic of the poets." It is doubtful whether one can call it a tragedy at all. Yet it remains one of the most characteristic and delightful of Euripidean dramas, as well as, by modern standards, the most easilyactable. And I notice that many judges who display nothing but a fierce satisfaction in sending other plays of that author to the block or the treadmill, show a certain human weakness in sentencing the gentle daughter of Pelias.

The play has been interpreted in many different ways. There is the old unsophisticated view, well set forth in Paley's preface of 1872. He regards the *Alcestis* simply as a triumph of pathos, especially of "that peculiar sort of pathos which comes most home to us, with our views and partialities for domestic life.... As for the characters, that of Alcestis must be acknowledged to be pre-eminently beautiful. One could almost imagine that Euripides had not yet conceived that bad opinion of the sex which so many of the subsequent dramas exhibit.... But the rest are hardly well-drawn, or, at least, pleasingly portrayed." "The poet might perhaps, had he pleased, have exhibited Admetus in a more amiable point of view."

This criticism is not very trenchant, but its weakness is due, I think, more to timidity of statement than to lack of perception. Paley does see that a character may be "well-drawn" without necessarily being "pleasing"; and even that he may be eminently pleasing as a part of the play while very displeasing in himself. He sees that Euripides may have had his own reasons for not making Admetus an ideal husband. It seems odd that such points should need mentioning; but Greek drama has always suffered from a school of critics who approach a play with a greater equipment of aesthetic theory than of dramatic perception. This is the characteristic defect of classicism. One mark of the school is to demand from dramatists heroes and heroines which shall satisfy its own ideals; and, though there was in the New Comedy a mask known to Pollux as "The Entirely-good Young Man" ([Greek: panchraestos neaniskos]), such a character is fortunately unknown to classical Greek drama.

The influence of this “classicist” tradition has led to a timid and unsatisfying treatment of the *Alcestis*, in which many of the most striking and unconventional features of the whole composition were either ignored or smoothed away. As a natural result, various lively-minded readers proceeded to overemphasize these particular features, and were carried into eccentricity or paradox. Alfred Schöne, for instance, fixing his attention on just those points which the conventional critic passed over, decides simply that the *Alcestis* is a parody, and finds it very funny. (*Die Alkestis von Euripides*, Kiel, 1895.)

I will not dwell on other criticisms of this type. There are those who have taken the play for a criticism of contemporary politics or the current law of inheritance. Above all there is the late Dr. Verrall’s famous essay in *Euripides the Rationalist*, explaining it as a psychological criticism of a supposed Delphic miracle, and arguing that Alcestis in the play does not rise from the dead at all. She had never really died; she only had a sort of nervous catalepsy induced by all the “suggestion” of death by which she was surrounded. Now Dr. Verrall’s work, as always, stands apart. Even if wrong, it has its own excellence, its special insight and its extraordinary awakening power. But in general the effect of reading many criticisms on the *Alcestis* is to make a scholar realize that, for all the seeming simplicity of the play, competent Grecians have been strangely bewildered by it, and that after all there is no great reason to suppose that he himself is more sensible than his neighbours.

This is depressing. None the less I cannot really believe that, if we make patient use of our available knowledge, the *Alcestis* presents any startling enigma. In the first place, it has long been known from the remnants of the ancient Didascalia, or official notice of production, that the *Alcestis* was produced as the fourth play of a series; that is, it took the place of a Satyr-play. It is what we may call Pro-satyrical. (See the present writer’s introduction to the *Rhesus*.) And we should note for what it is worth the observation in the ancient Greek argument: “The play is somewhat satyr-like ([Greek: saturiphkoteron]). It ends in rejoicing and gladness against the tragic convention.”

Now we are of late years beginning to understand much better what a Satyr-play was. Satyrs have, of course, nothing to do with satire, either etymologically or otherwise. Satyrs are the attendant daemons who form the

Kômos, or revel rout, of Dionysus. They are represented in divers fantastic forms, the human or divine being mixed with that of some animal, especially the horse or wild goat. Like Dionysus himself, they are connected in ancient religion with the Renewal of the Earth in spring and the resurrection of the dead, a point which students of the *‘Alcestis may well remember. But in general they represent mere joyous creatures of nature, unthwarted by law and unchecked by self-control. Two notes are especially struck by them: the passions and the absurdity of half-drunken revellers, and the joy and mystery of the wild things in the forest.*

The rule was that after three tragedies proper there came a play, still in tragic diction, with a traditional saga plot and heroic characters, in which the Chorus was formed by these Satyrs. There was a deliberate clash, an effect of burlesque; but of course the clash must not be too brutal. Certain characters of the heroic saga are, so to speak, at home with Satyrs and others are not. To take our extant specimens of Satyr-plays, for instance: in the *Cyclops* we have Odysseus, the heroic trickster; in the fragmentary *Ichneutae* of Sophocles we have the Nymph Cyllene, hiding the baby Hermes from the chorus by the most barefaced and pleasant lying; later no doubt there was an entrance of the infant thief himself. Autolycus, Sisyphus, Thersites are all Satyr-play heroes and congenial to the Satyr atmosphere; but the most congenial of all, the one hero who existed always in an atmosphere of Satyrs and the Kômos until Euripides made him the central figure of a tragedy, was Heracles.¹

The complete Satyr-play had a hero of this type and a Chorus of Satyrs. But the complete type was refined away during the fifth century; and one stage in the process produced a play with a normal chorus but with one figure of the Satyric or “revelling” type. One might almost say the “comic” type if, for the moment, we may remember that that word is directly derived from ‘Kômos.’

The *Alcestis* is a very clear instance of this Pro-satyric class of play. It has the regular tragic diction, marked here and there (393, 756, 780, etc.) by slight extravagances and forms of words which are sometimes epic and sometimes over-colloquial; it has a regular saga plot, which had already been treated by the old poet Phrynichus in his *Alcestis*, a play which is now lost but seems to have been Satyric; and it has one character straight from the Satyr world, the heroic reveller, Heracles. It is all in keeping that he

should arrive tired, should feast and drink and sing; should be suddenly sobered and should go forth to battle with Death. It is also in keeping that the contest should have a half-grotesque and half-ghastly touch, the grapple amid the graves and the cracking ribs.

* * * * *

So much for the traditional form. As for the subject, Euripides received it from Phrynichus, and doubtless from other sources. We cannot be sure of the exact form of the story in Phrynichus. But apparently it told how Admetus, King of Pherae in Thessaly, received from Apollo a special privilege which the God had obtained, in true Satyric style, by making the Three Fates drunk and cajoling them. This was that, when his appointed time for death came, he might escape if he could find some volunteer to die for him. His father and mother, from whom the service might have been expected, refused to perform it. His wife, Alcestis, though no blood relation, handsomely undertook it and died. But it so happened that Admetus had entertained in his house the demi-god, Heracles; and when Heracles heard what had happened, he went out and wrestled with Death, conquered him, and brought Alcestis home.

Given this form and this story, the next question is: What did Euripides make of them? The general answer is clear: he has applied his usual method. He accepts the story as given in the tradition, and then represents it in his own way. When the tradition in question is really heroic, we know what his way is. He preserves, and even emphasizes, the stateliness and formality of the Attic stage conventions; but, in the meantime, he has subjected the story and its characters to a keener study and a more sensitive psychological judgment than the simple things were originally meant to bear. So that many characters which passed as heroic, or at least presentable, in the kindly remoteness of legend, reveal some strange weakness when brought suddenly into the light. When the tradition is Satyric, as here, the same process produces almost an opposite effect. It is somewhat as though the main plot of a gross and jolly farce were pondered over and made more true to human character till it emerged as a refined and rather pathetic comedy. The making drunk of the Three Grey Sisters disappears; one can only just see the trace of its having once been present. The revelling of Heracles is touched in with the lightest of hands; it is little more than symbolic. And all the figures in the story, instead of being left

broadly comic or having their psychology neglected, are treated delicately, sympathetically, with just that faint touch of satire, or at least of amusement, which is almost inseparable from a close interest in character.

What was Admetus really like, this gallant prince who had won the affection of such great guests as Apollo and Heracles, and yet went round asking other people to die for him; who, in particular, accepted his wife's monstrous sacrifice with satisfaction and gratitude? The play portrays him well. Generous, innocent, artistic, affectionate, eloquent, impulsive, a good deal spoilt, unconsciously insincere, and no doubt fundamentally selfish, he hates the thought of dying and he hates losing his wife almost as much. Why need she die? Why could it not have been some one less important to him? He feels with emotion what a beautiful act it would have been for his old father. "My boy, you have a long and happy life before you, and for me the sands are well-nigh run out. Do not seek to dissuade me. I will die for you." Admetus could compose the speech for him. A touching scene, a noble farewell, and all the dreadful trouble solved--so conveniently solved! And the miserable self-blinded old man could not see it!

Euripides seems to have taken positive pleasure in Admetus, much as Meredith did in his famous *Egoist*; but Euripides all through is kinder to his victim than Meredith is. True, Admetus is put to obvious shame, publicly and helplessly. The Chorus make discreet comments upon him. The Handmaid is outspoken about him. One feels that Alcestis herself, for all her tender kindness, has seen through him. Finally, to make things quite clear, his old father fights him openly, tells him home-truth upon home-truth, tears away all his protective screens, and leaves him with his self-respect in tatters. It is a fearful ordeal for Admetus, and, after his first fury, he takes it well. He comes back from his wife's burial a changed man. He says not much, but enough. "I have done wrong. I have only now learnt my lesson. I imagined I could save my happy life by forfeiting my honour; and the result is that I have lost both." I think that a careful reading of the play will show an almost continuous process of self-discovery and self-judgment in the mind of Admetus. He was a man who blinded himself with words and beautiful sentiments; but he was not thick-skinned or thick-witted. He was not a brute or a cynic. And I think he did learn his lesson ... not completely and for ever, but as well as most of us learn such lessons.

The beauty of Alcestis is quite untouched by the dramatist's keener analysis. The strong light only increases its effect. Yet she is not by any means a mere blameless ideal heroine; and the character which Euripides gives her makes an admirable foil to that of Admetus. Where he is passionate and romantic, she is simple and homely. While he is still refusing to admit the facts and beseeching her not to "desert" him, she in a gentle but businesslike way makes him promise to take care of the children and, above all things, not to marry again. She could not possibly trust Admetus's choice. She is sure that the step-mother would be unkind to the children. She might be a horror and beat them (l. 307). And when Admetus has made a thrilling answer about eternal sorrow, and the silencing of lyre and lute, and the statue who shall be his only bride, Alcestis earnestly calls the attention of witnesses to the fact that he has sworn not to marry again. She is not an artist like Admetus. There is poetry in her, because poetry comes unconsciously out of deep feeling, but there is no artistic eloquence. Her love, too, is quite different from his. To him, his love for his wife and children is a beautiful thing, a subject to speak and sing about as well as an emotion to feel. But her love is hardly conscious. She does not talk about it at all. She is merely wrapped up in the welfare of certain people, first her husband and then her children. To a modern romantic reader her insistence that her husband shall not marry again seems hardly delicate. But she does not think about romance or delicacy. To her any neglect to ensure due protection for the children would be as unnatural as to refuse to die for her husband. Indeed, Professor J.L. Myres has suggested that care for the children's future is the guiding motive of her whole conduct. There was first the danger of their being left fatherless, a dire calamity in the heroic age. She could meet that danger by dying herself. Then followed the danger of a stepmother. She meets that by making Admetus swear never to marry. In the long run, I fancy, the effect of gracious loveliness which Alcestis certainly makes is not so much due to any words of her own as to what the Handmaid and the Serving Man say about her. In the final scene she is silent; necessarily and rightly silent, for all tradition knows that those new-risen from the dead must not speak. It will need a long *rite de passage* before she can freely commune with this world again. It is a strange and daring scene between the three of them; the humbled and broken-hearted husband; the triumphant Heracles, kindly and wise, yet still touched by the mocking and blustrous atmosphere from which he sprang; and the silent woman who has

seen the other side of the grave. It was always her way to know things but not to speak of them.

The other characters fall easily into their niches. We have only to remember the old Satyric tradition and to look at them in the light of their historical development. Heracles indeed, half-way on his road from the roaring reveller of the Satyr-play to the suffering and erring deliverer of tragedy, is a little foreign to our notions, but quite intelligible and strangely attractive. The same historical method seems to me to solve most of the difficulties which have been felt about Admetus's hospitality. Heracles arrives at the castle just at the moment when Alcestis is lying dead in her room; Admetus conceals the death from him and insists on his coming in and enjoying himself. What are we to think of this behaviour? Is it magnificent hospitality, or is it gross want of tact? The answer, I think, is indicated above.

In the uncritical and boisterous atmosphere of the Satyr-play it was natural hospitality, not especially laudable or surprising. From the analogy of similar stories I suspect that Admetus originally did not know his guest, and received not so much the reward of exceptional virtue as the blessing naturally due to those who entertain angels unawares. If we insist on asking whether Euripides himself, in real life or in a play of his own free invention, would have considered Admetus's conduct to Heracles entirely praiseworthy, the answer will certainly be No, but it will have little bearing on the play. In the *Alcestis*, as it stands, the famous act of hospitality is a datum of the story. Its claims are admitted on the strength of the tradition. It was the act for which Admetus was specially and marvellously rewarded; therefore, obviously, it was an act of exceptional merit and piety. Yet the admission is made with a smile, and more than one suggestion is allowed to float across the scene that in real life such conduct would be hardly wise.

Heracles, who rose to tragic rank from a very homely cycle of myth, was apt to bring other homely characters with him. He was a great killer not only of malefactors but of "kêres" or bogeys, such as "Old Age" and "Ague" and the sort of "Death" that we find in this play.

Thanatos is not a god, not at all a King of Terrors. One may compare him with the dancing skeleton who is called Death in mediaeval writings. When such a figure appears on the tragic stage one asks at once what relation he bears to Hades, the great Olympian king of the unseen. The answer is

obvious. Thanatos is the servant of Hades, a “priest” or sacrificer, who is sent to fetch the appointed victims.

The other characters speak for themselves. Certainly Pheres can be trusted to do so, though we must remember that we see him at an unfortunate moment. The aged monarch is not at his best, except perhaps in mere fighting power. I doubt if he was really as cynical as he here professes to be.

* * * * *

In the above criticisms I feel that I may have done what critics are so apt to do. I have dwelt on questions of intellectual interest and perhaps thereby diverted attention from that quality in the play which is the most important as well as by far the hardest to convey; I mean the sheer beauty and delightfulness of the writing.

It is the earliest dated play of Euripides which has come down to us. True, he was over forty when he produced it, but it is noticeably different from the works of his old age. The numbers are smoother, the thought less deeply scarred, the language more charming and less passionate. If it be true that poetry is bred out of joy and sorrow, one feels as if more enjoyment and less suffering had gone to the making of the *Alcestis* than to that of the later plays.

Characters Of The Play

Admêtus, King of Pherae in Thessaly.

Alcestis, daughter of Pelias, his wife.

Pherês, his father, formerly King but now in retirement.

Two Children, his son and daughter.

A Manservant in his house.

A Handmaid.

The Hero Heracles.

The God Apollo.

Thanátos or Death.

Chorus, consisting of Elders of Pherae.

The play was first performed when Glaukînos was Archon, in the 2nd year of the 85th Olympiad (438 B.C.). Sophocles was first, Euripides second with the Cretan Women, Alcmaeon in Psophis, Telephus and Alcestis.... The play is somewhat Satyric in character.

Alcestis

The scene represents the ancient Castle of Admetus near Pherae in Thessaly. It is the dusk before dawn; Apollo, radiant in the darkness, looks at the Castle.

Apollo: Admetus' House! 'Twas here I bowed my head Of old, and chafed not at the bondman's bread, Though born in heaven. Aye, Zeus to death had hurled My son, Asclepios, Healer of the World, Piercing with fire his heart; and in mine ire I slew his Cyclop churls, who forged the fire. Whereat Zeus cast me forth to bear the yoke Of service to a mortal. To this folk I came, and watched a stranger's herd for pay, And all his house I have prospered to this day. For innocent was the Lord I chanced upon And clean as mine own heart, King Pheres' son, Admetus. Him I rescued from the grave, Beguiling the Grey Sisters till they gave A great oath that Admetus should go free, Would he but pay to Them Below in fee Another living soul. Long did he prove All that were his, and all that owed him love, But never a soul he found would yield up life And leave the sunlight for him, save his wife: Who, even now, down the long galleries Is borne, death-wounded; for this day it is She needs must pass out of the light and die. And, seeing the stain of death must not come nigh My radiance, I must leave this house I love. But ha! The Headsman of the Pit, above Earth's floor, to ravish her! Aye, long and late He hath watched, and cometh at the fall of fate.

Enter from the other side Thanatos; a crouching black-haired and winged figure, carrying a drawn sword. He starts in revulsion on seeing Apollo.

Thanatos: Aha! Why here? What mak'st thou at the gate, Thou Thing of Light? Wilt overtread The eternal judgment, and abate And spoil the portions of the dead? 'Tis not enough for thee to have blocked In other days Admetus' doom With craft of magic wine, which mocked The three grey Sisters of the Tomb; But now once more I see thee stand at watch, and shake That arrow-armed hand to make This woman thine, who swore, who swore, To die now for her husband's sake.

Apollo: Fear not. I bring fair words and seek but what is just.

Thanatos, *sneering* And if words help thee not, an arrow must?

Apollo: 'Tis ever my delight to bear this bow.

Thanatos: And aid this house unjustly? Aye, 'tis so.

Apollo: I love this man, and grieve for his dismay.

Thanatos: And now wilt rob me of my second prey!

Apollo: I never robbed thee, neither then nor now.

Thanatos: Why is Admetus here then, not below?

Apollo: He gave for ransom his own wife, for whom ...

Thanatos, interrupting. I am come; and straight will bear her to the tomb.

Apollo: Go, take her.--I can never move thine heart.

Thanatos, mocking. To slay the doomed?--Nay; I will do my part.

Apollo: No. To keep death for them that linger late.

Thanatos, still mocking. 'Twould please thee, so?... I owe thee homage great.

Apollo: Ah, then she may yet ... she may yet grow old?

Thanatos, with a laugh. No!... I too have my rights, and them I hold.

Apollo: 'Tis but one life thou gainest either-wise.

Thanatos: When young souls die, the richer is my prize.

Apollo: Old, with great riches they will bury her.

Thanatos: Fie on thee, fie! Thou rich-man's lawgiver!

Apollo: How? Is there wit in Death, who seemed so blind?

Thanatos: The rich would buy long life for all their kind.

Apollo: Thou will not grant me, then, this boon? 'Tis so?

Thanatos: Thou knowest me, what I am: I tell thee, no!

Apollo: I know gods sicken at thee and men pine.

Thanatos: Begone! Too many things not meant for thine Thy greed hath conquered; but not all, not all!

Apollo: I swear, for all thy bitter pride, a fall Awaits thee. One even now comes conquering Towards this house, sent by a southland king To fetch him four wild coursers, of the race Which rend men's bodies in the winds of

Thrace. This house shall give him welcome good, and he Shall wrest this woman from thy worms and thee. So thou shalt give me all, and thereby win But hatred, not the grace that might have been.

Exit Apollo.

Thanatos: Talk on, talk on! Thy threats shall win no bride From me.--This woman, whatsoe'er betide, Shall lie in Hades' house. Even at the word I go to lay upon her hair my sword. For all whose head this grey sword visiteth To death are hallowed and the Lords of death.

Thanatos goes into the house. Presently, as the day grows lighter, the Chorus enters: it consists of Citizens of Pherae, who speak severally.

Chorus:

Leader: Quiet, quiet, above, beneath!

Second Elder: The house of Admetus holds its breath.

Third Elder: And never a King's friend near, To tell us either of tears to shed For Pelias' daughter, crowned and dead; Or joy, that her eyes are clear. Bravest, truest of wives is she That I have seen or the world shall see.

Divers Citizens, conversing. The dash -- indicates a new speaker.

--Hear ye no sob, or noise of hands Beating the breast? No mourners' cries For one they cannot save? --Nothing: and at the door there stands No handmaid.--Help, O Paian; rise, O star beyond the wave!

--Dead, and this quiet? No, it cannot be. --Dead, dead!--Not gone to burial secretly!

--Why? I still fear: what makes your speech so brave? --Admetus cast that dear wife to the grave Alone, with none to see?

--I see no bowl of clear spring water. It ever stands before the dread Door where a dead man rests. --No lock of shorn hair! Every daughter Of woman shears it for the dead. No sound of bruised breasts!

--Yet 'tis this very day ...--This very day? --The Queen should pass and lie beneath the clay. --It hurts my life, my heart!--All honest hearts Must sorrow for a brightness that departs, A good life worn away.

Leader: To wander o'er leagues of land, To search over wastes of sea, Where the Prophets of Lycia stand, Or where Ammon's daughters three

Make runes in the rainless sand, For magic to make her free-- Ah, vain! for the end is here; Sudden it comes and sheer. What lamb on the altar-strand Stricken shall comfort me?

Second Elder: Only, only one, I know: Apollo's son was he, Who healed men long ago. Were he but on earth to see, She would rise from the dark below And the gates of eternity. For men whom the Gods had slain He pitied and raised again; Till God's fire laid him low, And now, what help have we?

Others: All's done that can be. Every vow Full paid; and every altar's brow Full crowned with spice of sacrifice. No help remains nor respite now.

Enter from the Castle a Handmaid, almost in tears.

Leader: But see, a handmaid cometh, and the tear Wet on her cheek! What tidings shall we hear?... Thy grief is natural, daughter, if some ill Hath fallen to-day. Say, is she living still Or dead, your mistress? Speak, if speak you may.

Maid: Alive. No, dead.... Oh, read it either way.

Leader: Nay, daughter, can the same soul live and die?

Maid: Her life is broken; death is in her eye.

Leader: Poor King, to think what she was, and what thou!

Maid: He never knew her worth.... He will know it now.

Leader: There is no hope, methinks, to save her still?

Maid: The hour is come, and breaks all human will.

Leader: She hath such tendance as the dying crave?

Maid: For sure: and rich robes ready for her grave.

Leader: 'Fore God, she dies high-hearted, aye, and far In honour raised above all wives that are!

Maid: Far above all! How other? What must she, Who seeketh to surpass this woman, be? Or how could any wife more shining make Her lord's love, than by dying for his sake? But thus much all the city knows. 'Tis here, In her own rooms, the tale will touch thine ear With strangeness. When she knew the day was come, She rose and washed her body, white as foam, With running water; then the cedarn press She opened, and took forth her

funeral dress And rich adornment. So she stood arrayed Before the Hearth-Fire of her home, and prayed: "Mother, since I must vanish from the day, This last, last time I kneel to thee and pray; Be mother to my two children! Find some dear Helpmate for him, some gentle lord for her. And let not them, like me, before their hour Die; let them live in happiness, in our Old home, till life be full and age content." To every household altar then she went And made for each his garland of the green Boughs of the wind-blown myrtle, and was seen Praying, without a sob, without a tear. She knew the dread thing coming, but her clear Cheek never changed: till suddenly she fled Back to her own chamber and bridal bed: Then came the tears and she spoke all her thought. "O bed, whereon my laughing girlhood's knot Was severed by this man, for whom I die, Farewell! 'Tis thou ... I speak not bitterly... 'Tis thou hast slain me. All alone I go Lest I be false to him or thee. And lo, Some woman shall lie here instead of me-- Happier perhaps; more true she cannot be." She kissed the pillow as she knelt, and wet With flooding tears was that fair coverlet. At last she had had her fill of weeping; then She tore herself away, and rose again, Walking with downcast eyes; yet turned before She had left the room, and cast her down once more Kneeling beside the bed. Then to her side The children came, and clung to her and cried, And her arms hugged them, and a long good-bye She gave to each, like one who goes to die. The whole house then was weeping, every slave In sorrow for his mistress. And she gave Her hand to all; aye, none so base was there She gave him not good words and he to her. So on Admetus falls from either side Sorrow. 'Twere bitter grief to him to have died Himself; and being escaped, how sore a woe He hath earned instead--Ah, some day he shall know!

Leader: Surely Admetus suffers, even to-day, For this true-hearted love he hath cast away?

Maid: He weeps; begs her not leave him desolate, And holds her to his heart--too late, too late! She is sinking now, and there, beneath his eye Fading, the poor cold hand falls languidly, And faint is all her breath. Yet still she fain Would look once on the sunlight--once again And never more. I will go in and tell Thy presence. Few there be, will serve so well My master and stand by him to the end. But thou hast been from olden days our friend. *The Maid goes in.*

Chorus:

Third Elder: O Zeus, What escape and where From the evil thing? How break the snare That is round our King?

Second Elder: Ah list! One cometh?... No. Let us no more wait; Make dark our raiment And shear this hair.

Leader: Aye, friends! 'Tis so, even so. Yet the gods are great And may send allayment. To prayer, to prayer!

All, praying. O Paian wise! Some healing of this home devise, devise! Find, find.... Oh, long ago when we were blind Thine eyes saw mercy ... find some healing breath! Again, O Paian, break the chains that bind; Stay the red hand of Death!

Leader: Alas! What shame, what dread, Thou Pheres' son, Shalt be harvested When thy wife is gone!

Second Elder: Ah me; For a deed less drear Than this thou ruest Men have died for sorrow; Aye, hearts have bled.

Third Elder: Tis she; Not as men say dear, But the dearest, truest, Shall lie ere morrow Before thee dead!

All: But lo! Once more! She and her husband moving to the door! Cry, cry! And thou, O land of Pherae, hearken! The bravest of women sinketh, perisheth, Under the green earth, down where the shadows darken, Down to the House of Death!

During the last words Admetus and Alcestis have entered. Alcestis is supported by her Handmaids and followed by her two children.

Leader: And who hath said that Love shall bring More joy to man than fear and strife? I knew his perils from of old, I know them now, when I behold The bitter faring of my King, Whose love is taken, and his life Left evermore an empty thing.

Alcestis: O Sun, O light of the day that falls! O running cloud that races along the sky!

Admetus: They look on thee and me, a stricken twain, Who have wrought no sin that God should have thee slain.

Alcestis: Dear Earth, and House of sheltering walls, And wedded homes of the land where my fathers lie!

Admetus: Fail not, my hapless one. Be strong, and pray The o'er-mastering Gods to hate us not alway.

Alcestis, faintly, her mind wandering. A boat two-oared, upon water; I see, I see. And the Ferryman of the Dead, His hand that hangs on the pole, his voice that cries; "Thou lingerest; come. Come quickly, we wait for thee." He is angry that I am slow; he shakes his head.

Admetus: Alas, a bitter boat-faring for me, My bride ill-starred.--Oh, this is misery!

Alcestis, as before. Drawing, drawing! 'Tis some one that draweth me ... To the Palaces of the Dead. So dark. The wings, the eyebrows and ah, the eyes!... Go back! God's mercy! What seekest thou? Let me be!...

Recovering Where am I? Ah, and what paths are these I tread?

Admetus: Grievous for all who love thee, but for me And my two babes most hard, most solitary.

Alcestis: Hold me not; let me lie.-- I am too weak to stand; and Death is near, And a slow darkness stealing on my sight. My little ones, good-bye. Soon, soon, and mother will be no more here.... Good-bye, two happy children in the light.

Admetus: Oh, word of pain, oh, sharper ache Than any death of mine had brought! For the Gods' sake, desert me not, For thine own desolate children's sake. Nay, up! Be brave. For if they rend Thee from me, I can draw no breath; In thy hand are my life and death, Thine, my beloved and my friend!

Alcestis: Admetus, seeing what way my fortunes lie, I fain would speak with thee before I die. I have set thee before all things; yea, mine own Life beside thine was naught. For this alone I die.... Dear Lord, I never need have died. I might have lived to wed some prince of pride, Dwell in a king's house.... Nay, how could I, torn From thee, live on, I and my babes forlorn? I have given to thee my youth--not more nor less, But all--though I was full of happiness. Thy father and mother both--'tis strange to tell-- Had failed thee, though for them the deed was well, The years were ripe, to die and save their son, The one child of the house: for hope was none, If thou shouldst pass away, of other heirs. So thou and I had lived through the long years, Both. Thou hadst not lain sobbing here alone For a dead wife and orphan babes.... 'Tis done Now, and some God hath wrought out all his will.

Howbeit I now will ask thee to fulfill One great return-gift--not so great
withal As I have given, for life is more than all; But just and due, as thine
own heart will tell. For thou hast loved our little ones as well As I have....
Keep them to be masters here In my old house; and bring no stepmother
Upon them. She might hate them. She might be Some baser woman, not a
queen like me, And strike them with her hand. For mercy, spare Our little
ones that wrong. It is my prayer.... They come into a house: they are all
strife And hate to any child of the dead wife.... Better a serpent than a
stepmother! A boy is safe. He has his father there To guard him. But a Little
Girl! *Taking the Little Girl* to her *What good* And gentle care will guide thy
maidenhood? What woman wilt thou find at father's side? One evil word
from her, just when the tide Of youth is full, would wreck thy hope of love.
And no more mother near, to stand above Thy marriage-bed, nor comfort
thee pain-tossed In travail, when one needs a mother most! Seeing I must
die.... 'Tis here, across my way, Not for the morrow, not for the third day,
But now--Death, and to lie with things that were. Farewell. God keep you
happy.--Husband dear, Remember that I failed thee not; and you, My
children, that your mother loved you true.

Leader: Take comfort. Ere thy lord can speak, I swear, If truth is in him, he
will grant thy prayer.

Admetus: He will, he will! Oh, never fear for me. Mine hast thou been, and
mine shalt ever be, Living and dead, thou only. None in wide Hellas but
thou shalt be Admetus' bride. No race so high, no face so magic-sweet Shall
ever from this purpose turn my feet. And children ... if God grant me joy of
these, 'Tis all I ask; of thee no joy nor ease He gave me. And thy mourning
I will bear Not one year of my life but every year, While life shall last....
My mother I will know No more. My father shall be held my foe. They
brought the words of love but not the deed, While thou hast given thine all,
and in my need Saved me. What can I do but weep alone, Alone alway,
when such a wife is gone?... An end shall be of revel, and an end Of crowns
and song and mirth of friend with friend, Wherewith my house was glad. I
ne'er again Will touch the lute nor ease my heart from pain With pipes of
Afric. All the joys I knew, And joys were many, thou hast broken in two.
Oh, I will find some artist wondrous wise Shall mould for me thy shape,
thine hair, thine eyes, And lay it in thy bed; and I will lie Close, and reach
out mine arms to thee, and cry Thy name into the night, and wait and hear

My own heart breathe: "Thy love, thy love is near." A cold delight; yet it might ease the sum Of sorrow.... And good dreams of thee will come Like balm. 'Tis sweet, even in a dream, to gaze On a dear face, the moment that it stays. O God, if Orpheus' voice were mine, to sing To Death's high Virgin and the Virgin's King, Till their hearts failed them, down would I my path Cleave, and naught stay me, not the Hound of Wrath, Not the grey oarsman of the ghostly tide, Till back to sunlight I had borne my bride. But now, wife, wait for me till I shall come Where thou art, and prepare our second home. These ministers in that same cedar sweet Where thou art laid will lay me, feet to feet, And head to head, oh, not in death from thee Divided, who alone art true to me!

Leader: This life-long sorrow thou hast sworn, I too, Thy friend, will bear with thee. It is her due.

Alcestis: Children, ye heard his promise? He will wed No other woman nor forget the dead.

Admetus: Again I promise. So it shall be done.

Alcestis, *giving the children into his arms one after the other.* On that oath take my daughter: and my son.

Admetus: Dear hand that gives, I accept both gift and vow.

Alcestis: Thou, in my place, must be their mother now.

Admetus: Else were they motherless--I needs must try.

Alcestis: My babes, I ought to live, and lo, I die.

Admetus: And how can I, forlorn of thee, live on?

Alcestis: Time healeth; and the dead are dead and gone.

Admetus: Oh, take me with thee to the dark below, Me also!

Alcestis: 'Tis enough that one should go.

Admetus: O Fate, to have cheated me of one so true!

Alcestis, *her strength failing.* There comes a darkness: a great burden, too.

Admetus: I am lost if thou wilt leave me.... Wife! Mine own!

Alcestis: I am not thy wife; I am nothing. All is gone.

Admetus: Thy babes! Thou wilt not leave them.--Raise thine eye.

Alcestis: I am sorry.... But good-bye, children; good-bye.

Admetus: Look at them! Wake and look at them!

Alcestis: I must go.

Admetus: What? Dying!

Alcestis: Farewell, husband! *She dies.*

Admetus, *with a cry.* Ah!... Woe, woe!

Leader: Admetus' Queen is dead!

While Admetus is weeping silently, and the Chorus veil their faces, the Little Boy runs up to his dead Mother.

Little Boy: Oh, what has happened? Mummy has gone away, And left me and will not come back any more! Father, I shall be lonely all the day.... Look! Look! Her eyes ... and her arms not like before, How they lie ... Mother! Oh, speak a word! Answer me, answer me, Mother! It is I. I am touching your face. It is I, your little bird.

Admetus, *recovering himself and going to the Child.* She hears us not, she sees us not. We lie Under a heavy grief, child, thou and I.

Little Boy: I am so little, Father, and lonely and cold Here without Mother. It is too hard.... And you, Poor little sister, too. Oh, Father! Such a little time we had her. She might have stayed On till we all were old.... Everything is spoiled when Mother is dead.

The Little Boy is taken away, with his Sister, sobbing.

Leader: My King, thou needs must gird thee to the worst. Thou shalt not be the last, nor yet the first, To lose a noble wife. Be brave, and know To die is but a debt that all men owe.

Admetus: I know. It came not without doubts and fears, This thing. The thought hath poisoned all my years. Howbeit, I now will make the burial due To this dead Queen. Be assembled, all of you; And, after, raise your triumph-song to greet This pitiless Power that yawns beneath our feet. Meantime let all in Thessaly who dread My sceptre join in mourning for the dead With temples sorrow-shorn and sable weed. Ye chariot-lords, ye spurrers of the steed, Shear close your horses' manes! Let there be found Through all my realm no lute, nor lyre, nor sound Of piping, till twelve

moons are at an end. For never shall I lose a closer friend, Nor braver in my need. And worthy is she Of honour, who alone hath died for me.

The body of Alcestis is carried into the house by mourners; Admetus follows it.

Chorus: Daughter of Pelias, fare thee well, May joy be thine in the Sunless Houses! For thine is a deed which the Dead shall tell Where a King black-browed in the gloom carouses; And the cold grey hand at the helm and oar Which guideth shadows from shore to shore, Shall bear this day o'er the Tears that Well, A Queen of women, a spouse of spouses.

Minstrels many shall praise thy name With lyre full-strung and with voices lyreless, When Mid-Moon riseth, an orbèd flame, And from dusk to dawning the dance is tireless; And Carnos cometh to Sparta's call, And Athens shineth in festival; For thy death is a song, and a fullness of fame, Till the heart of the singer is left desireless.

Leader: Would I could reach thee, oh, Reach thee and save, my daughter, Starward from gulfs of Hell, Past gates, past tears that swell, Where the weak oar climbs thro' The night and the water!

Second Elder: Belovèd and lonely one, Who feared not dying: Gone in another's stead Alone to the hungry dead: Light be the carven stone Above thee lying!

Third Elder: Oh, he who should seek again A new bride after thee, Were loathed of thy children twain, And loathed of me.

Leader: Word to his mother sped, Praying to her who bore him; Word to his father, old, Heavy with years and cold; "Quick, ere your son be dead! What dare ye for him?"

Second Elder: Old, and they dared not; grey, And they helped him never! 'Twas she, in her youth and pride, Rose up for her lord and died. Oh, love of two hearts that stay One-knit for ever...

Third Elder: 'Tis rare in the world! God send Such bride in my house to be; She should live life to the end, Not fail through me.

As the song ceases there enters a stranger, walking strongly, but travel-stained, dusty, and tired. His lion-skin and club show him to be Heracles.

Heracles: Ho, countrymen! To Pherae am I come By now? And is Admetus in his home?

Leader: Our King is in his house, Lord Heracles.-- But say, what need brings thee in days like these To Thessaly and Pherae's wallèd ring?

Heracles: A quest I follow for the Argive King.

Leader: What prize doth call thee, and to what far place?

Heracles: The horses of one Diomede, in Thrace.

Leader: But how...? Thou know'st not? Is he strange to thee?

Heracles: Quite strange. I ne'er set foot in Bistony.

Leader: Not without battle shalt thou win those steeds.

Heracles: So be it! I cannot fail my master's needs.

Leader: 'Tis slay or die, win or return no more.

Heracles: Well, I have looked on peril's face before.

Leader: What profit hast thou in such manslaying?

Heracles: I shall bring back the horses to my King.

Leader: 'Twere none such easy work to bridle them.

Heracles: Not easy? Have they nostrils breathing flame?

Leader: They tear men's flesh; their jaws are swift with blood.

Heracles: Men's flesh! 'Tis mountain wolves', not horses' food!

Leader: Thou wilt see their mangers clogged with blood, like mire.

Heracles: And he who feeds such beasts, who was his sire?

Leader: Ares, the war-lord of the Golden Targe.

Heracles: Enough!--This labour fitteth well my large Fortune, still upward, still against the wind. How often with these kings of Ares' kind Must I do battle? First the dark wolf-man, Lycaon; then 'twas he men called The Swan; And now this man of steeds!... Well, none shall see Alcmena's son turn from his enemy.

Leader: Lo, as we speak, this land's high governor, Admetus, cometh from his castle door.

Enter Admetus from the Castle.

Admetus: Zeus-born of Perseid line, all joy to thee!

Heracles: Joy to Admetus, Lord of Thessaly!

Admetus: Right welcome were she!--But thy love I know.

Heracles: But why this mourning hair, this garb of woe?

Admetus, *in a comparatively light tone.* There is a burial I must make to-day.

Heracles: God keep all evil from thy children!

Admetus: Nay, My children live.

Heracles: Thy father, if 'tis he, Is ripe in years.

Admetus: He liveth, friend, and she Who bore me.

Heracles: Surely not thy wife? 'Tis not Alcestis?

Admetus, *his composure a little shaken.* Ah; two answers share my thought, Questioned of her.

Heracles: Is she alive or dead?

Admetus: She is, and is not; and my heart hath bled Long years for her.

Heracles: I understand no more. Thy words are riddles.

Admetus: Heard'st thou not of yore The doom that she must meet?

Heracles: I know thy wife Has sworn to die for thee.

Admetus: And is it life, To live with such an oath hung o'er her head?

Heracles, *relieved.* Ah, Weep not too soon, friend. Wait till she be dead.

Admetus: He dies who is doomed to die; he is dead who dies.

Heracles: The two are different things in most men's eyes.

Admetus: Decide thy way, lord, and let me decide The other way.

Heracles: Who is it that has died? Thou weapest.

Admetus: 'Tis a woman. It doth take My memory back to her of whom we spake.

Heracles: A stranger, or of kin to thee?

Admetus: Not kin, But much beloved.

Heracles: How came she to be in Thy house to die?

Admetus: Her father died, and so She came to us, an orphan, long ago.

Heracles, as though about to depart. 'Tis sad. I would I had found thee on a happier day.

Admetus: Thy words have some intent: what wouldst thou say?

Heracles: I must find harbour with some other friend.

Admetus: My prince, it may not be! God never send Such evil!

Heracles: Tis great turmoil, when a guest Comes to a mourning house.

Admetus: Come in and rest. Let the dead die!

Heracles: I cannot, for mere shame, Feast beside men whose eyes have tears in them.

Admetus: The guest-rooms are apart where thou shalt be.

Heracles: Friend, let me go. I shall go gratefully.

Admetus: Thou shalt not enter any door but mine. *To an Attendant* Lead in our guest. Unlock the furthest line Of guest-chambers; and bid the stewards there Make ready a full feast; then close with care The midway doors. 'Tis unmeet, if he hears Our turmoil or is burdened with our tears.

The Attendant leads Heracles into the house.

Leader: How, master? When within a thing so sad Lies, thou wilt house a stranger? Art thou mad?

Admetus: And had I turned the stranger from my door, Who sought my shelter, hadst thou praised me more? I trow not, if my sorrow were thereby No whit less, only the more friendless I. And more, when bards tell tales, were it not worse My house should lie beneath the stranger's curse? Now he is my sure friend, if e'er I stand Lonely in Argos, in a thirsty land.

Leader: Thou callest him thy friend; how didst thou dare Keep hid from him the burden of thy care?

Admetus: He never would have entered, had he known My grief.--Aye, men may mock what I have done, And call me fool. My house hath never learned To fail its friend, nor seen the stranger spurned.

Admetus goes into the house

Chorus: Oh, a House that loves the stranger, And a House for ever free!
And Apollo, the Song-changer, Was a herdsman in thy fee; Yea, a-piping he
was found, Where the upward valleys wound, To the kine from out the
manger And the sheep from off the lea, And love was upon Othrys at the
sound.

And from deep glens un beholden Of the forest to his song There came
lynxes streaky-golden, There came lions in a throng, Tawny-coated, ruddy-
eyed, To that piper in his pride; And shy fawns he would embolden,
Dappled dancers, out along The shadow by the pine-tree's side.

And those magic pipes a-blowing Have fulfilled thee in thy reign By thy
Lake with honey flowing, By thy sheepfolds and thy grain; Where the Sun
turns his steeds To the twilight, all the meads Of Molossus know thy sowing
And thy ploughs upon the plain. Yea, and eastward thou art free To the
portals of the sea, And Pelion, the unharboured, is but minister to thee.

He hath opened wide his dwelling To the stranger, though his ruth For the
dead was fresh and welling, For the loved one of his youth. Tis the brave
heart's cry: "I will fail not, though I die!" Doth it win, with no man's
telling, Some high vision of the truth? We may marvel. Yet I trust, When
man seeketh to be just And to pity them that wander, God will raise him
from the dust.

*As the song ceases the doors are thrown open and Admetus comes before
them: a great funeral procession is seen moving out.*

Admetus: Most gentle citizens, our dead is here Made ready; and these
youths to bear the bier Uplifted to the grave-mound and the urn. Now,
seeing she goes forth never to return, Bid her your last farewell, as
mourners may.

The procession moves forward, past him.

Leader: Nay, lord; thy father, walking old and grey; And followers bearing
burial gifts and brave Gauds, which men call the comfort of the grave.

Enter Pheres with followers bearing robes and gifts.

Pheres: I come in sorrow for thy sorrow, son. A faithful wife indeed thou
hast lost, and one Who ruled her heart. But, howso hard they be, We needs
must bear these griefs.--Some gifts for thee Are here.... Yes; take them. Let

them go beneath The sod. We both must honour her in death, Seeing she hath died, my son, that thou mayst live Nor I be childless. Aye, she would not give My soul to a sad old age, mourning for thee. Methinks she hath made all women's life to be A nobler thing, by one great woman's deed. Thou saviour of my son, thou staff in need To our wrecked age, farewell! May some good life Be thine still in the grave.--Oh, 'tis a wife Like this man needs; else let him stay unwed!

The old man has not noticed Admetus's gathering indignation.

Admetus: I called not thee to burial of my dead, Nor count thy presence here a welcome thing. My wife shall wear no robe that thou canst bring, Nor needs thy help in aught. There was a day We craved thy love, when I was on my way Deathward--thy love, which bade thee stand aside And watch, grey-bearded, while a young man died! And now wilt mourn for her? Thy fatherhood! Thou wast no true begetter of my blood, Nor she my mother who dares call me child. Oh, she was barren ever; she beguiled Thy folly with some bastard of a thrall. Here is thy proof! This hour hath shown me all Thou art; and now I am no more thy son. Fore God, among all cowards can scarce be one Like thee. So grey, so near the boundary Of mortal life, thou wouldst not, durst not, die To save thy son! Thou hast suffered her to do Thine office, her, no kin to me nor you, Yet more than kin! Henceforth she hath all the part Of mother, yea, and father in my heart. And what a glory had been thine that day, Dying to save thy son--when, either way, Thy time must needs be brief. Thy life has had Abundance of the things that make men glad; A crown that came to thee in youth; a son To do thee worship and maintain thy throne-- Not like a childless king, whose folk and lands Lie helpless, to be torn by strangers' hands. Wilt say I failed in duty to thine age; For that thou hast let me die? Not so; most sage, Most pious I was, to mother and to thee; And thus ye have paid me! Well, I counsel ye. Lose no more time. Get quick another son To foster thy last years, to lay thee on Thy bier, when dead, and wrap thee in thy pall. *I will not bury thee.* I am, for all The care thou hast shown me, dead. If I have found Another, true to save me at the bound Of life and death, that other's child am I, That other's fostering friend, until I die. How falsely do these old men pray for death, Cursing their weight of years, their weary breath! When Death comes close, there is not one that dares To die; age is forgot and all its cares.

Leader: Oh, peace! Enough of sorrow in our path Is strewn. Thou son, stir not thy father's wrath.

Pheres: My son, whom seekest thou ... some Lydian thrall, Or Phrygian, bought with cash?... to affright withal By cursing? I am a Thessalian, free, My father a born chief of Thessaly; And thou most insolent. Yet think not so To fling thy loud lewd words at me and go. I got thee to succeed me in my hall, I have fed thee, clad thee. But I have no call To die for thee. Not in our family, Not in all Greece, doth law bid fathers die To save their sons. Thy road of life is thine None other's, to rejoice at or repine. All that was owed to thee by us is paid. My throne is thine. My broad lands shall be made Thine, as I had them from my father.... Say, How have I wronged thee? What have I kept away? "Not died for thee?"... I ask not thee to die. Thou lovest this light: shall I not love it, I?... 'Tis age on age there, in the dark; and here My sunlit time is short, but dear; but dear. Thou hast fought hard enough. Thou drawest breath Even now, long past thy portioned hour of death, By murdering her ... and blamest my faint heart, Coward, who hast let a woman play thy part And die to save her pretty soldier! Aye, A good plan, surely! Thou needst never die; Thou canst find alway somewhere some fond wife To die for thee. But, prithee, make not strife With other friends, who will not save thee so. Be silent, loving thine own life, and know All men love theirs!... Taunt others, and thou too Shalt hear much that is bitter, and is true.

Leader: Too much of wrath before, too much hath run After. Old man, cease to revile thy son.

Admetus: Speak on. I have spoken.... If my truth of tongue Gives pain to thee, why didst thou do me wrong?

Pheres: Wrong? To have died for thee were far more wrong.

Admetus: How can an old life weigh against a young?

Pheres: Man hath but one, not two lives, to his use.

Admetus: Oh, live on; live, and grow more old than Zeus!

Pheres: Because none wrongs thee, thou must curse thy sire?

Admetus: I blest him. Is not life his one desire?

Pheres: This dead, methinks, is lying in thy place.

Admetus: A proof, old traitor, of thy cowardliness!

Pheres: Died she through me?... That thou wilt hardly say.

Admetus, *almost breaking down.* O God! Mayst thou but feel the need of me some day!

Pheres: Go forward; woo more wives that more may die.

Admetus: As thou wouldst not! Thine is the infamy.

Pheres: This light of heaven is sweet, and sweet again.

Admetus: Thy heart is foul. A thing unmeet for men.

Pheres: Thou laugh'st not yet across the old man's tomb.

Admetus: Dishonoured thou shalt die when death shall come.

Pheres: Once dead, I shall not care what tales are told.

Admetus: Great Gods, so lost to honour and so old!

Pheres: She was not lost to honour: she was blind.

Admetus: Go! Leave me with my dead.... Out from my mind!

Pheres: I go. Bury the woman thou hast slain.... Her kinsmen yet may come to thee with plain Question. Acastus hath small place in good Men, if he care not for his sister's blood.

Pheres goes off, with his Attendants. Admetus calls after him as he goes.

Admetus: Begone, begone, thou and thy bitter mate! Be old and childless-- ye have earned your fate-- While your son lives! For never shall ye be From henceforth under the same roof with me.... Must I send heralds and a trumpet's call To abjure thy blood? Fear not, I will send them all....

Pheres is now out of sight; Admetus drops his defiance and seems like a broken man.

But we--our sorrow is upon us; come With me, and let us bear her to the tomb.

Chorus: Ah me! Farewell, unfalteringly brave! Farewell, thou generous heart and true! May Pluto give thee welcome due, And Hermes love thee in the grave. Whate'er of blessed life there be For high souls to the darkness flown, Be thine for ever, and a throne Beside the crowned Persephonê.

The funeral procession has formed and moves slowly out, followed by Admetus and the Chorus. The stage is left empty, till a side door of the Castle opens and there comes out a Servant, angry and almost in tears.

Servant: Full many a stranger and from many a land Hath lodged in this old castle, and my hand Served them; but never has there passed this way A scurvier ruffian than our guest to-day. He saw my master's grief, but all the more In he must come, and shoulders through the door. And after, think you he would mannerly Take what was set before him? No, not he! If, on this day of trouble, we left out Some small thing, he must have it with a shout. Up, in both hands, our vat of ivy-wood He raised, and drank the dark grape's burning blood, Strong and untempered, till the fire was red Within him; then put myrtle round his head And roared some noisy song. So had we there Discordant music. He, without a care For all the affliction of Admetus' halls, Sang on; and, listening, one could hear the thralls In the long gallery weeping for the dead. We let him see no tears. Our master made That order, that the stranger must not know. So here I wait in her own house, and do Service to some black thief, some man of prey; And she has gone, has gone for ever away. I never followed her, nor lifted high My hand to bless her; never said good-bye.... I loved her like my mother. So did all The slaves. She never let his anger fall Too hard. She saved us alway....And this wild beast Comes in our sorrow when we need him least!

During the last few lines Heracles has entered, unperceived by the Servant. He has evidently bathed and changed his garments and drunk his fill, and is now revelling, a garland of flowers on his head. He frightens the Servant a little from time to time during the following speech.

Heracles: Friend, why so solemn and so cranky-eyed? 'Tis not a henchman's office, to show pride To his betters. He should smile and make good cheer. There comes a guest, thy lord's old comrade, here; And thou art all knitted eyebrows, scowls and head Bent, because somebody, forsooth, is dead! Come close! I mean to make thee wiser.

The Servant reluctantly comes close.

So. Dost comprehend things mortal, how they grow?... 'To himself I suppose not. How could he?... Look this way! Death is a debt all mortal men must pay; Aye, there is no man living who can say If life will last him yet a single day. On, to the dark, drives Fortune; and no force Can wrest her

secret nor put back her course.... I have told thee now. I have taught thee. After this Eat, drink, make thyself merry. Count the bliss Of the one passing hour thine own; the rest Is Fortune's. And give honour chiefliest To our lady Cypris, giver of all joys To man. 'Tis a sweet goddess. Otherwise, Let all these questions sleep and just obey My counsel.... Thou believest all I say? I hope so.... Let this stupid grieving be; Rise up above thy troubles, and with me Drink in a cloud of blossoms. By my soul, I vow the sweet splash-music of the bowl Will break thy glumness, loose thee from the frown Within. Let mortal man keep to his own Mortality, and not expect too much. To all your solemn dogs and other such Scowlers--I tell thee truth, no more nor less-- Life is not life, but just unhappiness.

He offers the wine-bowl to the Servant, who avoids it.

Servant: We know all this. But now our fortunes be Not such as ask for mirth or revelry.

Heracles: A woman dead, of no one's kin; why grieve So much? Thy master and thy mistress live.

Servant: Live? Man, hast thou heard nothing of our woe?

Heracles: Yes, thy lord told me all I need to know.

Servant: He is too kind to his guests, more kind than wise.

Heracles: Must I go starved because some stranger dies?

Servant: Some stranger?--Yes, a stranger verily!

Heracles, *his manner beginning to change.* Is this some real grief he hath hid from me?

Servant: Go, drink, man! Leave to us our master's woes.

Heracles: It sounds not like a stranger. Yet, God knows...

Servant: How should thy revelling hurt, if that were all?

Heracles: Hath mine own friend so wronged me in his hall?

Servant: Thou camest at an hour when none was free To accept thee. We were mourning. Thou canst see Our hair, black robes...

Heracles, *suddenly, in a voice of thunder.* Who is it that is dead?

Servant: Alcestis, the King's wife.

Heracles, *overcome*. What hast thou said? Alcestis?... And ye feasted me withal!

Servant: He held it shame to turn thee from his hall.

Heracles: Shame! And when such a wondrous wife was gone!

Servant, *breaking into tears*. Oh, all is gone, all lost, not she alone!

Heracles: I knew, I felt it, when I saw his tears, And face, and shorn hair. But he won mine ears With talk of the strange woman and her rite Of burial. So in mine own heart's despite I crossed his threshold and sat drinking--he And I old friends!--in his calamity. Drank, and sang songs, and revelled, my head hot With wine and flowers!... And thou to tell me not, When all the house lay filled with sorrow, thou! *A pause; then suddenly* Where lies the tomb?--Where shall I find her now?

Servant, *frightened*. Close by the straight Larissa road. The tall White marble showeth from the castle wall.

Heracles: O heart, O hand, great doings have ye done Of old: up now, and show them what a son Took life that hour, when she of Tiryns' sod, Electryon's daughter, mingled with her God! I needs must save this woman from the shore Of death and set her in her house once more, Repaying Admetus' love.... This Death, this black And wingèd Lord of corpses, I will track Home. I shall surely find him by the grave A-hungered, lapping the hot blood they gave In sacrifice. An ambush: then, one spring, One grip! These arms shall be a brazen ring, With no escape, no rest, howe'er he whine And curse his mauled ribs, till the Queen is mine! Or if he escape me, if he come not there To seek the blood of offering, I will fare Down to the Houses without Light, and bring To Her we name not and her nameless King Strong prayers, until they yield to me and send Alcestis home, to life and to my friend: Who gave me shelter, drove me not away In his great grief, but hid his evil day Like a brave man, because he loved me well. Is one in all this land more hospitable, One in all Greece? I swear no man shall say He hath cast his love upon a churl away!

He goes forth, just as he is, in the direction of the grave. The Servant watches a moment and goes back into the hall.

The stage is empty; then Admetus and the Chorus return.

Admetus: Alas! Bitter the homeward way, Bitter to seek A widowed house; ah me, Where should I fly or stay, Be dumb or speak? Would I could cease to be!

Despair, despair! My mother bore me under an evil star. I envy them that are perished; my heart is there. It dwells in the Sunless Houses, afar, afar.

I take no joy in looking upon the light; No joy in the feel of the earth beneath my tread. The Slayer hath taken his hostage; the Lord of the Dead Holdeth me sworn to taste no more delight.

He throws himself on the ground in despair.

Chorus: *Each member of the Chorus speaks his line severally, as he passes Admetus, who is heard sobbing at the end of each line.*

--Advance, advance; Till the house shall give thee cover. --Thou hast borne heavy things And meet for lamentation. --Thou hast passed, hast passed, Thro' the deepest of the River. --Yet no help comes To the sad and silent nation. --And the face of thy beloved, it shall meet thee never, never!

Admetus: Ye wrench my wounds asunder. Where Is grief like mine, whose wife is dead? My wife, whom would I ne'er had wed, Nor loved, nor held my house with her....

Blessed are they who dare to dwell Unloved of woman! 'Tis but one Heart that they bleed with, and alone Can bear their one life's burden well.

No young shall wither at their side, No bridal room be swept by death.... Aye, better man should draw his breath For ever without child or bride.

Chorus, as before. --'Tis Fate, 'tis Fate: She is strong and none shall break her. --No end, no end, Wilt thou lay to lamentations? --Endure and be still: Thy lamenting will not wake her. --There be many before thee, Who have suffered and had patience. --Though the face of Sorrow changeth, yet her hand is on all nations.

Admetus: The garb of tears, the mourner's cry: Then the long ache when tears are past!... Oh, why didst hinder me to cast This body to the dust and die With her, the faithful and the brave? Then not one lonely soul had fled, But two great lovers, proudly dead, Through the deep waters of the grave.

Leader: A friend I knew, In whose house died a son, Worthy of bitter rue, His only one. His head sank, yet he bare Stilly his weight of care, Though

grey was in his hair And life nigh done.

Admetus: Ye shapes that front me, wall and gate, How shall I enter in and dwell Among ye, with all Fortune's spell Dischanted? Aye, the change is great.

That day I strode with bridal song Through lifted brands of Pelian pine; A hand belovèd lay in mine; And loud behind a revelling throng

Exalted me and her, the dead. They called us young, high-hearted; told How princes were our sires of old, And how we loved and we must wed....

For those high songs, lo, men that moan, And raiment black where once was white; Who guide me homeward in the night, On that waste bed to lie alone.

Second Elder: It breaks, like strife, Thy long peace, where no pain Had entered; yet is life, Sweet life, not slain. A wife dead; a dear chair Empty: is that so rare? Men live without despair Whose loves are ta'en.

Admetus, erect and facing them. Behold, I count my wife's fate happier, Though all gainsay me, than mine own. To her Comes no more pain for ever; she hath rest And peace from all toil, and her name is blest. But I am one who hath no right to stay Alive on earth; one that hath lost his way In fate, and strays in dreams of life long past.... Friends, I have learned my lesson at the last. I have my life. Here stands my house. But now How dare I enter in? Or, entered, how Go forth again? Go forth, when none is there To give me a parting word, and I to her?... Where shall I turn for refuge? There within, The desert that remains where she hath been Will drive me forth, the bed, the empty seat She sat in; nay, the floor beneath my feet Unswept, the children crying at my knee For mother; and the very thralls will be In sobs for the dear mistress that is lost. That is my home! If I go forth, a host Of feasts and bridal dances, gatherings gay Of women, will be there to fright me away To loneliness. Mine eyes will never bear The sight. They were her friends; they played with her. And always, always, men who hate my name Will murmur: "This is he who lives in shame Because he dared not die! He gave instead The woman whom he loved, and so is fled From death. He counts himself a man withal! And seeing his parents died not at his call He hates them, when himself he dared not die!" Such mocking beside all my pain shall I Endure.... What profit was it to live on, Friend, with my grief kept and mine honour gone?

Chorus: I have sojourned in the Muse's land, Have wandered with the wandering star, Seeking for strength, and in my hand Held all philosophies that are; Yet nothing could I hear nor see Stronger than That Which Needs Must Be. No Orphic rune, no Thracian scroll, Hath magic to avert the morrow; No healing all those medicines brave Apollo to the Asclepiad gave; Pale herbs of comfort in the bowl Of man's wide sorrow. She hath no temple, she alone, Nor image where a man may kneel; No blood upon her altar-stone Crying shall make her hear nor feel. I know thy greatness; come not great Beyond my dreams, O Power of Fate! Aye, Zeus himself shall not unclose His purpose save by thy discerning. The chain of iron, the Scythian sword, It yields and shivers at thy word; Thy heart is as the rock, and knows No ruth, nor turning.

They turn to Admetus.

Her hand hath caught thee; yea, the keeping Of iron fingers grips thee round. Be still. Be still. Thy noise of weeping Shall raise no lost one from the ground. Nay, even the Sons of God are parted At last from joy, and pine in death.... Oh, dear on earth when all did love her, Oh, dearer lost beyond recover: Of women all the bravest-hearted Hath pressed thy lips and breathed thy breath.

Let not the earth that lies upon her Be deemed a grave-mound of the dead. Let honour, as the Gods have honour, Be hers, till men shall bow the head, And strangers, climbing from the city Her slanting path, shall muse and say: "This woman died to save her lover, And liveth blest, the stars above her: Hail, Holy One, and grant thy pity!" So pass the wondering words away.

Leader: But see, it is Alcmena's son once more, My lord King, cometh striding to thy door.

Enter Heracles; his dress is as in the last scene, but shows signs of a struggle. Behind come two Attendants, guiding between them a veiled Woman, who seems like one asleep or unconscious. The Woman remains in the background while Heracles comes forward.

Heracles: Thou art my friend, Admetus; therefore bold And plain I tell my story, and withhold No secret hurt.--Was I not worthy, friend, To stand beside thee; yea, and to the end Be proven in sorrow if I was true to thee? And thou didst tell me not a word, while she Lay dead within; but bid me feast, as though Naught but the draping of some stranger's woe Was on

thee. So I garlanded my brow And poured the gods drink-offering, and but now Filled thy death-stricken house with wine and song. Thou hast done me wrong, my brother; a great wrong Thou hast done me. But I will not add more pain In thine affliction. Why I am here again, Returning, thou must hear. I pray thee, take And keep yon woman for me till I make My homeward way from Thrace, when I have ta'en Those four steeds and their bloody master slain. And if--which heaven avert!--I ne'er should see Hellas again, I leave her here, to be An handmaid in thy house. No labour small Was it that brought her to my hand at all. I fell upon a contest certain Kings Had set for all mankind, sore buffetings And meet for strong men, where I staked my life And won this woman. For the easier strife Black steeds were prizes; herds of kine were cast For heavier issues, fists and wrestling; last, This woman.... Lest my work should all seem done For naught, I needs must keep what I have won; So prithee take her in. No theft, but true Toil, won her.... Some day thou mayst thank me, too.

Admetus: 'Twas in no scorn, no bitterness to thee, I hid my wife's death and my misery. Methought it was but added pain on pain If thou shouldst leave me, and roam forth again Seeking another's roof. And, for mine own Sorrow, I was content to weep alone. But, for this damsel, if it may be so, I pray thee, Lord, let some man, not in woe Like mine, take her. Thou hast in Thessaly Abundant friends.... 'Twould wake sad thoughts in me. How could I have this damsel in my sight And keep mine eyes dry? Prince, why wilt thou smite The smitten? Grievs enough are on my head. Where in my castle could so young a maid Be lodged--her veil and raiment show her young: Here, in the men's hall? I should fear some wrong. 'Tis not so easy, Prince, to keep controlled My young men. And thy charge I fain would hold Sacred.--If not, wouldst have me keep her in The women's chambers ... where my dead hath been? How could I lay this woman where my bride Once lay? It were dishonour double-dyed. These streets would curse the man who so betrayed The wife who saved him for some younger maid; The dead herself ... I needs must worship her And keep her will.

During the last few lines Admetus has been looking at the veiled Woman and, though he does not consciously recognize her, feels a strange emotion overmastering him. He draws back.

Aye. I must walk with care.... O woman, whosoe'er thou art, thou hast The shape of my Alcestis; thou art cast In mould like hers.... Oh, take her from

mine eyes! In God's name!

Heracles signs to the Attendants to take Alcestis away again. She stays veiled and unnoticing in the background.

I was fallen, and in this wise Thou wilt make me deeper fall... Meseems, meseems, There in her face the loved one of my dreams Looked forth.--My heart is made a turbid thing, Craving I know not what, and my tears spring Unbidden.--Grief I knew 'twould be; but how Fiery a grief I never knew till now.

Leader: Thy fate I praise not. Yet, what gift soe'er God giveth, man must steel himself and bear.

Heracles, *drawing Admetus on.* Would God, I had the power, 'mid all this might Of arm, to break the dungeons of the night, And free thy wife, and make thee glad again!

Admetus: Where is such power? I know thy heart were fain; But so 'tis writ. The dead shall never rise.

Heracles: Chafe not the curb, then: suffer and be wise.

Admetus: Easier to give such counsel than to keep.

Heracles: Who will be happier, shouldst thou always weep?

Admetus: Why, none. Yet some blind longing draws me on...

Heracles: 'Tis natural. Thou didst love her that is gone.

Admetus: 'Tis that hath wrecked, oh more than wrecked, my life.

Heracles: 'Tis certain: thou hast lost a faithful wife.

Admetus: Till life itself is dead and wearies me.

Heracles: Thy pain is yet young. Time will soften thee,

The veiled Woman begins dimly, as though in a dream, to hear the words spoken.

Admetus: Time? Yes, if time be death.

Heracles: Nay, wait; and some Woman, some new desire of love, will come.

Admetus, *indignantly.* Peace! How canst thou? Shame upon thee!

Heracles: Thou wilt stay Unwed for ever, lonely night and day?

Admetus: No other bride in these void arms shall lie.

Heracles: What profit will thy dead wife gain thereby?

Admetus: Honour; which finds her wheresoe'er she lies.

Heracles: Most honourable in thee: but scarcely wise!

Admetus: God curse me, if I betray her in her tomb!

Heracles: So be it!... And this good damsel, thou wilt take her home?

Admetus: No, in the name of Zeus, thy father! No!

Heracles: I swear, 'tis not well to reject her so.

Admetus: 'Twould tear my heart to accept her.

Heracles: Grant me, friend, This one boon! It may help thee in the end.

Admetus: Woe's me! Would God thou hadst never won those victories!

Heracles: Thou sharest both the victory and the prize.

Admetus: Thou art generous.... But now let her go.

Heracles: She shall, If go she must. Look first, and judge withal.

He takes the veil off Alcestis.

Admetus, steadily refusing to look. She must.--And thou, forgive me!

Heracles: Friend, there is A secret reason why I pray for this.

Admetus, surprised, then reluctantly yielding. I grant thy boon then--though it likes me ill.

Heracles: 'Twill like thee later. Now ... but do my will.

Admetus, beckoning to an Attendant. Take her; find her some lodging in my hall.

Heracles: I will not yield this maid to any thrall.

Admetus: Take her thyself and lead her in.

Heracles: I stand Beside her; take her; lead her to thy hand.

He brings the Woman close to Admetus, who looks determinedly away. She reaches out her arms.

Admetus: I touch her not.--Let her go in!

Heracles: I am loth To trust her save to thy pledged hand and oath.

He lays his hand on Admetus's shoulder.

Admetus, desperately. Lord, this is violence ... wrong ...

Heracles: Reach forth thine hand And touch this comer from a distant land.

Admetus, holding out his hand without looking. Like Perseus when he touched the Gorgon, there!

Heracles: Thou hast touched her?

Admetus, at last taking her hand. Touched her?... Yes.

Heracles, a hand on the shoulder of each. Then cling to her; And say if thou hast found a guest of grace In God's son, Heracles! Look in her face; Look; is she like...?

Admetus looks and stands amazed. Go, and forget in bliss Thy sorrow!

Admetus: O ye Gods! What meaneth this? A marvel beyond dreams! The face ... 'tis she; Mine, verily mine! Or doth God mock at me And blast my vision with some mad surmise?

Heracles: Not so. This is thy wife before thine eyes.

Admetus, who has recoiled in his amazement. Beware! The dead have phantoms that they send...

Heracles: Nay; no ghost-raiser hast thou made thy friend.

Admetus: My wife ... she whom I buried?

Heracles: I deceive Thee not; nor wonder thou canst scarce believe.

Admetus: And dare I touch her, greet her, as mine own Wife living?

Heracles: Greet her. Thy desire is won.

Admetus, approaching with awe, Beloved eyes; beloved form; O thou Gone beyond hope, I have thee, I hold thee now?

Heracles: Thou hast her: may no god begrudge your joy.

Admetus, turning to Heracles. O lordly conqueror, Child of Zeus on high, Be blessèd! And may He, thy sire above, Save thee, as thou alone hast

saved my love!

He kneels to Heracles, who raises him.

But how ... how didst thou win her to the light?

Heracles: I fought for life with Him I needs must fight.

Admetus: With Death thou hast fought! But where?

Heracles: Among his dead I lay, and sprang and gripped him as he fled.

Admetus, *in an awed whisper, looking towards Alcestis.* Why standeth she so still? No sound, no word!

Heracles: She hath dwelt with Death. Her voice may not be heard Ere to the Lords of Them Below she pay Due cleansing, and awake on the third day. *To the Attendants* So; guide her home.

They lead Alcestis to the doorway.

And thou, King, for the rest Of time, be true; be righteous to thy guest, As he would have thee be. But now farewell! My task yet lies before me, and the spell That binds me to my master; forth I fare.

Admetus: Stay with us this one day! Stay but to share The feast upon our hearth!

Heracles: The feasting day Shall surely come; now I must needs away.

Heracles departs.

Admetus: Farewell! All victory attend thy name And safe home-coming! Lo, I make proclaim To the Four Nations and all Thessaly; A wondrous happiness hath come to be: Therefore pray, dance, give offerings and make full Your altars with the life-blood of the Bull! For me ... my heart is changed; my life shall mend Henceforth. For surely Fortune is a friend.

He goes with Alcestis into the house.

Chorus: There be many shapes of mystery; And many things God brings to be, Past hope or fear. And the end men looked for cometh not, And a path is there where no man thought. So hath it fallen here.

THE END

I'm Julie, the woman who runs [Global Grey](#) - the website where this ebook was published. These are my own formatted editions, and I hope you enjoyed reading this particular one.

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Notes

[←1]

The character of Heracles in connexion with the Kômos, already indicated by Wilamowitz and Dieterich (*Herakles*, pp. 98, ff.; *Pulcinella*, pp. 63, ff.), has been illuminatingly developed in an unpublished monograph by Mr. J.A.K. Thomson, of Aberdeen.