

THE ALCHEMIST.

THIS POEM WAS INTENDED AS THE PROLOGUE TO
A PLAY—AT PRESENT UNFINISHED.

*An old tower, very loft, on a small and rocky islet.
In the highest chamber a man of some forty
years, but silver-haired, looks out of the window.
Clear starry night, no moon. Chamber furnished
with books, alchemic instruments, etc. He gazes
some minutes, sighs deeply, but at last speaks.*

Ph. The world moves not. I gaze upon the abyss.

Look down into the black unfathomed vault
Of Starland and behold—myself.

The sea

To give a sense of motion or of sound
Washes the wall of this grey tower in vain;

I contemplate myself in that dim sphere
Whose hollow centre I am standing at
With burning eyes intent to penetrate
The black circumference, and find out God—
And only see myself. The walls of Space
Mock me with silence. What is Life? The stars
Are silent. O ye matchless ministers
That daily pass in your appointed ways
To reach—we know not what! How meaningless
Your bright assemblage and your steady task
Of doubtful motion. And the soul of man
Grapples in death-pangs with your mystery,
And fails to wrestle down the hard embrace
That grips the thighs of thought. And so he dies
To pass beyond ye—whither? To find God?
All my life long I have gazed, and dreamed, and
thought,
Unless my thought itself were but a dream,
A little, troubled dream, a dream of death
Whence I may wake—ah, where? In some new
world
Where Consciousness doth touch the Infinite,
And all the strivings of the soul be found

Sufficient to beat back the waves of doubt,
To pierce the void, and grasp the glorious,
To find out Truth? Would God it might be so,
Since here is nothing for the soul to love
Or cling to beyond self. My chamberlain
Once showed me a pet slave, dwarf, savage, black,
A vile, lewd creature, who would cast a staff
Far wheeling through the air, and suddenly
Break its swift course, and curving rapidly
Come hard upon himself who threw. Even so
These vile deformities—our souls—cast forth
Missiles of thought, and seek to reach some end
With swift imagining—and end in self.
What sage called God the image of man's self
He sees cast dimly on a bank of cloud,
Thrice his own size? And I whose life has been

[*Cry without.*]

One bitter fight with nature and myself
To find Him out, turn, terrible, to-night

[*Cry without.*]

To see myself—myself—myself. [*Cry without.*]
Hush! Hark!

Methought I heard a cry. The seamew wails

Less humanly than that—I will go down
And seek the stranger. [*Making as to leave room.*]
E'en this rocky isle

Shall prove a friend—

A Voice. Stand still.

Ph. Again! Is this
The warning of a mind o'er-strained?

[*Moving towards door.*]

Voice. Stand still
And see salvation in Jehovah's hands.

Ph. Is this the end of life?

Voice. Thy Life begins.

Ph. Strange Voice, I hear thee, and obey.
Perchance

I have not lived so far. Perchance to-day,
Like a spring-flower that slowly opens out
Its willing petals to the tender dawn,
My soul may open to the knowledge of
A dawn of new thought that may lead—

Voice. To God.

Ph. Hope hardly dared to name it!

Enter Messenger.

Mess. My lord, the king's command!

Ph. I heed it not.

See thou disturb not my high meditation.

Away!

Voice. With meditations centred in thyself.

Mess. Who spoke?

Ph. Speak thou. I obey the king.

Mess. My lord,

He bids thee to his court, to hold the reins

Tight on the fretful horses of the state

Whose weary burden makes them slip—nay, fall

On the stern hill of war. Thou art appointed

Being the wisest man in all the realm,

(So spake the king) the second to himself—

Ph. Thy vessel waits?

Mess. For dawn.

Ph. Then hasten thee

To tell them I am ready. The meanwhile

I will devote to prayer.

Mess. At dawn, my lord.

[*Exit Messenger.*]

Ph. [Turns to window.] O Maker and O Ruler
of all Worlds,
Illimitable power, immortal God,
Vague, vast, unknown, dim-looking, scarcely spied
Through doubtful crannies of the Universe,
Unseen, intangible, eluding sense
And poor conception, halting for a phrase
Of weak mind-language, O Eternity,
Hear thou the feeble world, the lame desire,
The dubious crying of the pinioned dove,
The wordless eloquent emotion
That speaks within a man, despite his mind!
Hear, who can pray for naught, unknowing aught
Whereof, for what to pray. But hear me, thou!
Hear me, thou God, who fettered the bleak winds
Of North and East, and held in silken rein
The golden steeds of West and South, who bade
The tireless sea respect its narrow bounds,
And fixed the mountains, that eternal ice
Might be thy chiefest witness, and who wove
The myriad atoms of Infinitude
Into the solid tapestry of night,
And gave the sun his heat, and bade him kiss

The lips of death upon the moon's dark face,
So that her silver lustre might rejoice
The fiery lover, the sharp nightingale,
And those pale mortals whom the day beholds.
Asleep, because the many bid them slave
From dusk to dawn being poor; and braided up
The loose hair of all trees and flowers, and made
Their one white light divide to red and green
And violet and the hues innumerable
Lesser than these, and gave man hope at last
With the invariable law of death
Abundant in new life, and having filled
The world with music, dost demand of us
“Is my work meaningless?” O thou, supreme,
Thou, First and Last, most inconceivable
All-radiating Unity, thou sphere
All-comprehensive, all-mysterious,
Spirit of Life and Death, bow down and hear!

[Bends deeper and prays silently. The flame grows duller, and finally leaves the room in absolute darkness.
Curtain.