R e' er his tale was done, night held the earth;
Yea, the brown bird grown bold, as sounds of mirth
Grew faint and scanty, now his tale had done,
And by his mate abode the next day's sun;
And in those old hearts did the story move
Remembrance of the mighty deeds of love,
And with these thoughts did hopes of life arise,
Till tears unseen were in their ancient eyes,
And in their yearning hearts unspoken prayers,
And idle seemed the world with all its cares.
FEW words they said; the balmy odorous wind
Wandered about, some resting-place to find;
The young leaves rustled 'neath its gentle breath,
And here and there some blossom burst his sheath,
Adding unnoticed fragrance to the night;
But, as they pondered, a new golden light
Streamed over the green garden, and they heard
Sweet voices sing some ancient poet's word
In praise of May; and then in sight there came
The minstrels' figures underneath the flame
Of scented torches passing 'twixt the trees,
And soon the dusky hall grew bright with these,
And therewithal they put all thought away,
And midst the tinkling harps drank deep to May.

HROUGH many changes had the May-tide passed,
The hope of summer oft had been o'er cast,
Ere midst the gardens they once more were met;
But now the full-leaved trees might well forget
The changeful agony of doubtful spring.
For summer pregnant with so many a thing
Was at the door; right hot had been the day
Which they amid the trees had passed away,
And now betwixt the tulip beds they went
Unto the hall, and thoughts of days lone spent
Gathered about them, as some blossom's smell
Unto their hearts familiar tales did tell.
BUT when they well were settled in the hall,
And now behind the trees the sun 'gan fall,
And they as yet no history had heard,
Laurence, the Swabian priest, took up the word,
And said: Ye know from what has gone before,
That in my youth I followed mystic lore,
And many books I read in seeking it,
And through memory this same eve doth flit
A certain tale I found in one of these,
Long ere mine eyes had looked upon the seas;
It made me shudder in the times gone by,
When I believed in many a mystery
I thought divine, that now I think, forsooth,
Men's own fears made, to fill the place of truth
Within their foolish hearts; short is the tale,
And therefore will the better now avail
To fill the space before the night comes on,
And unto rest once more the world is won.
THE WRITING ON THE IMAGE.

The Argument.

HOW ON AN IMAGE THAT STOOD ANCIENTLY IN ROME WERE WRITTEN CERTAIN WORDS, WHICH NONE UNDERSTOOD, UNTIL A SCHOLAR, COMING THERE, KNEW THEIR MEANING, AND THEREBY DISCOVERED GREAT MARVELS, BUT WITHAL DIED MISERABLY.

In half-forgotten days of old,
As by our fathers we were told,
Within the town of Rome there stood
An image cut of cornel1 wood,
And on the upraised hand of it
Men might behold these letters writ:
PERCUTE HIC; which is to say,
In that tongue that we speak to-day,
STRIKE HERE! nor yet did any know
The cause why this was written so.

THUS in the middle of the square,
In the hot sun and summer air,
The snow-drift and the driving rain,
That image stood, with little pain,
For twice a hundred years and ten;
While many a band of striving men
Were driven betwixt woe and mirth
Swiftly across the weary earth,
From nothing unto dark nothing:
And many an emperor and king,
Passing with glory or with shame,
Left little record of his name,
And no remembrance of the face
Once watched with awe for gifts or grace.

1cornel: wood of Cornus masculata, the cornelian cherry-tree, noted for its

The Writing on the Image

Fear little, then, I counsel you,
What any son of man can do;
Because a log of wood will last
While many a life of man goes past,
And all is over in short space.
NOW so it chanced that to this place
There came a man of Sicily,2
Who when the image he did see,
Know full well who, in days of yore,
Had set it there; for such strange lore,
In Egypt and in Babylon,3
This man with painful toil had won;
And many secret thing could do;
So verily full well he knew
That master of all sorcery
Who wrought the thing in days gone by;
And doubted not that some great spell
It guarded, but could nowise tell
What it might be. So, day by day,
Still would he loiter on the way,
And watch the image carefully,
Well mocked of many a passer-by.
AND on a day he stood and gazed
Upon the slender finger, raised
Against a doubtful cloudy sky,
Nigh noontide; and thought: Certainly
The master who made thee so fair

2Sicily: The Gesta tale does not identify the Scholar's nationality.
3Egypt and Babylon: Parly because of the Biblical account of Pharaoh's sorcerers (Exodus 7:10-11), perhaps, Egypt was associated with magic. Babylon was one of the first cultures in which astrology and astronomy flourished. Sorcery is not mentioned in the Gesta as one of the Scholar's accomplishments, but Morris may have adopted this from an earlier version of the story in William of Malmsbury's Gesta Regum, Bk. II, Ch. 10, in which the erudite clerk Gerbert (later Pope Silvester II) is accused of sorcery (A.P.M.W.). Morris may also have included this detail in an effort to make the scholar a slightly more raffish as well as learned character, whose ultimate fate would seem less
By wondrous art, had not stopped there,
But made thee speak, had he not thought
That thereby evil might be brought
Upon his spells. But as he spoke,
From out a cloud the noon sun broke
With watery light, and shadows cold:
Then did the Scholar well behold
How, from that finger carved to tell
Those words, a short black shadow fell
Upon a certain spot of ground,
And thereon, looking all around
And seeing none heeding, went straightway
Whereas the finger's shadow lay,
And with his knife about the place
A little circle did he trace;
Then home he turned with throbbing head,
And forthright gat him to his bed,
And slept until the night was late
And few men stirred from gate to gate.
SO when at midnight he did wake,
Pickaxe and shovel did he take,
And, going to that now silent square,
He found the mark his knife made there,
And quietly with many a stroke
The pavement of the place he broke:
And so, the stones being set apart,
He 'gan to dig with beating heart,
And from the hole in haste he cast
The marl4 and gravel; till at last,
Full shoulder high, his arms were jarred,
For suddenly his spade struck hard
With clang against some metal thing:
And soon he found a brazen ring,5

undeserved.
4marl clayey soil.
5brazen ring: an added detail, perhaps suggested to Morris by the many fairytale palaces (Aladdin's, for example) entered by trapdoors.

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All green with rust, twisted, and great
As a man's wrist, set in a plate
Of copper, wrought all curiously
With words unknown though plain to see,
Spite of the rust; and flowering trees,
And beasts, and wicked images,
Whereat he shuddered: for he knew
What ill things he might come to do,
If he should still take part with these
And that Great Master's strive to please.
BUT small time had he then to stand
And think, so straight he set his hand
Unto the ring, but where he thought
That by main strength it must be brought
From out its place, lol easily
It came away, and let him see
A winding staircase wrought of stone,
Wherethrough the new-come wind did moan.
THEN thought he: If I come alive
From out this placz well shall I thrive,
For I may look here certainly
The treasures of a king to see,
A mightier man than men are now.
So in few days what man shall know
The needy Scholar, seeing me
Great in the place where great men be,
The richest man in all the land?
Beside the best then shall I stand,
And some unheard-of palace have;
And if my soul I may not save
In heaven, yet here in all men's eyes
Will I make some sweet paradise,
With marble cloisters, and with trees

6Great Master: perhaps the devil, perhaps some lesser personification of necromancy or greed. Cf. Matthew 6:24, "No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."
And bubbling wells, and fantasies,
And things all men deem strange and rare,
That I may see, if so I please,
Laid on the flowers, or mid the trees
With half-clad bodices wandering.
There, dwelling happier than the king,
What lovely days may yet be mine!
How shall I live with love and wine,
And music, till I come to die
And then: Who knoweth certainly
What hap to us when we are dead?
Truly I think by likeliest
Nought hap to us of good or bad;
Therefore on earth will I be glad
A short space, free from hope or fear;
And fearless will I enter here
And meet my fate, whatso it be.
NOW on his back a bag had he,
To bear what treasure he might win,
And therewith now did he begin
To go adown the winding stair;
And found the walls all painted fair
With images of many a thing,
Warrior and priest, and queen and king,
But nothing knew what they might be.
Which things full clearly he could see,
For lamps were hung up here and there
Of strange device, but wrought right fair,
And pleasant savour came from them.
A[+] last a curtain, on whose hem
Unknown words in red gold were writ,
He reached, and softly raising it
Stepped back, for now did he behold
A goodly hall hung round with gold,

7So in few days..... Morris added this soliloquy. The scholar of the Gesta is

And at the upper end could see
Sitting, a glorious company:
Therefore he trembled, thinking well
They were no men, but fiends of hell.
But while he waited, trembling sore,
And doubtful of his late-learned lore,
A cold blast of the outer air
Blew out the lamps upon the stair
And all was dark behind him; then
Did he fear less to face those men
Than, turning round, to leave them there
While he went groping up the stair.
Yea, since he heard no cry or call
Or any speech from them at all,
He doubted they were images
Set there some dying king to please
By that Great Master of the art;
Therefore at last with stouter heart
He raised the cloth and entered in
In hope that happy life to win,
And drawing nigher did behold
That these were bodies dead and cold:
Attired in full royal guise,
And wrought by art in such a wise
That living they all seemed to be,
Whose very eyes he well could see,
That now beheld not foul or fair,
Shining as though alive they were.
And midst of that company
An ancient king that man could see,
A mighty man, whose beard of grey
A foot over his gold gown lay;
And next beside him sat his queen

motivated by curiosity rather than avarice.

bodies dead and cold: The Gesta tale does not specify whether the people in
the hall are mumified or frozen in enchantment, but does mention living
servants and animals in other rooms, who turn to stone when touched.
Who in a flowery gown of green
A golden mantle well was clad,
And on her neck a collar had
Too heavy for her dainty breast;
Her loins by such a belt were prest
That whoso in his treasury
Held that alone, a king might be.
On either side of these, a lord
Stood heedfully before the board,
And in their hands held bread and wine
For service; behind these did shine
The armour of the guards, and then
The well-attireèd serving-men,
The minstrels clad in raiment meet;
And over against the royal seat
Was hung a lamp, although no flame
Was burning there, but there was set
Within its open golden fret9
A huge carbuncle,10 red and bright;
Wherefrom there shone forth such a light
That great hall was as clear by it,
As though by wax it had been lit,
As some great church at Easter-tide.
NOW set a little way aside,
Six paces from the dais stood
An image11 made of brass and wood,
In likeness of a full-armed knight,
Who pointed 'gainst the ruddy light
A huge shaft ready in a bow.

9fret: (here), a metal band that holds a round object in place.
10carbuncle: ruby: The belief that the ruby radiated its own light persisted into the sixteenth century. Abardus wrote in 1531 that a Countess of Holland donated a carbuncle to a monastery so that monks could read their evening offices without a lamp (W. Jones, History and Mystery of Precious Stones, London, 1880, 23-25).
11image: The image in the Gesta represents Death, and carries a warning inscription: "I am who I am. Nothing can escape my stroke, not even yonder carbuncle which shines so bright."
The jewelled collar, that straight slid
Down her smooth bosom to the board.
And when these matters he had stored
Safe in his sack, with both their crowns,
The jewelled parts of their rich gowns,
Their shoes and belts, brouchtes and rings,
And cleared the board of all rich things,
He staggered with them down the hall.12
But as he went his eyes did fall
Upon a wonderful green stone,
Upon the hall-floor laid alone;
He said: Though thou art not so great
To add by much unto the weight
Of this my sack indeed, yet thou,
Certes, would make me rich enow,
That verily with thee I might
Wage one-half of the world to fight
The other half of it, and I
The lord of all the world might die;
I will not leave thee. Therewithal
He knelt down midst of the hall,
Thinking it would come easily
Into his hand; but when that he
Gat hold of it, full fast it stack,13
So fuming, down he laid his sack,
And with both hands pulled lustily,
But as he strained, he cast his eye
Back to the date; there he saw
The bowman image 'gin to draw
The mighty bowstring to his ear;14
So, shrieking out aloud for fear,
Of that rich stone he loosed his hold,
And catching up his bag of gold,
Gat to his feet: but ere he stood,
The evil thing of brass and wood
Up to his ear the notches drew;
And clanging, forth the arrow flew,
And midst of the carbuncle
Clanging again, the forked barbs fell,
And all was dark as pitch straightway.
SO there until the judgment day
Shall come and find his bones laid low,
And raise them up for weal or woe,
This man must bide: cast down he lay;
While all his past life day by day
In one short moment he could see
Drawn out before him, while that he
In terror by that fatal stone
Was laid, and scarcely dared to moan.
But in a while his hope returned,
And then, though nothing he discerned,
He gat him up upon his feet,
And all about the walls he beat
To find some token of the door,
But never could he find it more;
For by some dreadful sorcery
All was sealed close as it might be,
And midst the marvels of that hall
This Scholar found the end of all.15
BUT in the town on that same night,
An hour before the dawn of light,
Such storm upon the place there fell,
That not the oldest man could tell
Of such another: and thereby
keeping with his tendency to rationalize magical aspects of the tales.

12 he had stored . . . . : Morris once again modifies details to emphasize the scholar's greed. In the Gesta the scholar removes only a gold knife and cup, and the text offers the not entirely implausible explanation that "my report of all these wonders will not be believed unless I can carry something back with me."
13 stack: stuck.
14 he cast his eye . . . ear: Morris suggests that the jewel is a triggering device, in
The image was burnt utterly,
Being stricken from the clouds above;
And folk deemed that same bolt did move
The pavement where that wretched one
Unto his foredoomed fate had gone,
Because the plate was set again
Into its place, and the great rain
Washed the earth down, and sorcery
Had hid the place where it did lie.
So soon the stones were set all straight,
But yet the folk, afraid of fate,
Where once the man of cornel wood
Through many a year of bad and good
Had kept his place, set up alone
Great Jove himself, cut in white stone,
But thickly overlaid with gold. 16
Which, saith my tale, you may behold
Unto this day, although indeed
Some Lord or other, being in need,
Took every ounce of gold away.
But now, this tale in some past day
Being writ, I warrant all is gone,
Both gold and weather-beaten stone.
Be merry, masters, while ye may,
For men much quicker pass away.

17 Nitocris' tomb: Nitocris, a Babylonian queen, ordered an inscription carved on her tomb that gave her successors permission to open it and remove the treasures in times of great necessity. When Darius of Persia opened the tomb, according to legend, he found another inscription: "If thy avarice had not been insatiable, thou never wouldst have violated the monuments of the dead."
18 the Niblung's fatal hoard: fabulous treasure hoard of Germanic legend, guarded by the dragon Fafnir, and focus of a bloody feud that exterminates two families.