DECEMBER came, with mirth men needs must make
E'en for the empty days and leisure's sake
That earth's cold leaden sleep doth bring; so there
Our elders sat within the guest-hall fair,
Not looking older for the snow without;
Cheery enough; remembering not old doubt,
A gnawing pain once, grown too hard to bear,
And so cast by; not thinking of old fear,
That conquering once, e'en with its victory
Must fade away, and, like all things else, die.
'Not thinking of much else than that they had
Enough of life to make them somewhat glad
When all went well with them. Now so it fell
That mariners were there, who 'gan to tell
Mishaps betid upon the winter seas,
Which set some younger men amidst of these
To ask the Wanderers of their voyage vain,
As knowing scarce the tale thereof. Small pain
It gave them now to answer: yet belike
On the old men, their hosts, the thing did strike
In jarring wise, this turning o'er and o'er
Of memories once so bitter sharp and sore:
Wherefore at last an elder said: Let be,
My masters! if about the troublous sea
Ye needs must hear, hearken a tale once told
By kin of ours in the dim days of old,
Whose thoughts when turning to a peaceful home
Unto this very west of ours must come,
Scarce causelessly meseems when all is said,
And I remember that years bow my head,
And not the trouble of those days of war,
Of loss and wrong that in old stories are.

The Golden Apples:
The Classical Tale for December

Narrative:


They then guide the sailors to a walled garden in a land of densely forested mountains, where Hercules finds a serpent-guardian and Hesperus's three daughters. The latter warn him that theft of the apples they guard will bring the thief a "deathless life forlorn," (l. 326) but he brushes aside their warning, dispatches the serpent, and seizes their treasure.

Hercules then bestows on the three sisters a slightly incongruous blessing, gives them a girdle (to mark "how the Theban man, The son of Jove, came o'er the waters wan" ll. 391-92), and gratuitously adds that his gift will endure when their beauty and happiness have faded. Their leavetaking is understandably cool.

When he finally returns to the ship, his fellow-traveller, the shape-changing, old sea-god Nereus, tells the sailors that he is now released from his obligation to Hercules, and flies away in the shape of a bird. The duly sobered sailors then convey Hercules the rest of the way to Tyre, offer sacrifices at Nereus's temple, and try to describe to others the wonders they have seen.
THE GOLDEN APPLES.

The Argument.
IN THIS TALE IS TOLD OF THE VOYAGE OF A SHIP OF TYRE, THAT, AGAINST THE WILL OF THE SHIPMEN, BORE HERCULES TO AN UNKNOWN LAND OF THE WEST, THAT HE MIGHT ACCOMPLISH A TASK LAIED ON HIM BY THE FATES.

As many as the leaves fall from the tree,
From the world's life the years are fallen away
Since King Eurystheus sat in majesty
In fair Mycenes; midmost of whose day
It once befell that in a quiet bay
A ship of Tyre was swinging nigh the shore,
Her folk for sailing handling rope and oar.

Fresh was the summer morn, a soft wind stole
Down from the sheep-browsed slopes the cliffs that crowned,
And ruffled lightly the long gleaming roll
Of the peaceful sea, and bore along the sound
Of shepherd-folk and sheep and questing hound;
For in the first dip of the hillside there
Lay bosomed 'midst its trees a homestead fair.

1King Eurystheus: Angered by the infidelity of her husband Zeus, Hera forced Zeus's illegitimate son Heracles/Hercules to obey this Mycenaean king's commands and to perform twelve 'heroic labours,' and rendered him insane when he tried to refuse. The oracles of Apollo then decreed that he must indeed accomplish the tasks, but would be deified in compensation for his trials.
2Mycenes: an ancient Peloponnesian city on a hill in the northeast corner of the Argive plain, south of Corinth.
3Tyre: an ancient Phoenician coastal city and center of commerce, 20 miles south of Sidon.

Amid regrets for last night, when the moon,
Risen on the soft dusk, shone on maidens' feet
Brushing the gold-heart lilies to the tune
Of pipes complaining; o'er the grass down-beat
That mixed with dewy flowers its odour sweet,
The shipmen laboured, till the sail unfurled
Swung round the prow to meet another world.

But ere the anchor had come home, a shout
Rang from the strand, as though the ship were hailed.
Whereat the master bade them stay, in doubt
That they without some needful thing had sailed;
When, lo! from where the cliffs' steep grey sides failed
Into a ragged stony slip, came twain
Who seemed in haste the ready keel to gain.

Soon they drew nigh, and he who first came down
Unto the surf was a man huge of limb,
Grey-eyed, with crisp-curl'd hair 'twixt black and brown,
Who had a lion's skin cast over him,
So wrought with gold that the fell showed but dim
Betwixt the threads, and in his hand he bore
A mighty club with bands of steel done o'er.

Panting there followed him a grey old man,
Bearing a long staff, clad in gown of blue,
Feeble of aspect, hollow-cheeked and wan,
Who when unto his fellow's side he drew,
Said faintly: Now, do that which thou shouldst do;

4slip: a landing ramp.
5man huge of limb: Heracles/Hercules, the son of Zeus and Alcmene, noted both for his persistence and for his prodigious strength.
6lion's skin: Heracles's first task was to kill the ravaging lion of Nemea, near Mycenes, and he wore its skin thereafter.
7mighty club: In some accounts, according to Lepriere, Vulcan had given Hercules a brass club.
8grey old man: Nereus, son of Pontus and father of the Nereids, was a sea-god possessed of legendary wisdom and prophetic insight, which Hercules here sought to exploit.
This is the ship. Then in the other's eye
A smile gleamed, and he spake out merrily:

Masters, folk tell me that ye make for Tyre,
And after that still nearer to the sun;
And since Fate bids me look to die by fire,' 45
Fain am I, ere my worldly day be done,
To know what from earth's hottest can be won;
And this old man, my kinsman, would with me.
How say ye, will ye bear us o'er the sea?

What is thy name? the master said: And know
'That we are merchants, and for nought give nought;
What wilt thou pay? thou seem'st full rich, I trow.
The old man muttered, stooped adown and caught
At something in the sand. E'en so I thought,
The younger said, when I set out from home;
As to my name, perchance in days to come

Thou shalt know that; but have heed, take this toy,
And call me the Strong Man. And as he spake
The master's deep brown eyes 'gan gleam with joy,
For from his arm a huge ring did he take,
And cast it on the deck, where it did break
A water-jar, and in the wet shards lay
Golden, and gleaming like the end of day.

But the old man held out a withered hand,
Wherein there shone two pearls most great and fair,
And said: If any nigher I might stand,
Then mightst thou see the things I give thee here;
And for my name, a many names I bear;

9*die by fire*: At the end of his life, according to Lemprière, Heracles lay down on his funeral pyre and ordered his followers to light it, but Zeus assumed the body into heaven and no ashes remained.
10a huge ring did he take: This ring seems to be Morris's invention, since no such "toy" appears among the gods' gifts to Heracles in Apollodorus (Book II: 4.11).

But call me Shepherd of the Shore this tide, 11
And for more knowledge with a good will bide.

From one to other turned the master's eyes;
The Strong Man laughed as at some hidden jest,
And wild doubts in the shipman's heart did rise;
But thinking on the thing, he deemed it best
To bid them come aboard, and take such rest
As they might have of the untrustv sea,
Mid men who trusty fellows still should be.

Then no more words the Strong Man made, but straight
Caught up the elder in his arms, and so,
Making no whet of all that added weight,
Strode to the ship, right through the breakers low,
And catching at the rope that they did throw
Out toward his hand, swung up into the ship:
Then did the master let the hawser slip. 12

The shapely prow cleft the wet mead and green,
And wondering drew the shipmen round to gaze
Upon those limbs, the mightiest ever seen;
And many deemed it no light thing to face
The splendour of his eyen, though they did blaze
With no wrath now, no hate for them to dread,
As seaward 'twixt the summer isles they sped.

Freshened the wind, but ever fair it blew
Unto the south-east; but as failed the land,
Unto the plunging prow the Strong Man drew,
And silent, gazing with wide eyes did stand,
As though his heart found rest; but mid the band
Of shipmen in the stern the old man sat,
Telling them tales that no man there forgot.

11*But call me Shepherd of the Shore this tide*: Among other things, Nereus was a shape-shifter.
12*hawser*: a heavy rope used to tow or secure a ship.
As one who had beheld, he told them there
Of the sweet singer, whom, for his song's sake,
The dolphins back from choking death did bear;
How in the mid sea did the vine outbreak
O'er that ill bark when Bacchus 'gan to wake;
How anigh Cyprus, ruddy with the rose
The cold sea grew as any June-loved close;

While on the flowery shore all things alive
Grew faint with sense of birth of some delight,
And the nymphs waited trembling there, to give
Glad welcome to the glory of that sight:
'He paused then, ere he told how, wild and white,
Rose ocean, breaking o'er a race accurst,
A world once good, now come unto its worst.

And then he smiled, and said: And yet ye won,
Ye men, and tremble not on days like these,
Nor think with what a mind Prometheus' son
Beheld the last of the torn reeling trees
From high Parnassus: slipping through the seas
Ye never think, ye men-folk, how ye seem
From down below through the green waters' gleam.

Dusk was it now when these last words he said,
And little of his visage might they see,
But o'er their hearts stole vague and troublous dread,
They knew not why; yet ever quietly
They sailed that night; nor might a morning be
Fairer than was the next morn; and they went
Along their due course after their intent.

The fourth day, about sunrise, from the mast
The watch cried out he saw Phenician land;
Whereat the Strong Man on the elder cast
A look askance, and he straight took his stand
Anigh the prow, and gazed beneath his hand
Upon the low sun and the scarce-seen shore,
Till cloud-flecks rose, and gathered and drew o'er.

The morn grown cold; then small rain 'gan to fall,
And all the wind dropped dead, and hearts of men
Sank, and their bark seemed helpless now and small;
Then suddenly the wind 'gan moan again,
Sails flapped, and ropes beat wild about; and then
Down came the great east wind; and the ship ran
Straining, heeled o'er, through seas all changed and wan.

Westward, scarce knowing night from day, they drive
Through sea and sky grown one; the Strong Man wrought
With mighty hands, and seemed a god to save;
But on the prow, heeding all weather sought,
The elder stood, nor any prop he sought,
But swayed to the ship's wallowing, as on wings
He there were set above the wrack of things.

And westward still they drive; and if they saw
Land upon either side, as on they sped,
'Twas but as faces in a dream may draw
Anigh, and fade, and leave nought in their stead;
And in the shipmen's hearts grew heavy dread

13 sweet singer: probably an allusion to Arion, a semi-legendary poet of the seventh century B.C., who was allegedly saved by dolphins (Herodotus I, Chapter 23) (A. P. M. W.). A version of this story reportedly provided the basis for an unused Earthly Paradise tale. Given the anachronism of this reference, Morris may have conflated the dolphin-rescue-story with a complimentary allusion to Orpheus, legendary singer and Argonaut. Orpheus is also the hero of "The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice," a major unpublished Earthly Paradise tale, and he also plays a significant role in Morris's The Life and Death of Jason.

14the vine outbreak: This suggests an episode in the Homeric "Hymn to Dionysus" in which the child-god is kidnapped by pirates and covers their ship in vines to make his escape (A. P. M. W.).

15that sight: the birth of Venus from the "cold sea."

16accurst: a reference to the Greek variant of the biblical deluge-legend, in which a flood is sent by the gods to punish men for their sins (Odyssey IV, l. 400ff) (A. P. M. W.).

17Prometheus' son: Prometheus fashioned the first human being, and Nereus here suggests that Prometheus's creatures have become heedless of their origins.

18And westward still they drive: The Garden's legendary site lay at the ocean's western border beyond the Atlas mountains.
To sick despair; they deemed they should drive on
Till the world's edge and empty space were won.

But 'neath the Strong Man's eyes e'en as they might
They toiled on still; and he sang to the wind,
And spread his arms to meet the waters white,
As o'er the deck they tumbled, making blind
The brine-drenched shipmen; nor with eye unkind
He gazed up at the lightning; nor would frown
When o'er the wet waste Jove's bolt* rattled down.

And they, who at the last had come to think
Their guests were very gods, with all their fear
Feared nought belike that their good ship would sink
Amid the storm; but rather looked to hear
The last moan of the wind that them should bear
Into the windless stream of ocean grey,
Where they should float till dead was every day.

Yet their fear mocked them; for the storm 'gan die
About the tenth day, though unto the west
They drew on still; soon fair and quietly
The morn would break; and though amid their rest
Nought but long evil wandering seemed the best
That they might hope for, still, despite their dread,
Sweet was the quiet sea and goodlihead

Of the bright sun at last come back again;
And as the days passed, less and less fear grew,
If without cause, till faded all their pain;
And they 'gan turn unto their guests anew,
Yet durst ask nought of what that evil drew
Upon their heads; or of returning speak.
Happy they felt, but listless, spent, and weak.

And now as at the first the elder was,
And sat and told them tales of yore agone;
But still the Strong Man up and down would pass

About the deck, or on the prow alone
Would stand and stare out westward; and still on
Through a fair summer sea they went, nor thought
Of what would come when these days turned to nought.

And now when twenty days were well passed o'er
They made a new land; cloudy mountains high
Rose from the sea at first; then a green shore
Spread fair below them: as they drew anigh
No sloping stony strand could they espy,
And no surf breaking; the green sea and wide
Wherethrough they slipped was driven by no tide.

Dark fell ere they might set their eager feet
Upon the shore; but night-long their ship lay
As in a deep stream, by the blossoms sweet
That flecked the grass whence flowers ne'er passed away.
But when the cloud-barred east brought back the day,
And turned the western mountain-tops to gold,
Fresh fear the shipmen in their bark did hold.

For as a dream seemed all; too fair for those
Who needs must die; moreover they could see,
A furlong off, 'twixt apple-tree and rose,
A brazen wall* that gleamed out wondrously
In the young sun, and seemed right long to be;
And memory of all marvels lay upon
Their shrinking hearts now this sweet place was won.

But when unto the nameless guests they turned,
Who stood together nigh the plank shot out
Shoreward, within the Strong Man's eyes there burned
A wild light, as the other one in doubt
He eyed a moment; then with a great shout
Leaped into the blossomed grass; the echoes rolled
Back from the hills, harsh still and over-bold.

204 brazen wall: According to legend, the walls of the Garden were made of brass.
Slowly the old man followed him, and still
The crew held back: they knew now they were brought
Over the sea the purpose to fulfil
Of these strange men; and in their hearts they thought,
Perchance we yet shall live, if, meddling nought
With dreams, we bide here till these twain come back;
But prying eyes the fire-blast seldom lack.

Yet 'mongst them were two fellows bold and young,
Who, looking each upon the other's face,
Their hearts to meet the unknown danger strung,
And went ashore, and at a gentle pace
'Followed the strangers, who unto the place
Where the wall gleamed had turned; peace and desire
Mingled together in their hearts, as nigher

They drew unto that wall, and dulled their fear:
Fair wrought it was, as though with bricks of brass;
And images upon its face there were,
Stories of things a long while come to pass:
Nor that alone; as looking in a glass
Its maker knew the tales of what should be,
And wrought them there for bird and beast to see.

So on they went; the many birds sang sweet
Through all that blossomed thicket from above,
And unknown flowers bent down before their feet;
The very air, cleft by the grey-winged dove,
Throbbed with sweet scent, and smote their souls with love.
Slowly they went, till those twain stayed before
A strangely-wrought and iron-covered door.

They stayed, too, till o'er noise of wind, and bird,
And falling flower, there rang a mighty shout
As the Strong Man his steel-bound club upreared,
And drive it 'gainst the hammered iron stout,
Where 'neath his blows flew bolt and rivet out,
Till shattered on the ground the great door lay,
And into the guarded place bright poured the day.

The Strong Man entered, but his fellow stayed,
Leaning against a tree-trunk as they deemed.
They faltered now, and yet all things being weighed
Went on again; and thought they must have dreamed
Of the old man, for now the sunlight streamed
Full on the tree he had been leaning on,
And him they saw not go, yet was he gone:

Only a slim green lizard flirted there
Amidst the dry leaves; him they noted nought,
But trembling, through the doorway 'gan to peer,
And still of strange and dreadful saw not aught.
Only a garden fair beyond all thought.
And there, 'twixt sun and shade, the Strong Man went,
On some long-sought—o'er end belike intent.

They 'gan to follow down a narrow way,
Of greensward that the lilies trembled o'er,
And whereon thick th' scattered rose-leaves lay;
But a great wonder weighed upon them sore,
And well they thought they should return no more;
Yet scarce a pain that seemed; they looked to meet
Before they died things strange and fair and sweet.

So still to right and left the Strong Man thrust
The blossomed boughs, and passed on steadily,
As though his hardy heart he well did trust,
Till in a while he gave a joyous cry,
And hastened on, as though the end drew nigh;
And women's voices then they deemed they heard,
Mixed with a noise that made desire afeard.

Yet through sweet scents and sounds on did they bear
Their panting hearts, till the path ended now
In a wide space of green; a streamlet clear
From out a marble basin there did flow,
And close by that a slim-trunked tree did grow,
And on a bough low o'er the water cold
There hung three apples of red-gleaming gold.
About the tree, new risen e’en now to meet
The shining presence of that mighty one,
Three damsels stood, twenty naked from head to feet
Save for the glory of their hair, where sun
And shadow flickered, while the wind did run
Through the grey leaves o’erhead, and shook the grass
Where nigh their feet the wandering bee did pass.

But ’midst their delicate limbs and all around
The tree-roots, gleaming blue-black could they see
The spires of a great serpent, twenty, that, enwound
About the smooth bole, looked forth threateningly
With glittering eyes and raised crest o’er the three
Fair heads fresh crowned, and hissed above the speech
Wherewith they murmured softly each to each.

Now the Strong Man amid the green space stayed,
And, leaning on his club, with eager eyes
But brow yet smooth, in voice yet friendly said:
O daughters of old Hesperus the Wise,
Well have ye held your guard here; but time tries
The very will of gods, and to my hand
Must give this day the gold fruit of your land.

Then spake the first maid; sweet as the west wind
Amidst of summer noon her sweet voice was:
Ah, me! what knows this place of changing mind
Of men or gods; here shall long ages pass,
And clean forget thy feet upon the grass,
Thy hapless bones amid the fruitful mould;
Look at thy death, envenomed, swift, and cold!

Hiding new flowers, the dull coils, as she spake,
Moved near her limbs; but then the second one,
In such a voice as when the morn doth wake
To songs of birds, said: When the world fordone

Has moaned its last, still shall we dwell alone
Beneath this bough, and have no tales to tell
Of things deemed great that on the earth befell.

Then spake the third, in voice as of the flute
That wakes the maiden to her wedding morn:
If any god should gain our golden fruit,
Its curse would make his deathless life forlorn.
Lament thou, then, that ever thou wert born;
Yet all things, changed by joy or loss or pain,
To what they were shall change and change again.

So be it, he said; the Fates that drive me on
Shall slay me or shall save; blessing or curse
That followeth after when the thing is won
Shall make my work no better now nor worse;
And if it be that the world’s heart must nurse
Hatred against me, how then shall I choose
To leave or take? Let your dread servant loose!

E’en therewith, like a pillar of black smoke,
Swift, shifting ever, drive the worm at him;
In deadly silence now that nothing broke,
Its folds were writhing round him trunk and limb,
Until his glittering gear was nought but dim
E’en in that sunshine, while his head and side
And breast the fork-tongued, pointed muzzle tried.

Closer the coils drew, quicker all about
The forked tongue darted, and yet stiff he stood,
E’en as an oak that sees the straw flare out
And lick its ancient bole for little good;
Until the godlike fury of his mood
Burst from his heart in one great shattering cry,
And rattling down the loosened coils did lie;

And from the torn throat and crushed dreadful head
Forth flowed a stream of blood along the grass;
Bright in the sun he stood above the dead,
Panting with fury; yet, as ever was
The want of him, soon did his anger pass,
And with a happy smile, at last he turned
To where the apples o’er the water burned.

Silent and moveless ever stood the three;
No change came o’er their faces, as his hand
Was stretched aloft unto the sacred tree;
Nor shrank they aught aback, though he did stand
So close that tresses of their bright hair, fanned
By the sweet garden breeze, lay light on him,
And his gold fell brushed by them breast and limb.

'He drew adown the wind-stirred bough, and took
The apples thence; then let it spring away,
And from his brow the dark hair backward shook,
And said: O sweet, O fair, and shall this day
A curse upon my life henceforward lay,
This day alone? Methinks of coming life
Somewhat I know, with all its loss and strife.  

But this I know, at least: the world shall wend
Upon its way, and, gathering joy and grief
And deeds done, bear them with it to the end;
So shall it, though I lie as last year’s leaf
Lies 'neath a summer tree, at least receive
My life gone by, and store it, with the gain
That men alive call striving, wrong, and pain.

So for my part I rather bless than curse,
And bless this fateful land; good be with it;
Nor for this deadly thing’s death is it worse,
Nor for the lack of gold; still shall ye sit
Watching the swallow o’er the daisies flit;
Still shall your wandering limbs ere day is done
Make dawn desired by the sinking sun.

23 with all its loss and strife: Hercules never did find the tranquility and contemplation he sought. Inadvertently killed by his wife Deianira, who sent him a poisonous 'magic' robe she hoped would help her regain his love, Hercules's last mortal acts were to construct his own funeral pyre, climb on it and order that it be lit.

And now, behold! in memory of all this
Take ye this girdle, that shall waste and fade
As fadeth not your fairness and your bliss;
That when hereafter 'mid the blossoms laid
Ye talk of days and men now nothing made,
Ye may remember how the Theban man,
The son of Jove, came o’er the waters wan.

Their faces changed not aught for all they heard;
As though all things now fully told out were,
They gazed upon him without any word:
Ah! craving kindness, hope, or loving care,
Their fairness scarcely could have made more fair,
As with the apples folded in his fell
He went, to do more deeds for folk to tell.

Now as the girdle on the ground was cast
Those fellows turned and hurried toward the door,
And as across its broken leaves, they passed
The old man saw they not, e’en as before;
But an unearthed blind mole bewildered sore
Was wandering there in fruitless, aimless wise,
That got small heed from their full-sated eyes.

Swift gat they to their anxious folk; nor had
More time than just to say, Be of good cheer,
For in our own land may we yet be glad,
When they beheld the guests a-drawing near;
And much bewildered the two fellows were
To see the old man, and must even deem
That they should see things stranger than a dream.

But when they were aboard, the elder cried:
Up sails, my masters, fair now is the wind;
Nor good it is too long here to abide,
Lest what ye may not loose your souls should bind.
And as he spake, the tall trees left behind
Stirred with the rising land-wind, and the crew,
Joyous thereat, the hawsers shipward drew.
Swift sped the ship, and glad at heart were all,
And the Strong Man was merry with the rest,
And from the elder’s lips no word did fall
That did not seem to promise all the best;
Yet with a certain awe were men oppressed,
And felt as if their inmost hearts were bare,
And each man’s secret babble through the air.

Still oft the old man sat with them and told
Tales of past time, as on the outward way;
And now would they the face of him behold
‘And deem it changed; the years that on him lay
Seemed to grow nought, and no more wan and grey
He looked, but ever glorious, wise, and strong,
As though no lapse of time for him were long.

At last, when six days through the kindly sea
Their keel had slipped, he said: Come, hearken now,
For so it is that things fare wondrously
E’en in these days; and I a tale can show
That, told by you unto your sons, shall grow
A marvel of the days that are to come:
Take heed and tell it when ye reach your home.

Yet living in the world a man there is
Men call the Theban King Amphitryon’s son;²⁴
Although perchance a greater sire was his;
But certainly his lips have hung upon
Alcmene’s breasts: great deeds this man hath won
Already; for his name is Hercules,
And e’en ye Asian folk have heard of these.

Now ere the moon, this eve in his last wane,
Was born, this Hercules, the fated thrall
Of King Eurystheus, was straight bid to gain
Gifts from a land whereon no foot doth fall

²⁴King Amphitryon’s son: Hercules was the son of Alcmene, wife of the Mycenaean king Amphitryon. Legend ascribed his paternity to Zeus.

Of mortal man, beyond the misty wall
Of unknown waters; pensively he went
Along the sea on his hard life intent.

And at the dawn he came into a bay
Where the sea, ebbed far down, left wastes of sand,
Walled from the green earth by great cliffs and grey;
Then he looked up, and wondering there did stand,
For strange things lay in slumber on the strand;
Strange counterparts of what the firm earth hath
Lay scattered all about his weary path:

Sea-lions and sea-horses and sea-kine,
Sea-boars, sea-men strange-skinned, of wondrous hair;
And in their midst a man who seemed divine
For changeless eld, and round him women fair,
Clad in the sea-web’s glassy green and clear,
With gems on head and girdle, limb and breast,
Such as earth knoweth not among her best.²⁵

A moment at the fair and wondrous sight
He stared, then, since the heart in him was good,
He went about with careful steps and light
Till o’er the sleeping sea-god now he stood;
And if the white-foot maids had stirred his blood
As he passed by, now other thoughts had place
Within his heart when he beheld that face.

For Nereus now he knew, who knows all things;
And to himself he said: If I prevail,
Better than by some god-wrought eagle-wings
Shall I be holpen; then he cried out: Hail,
O Nereus! lord of shifting hill and dale!
Arise and wrestle; I am Hercules!
Not soon now shalt thou meet the ridgy seas.

And mightily he cast himself on him;
And Nereus cried out shrilly; and straightway
That sleeping crowd, fair maid with half-hid limb,
Strange man and green-haired beast, made no delay,
But glided down into the billows grey,
And, by the lovely sea embraced, were gone,
While they two wrestled on the sea-strand lone.

Soon found the sea-god that his bodily might
Was nought in dealing with Jove's dear one there;
And soon he 'gan to use his magic sleight:
Into a lithe leopard and a hugging bear
He turned him; then the smallest fowl of air
The straining arms of Hercules must hold,
And then a mud-born wriggling eel and cold.

Then as the firm hands mastered this, forth brake
A sudden rush of waters all around,
Blinding and choking; then a thin green snake
With golden eyes; then o'er the shell-strewn ground
Forth stole a fly, the least that may be found;
Then earth and heaven seemed wrapped in one huge flame,
But from the midst thereof a voice there came:

Kinsman and stout-heart, thou hast won the day,
Nor to my grief: what wouldst thou have of me?
And therewith to an old man small and grey
Faded the roaring flame, who warily
Sat down upon the sand and said: Let be!
I know thy tale; worthy of help thou art;
Come now, a short way hence will there depart.

A ship of Tyre for the warm southern seas,
Come we aboard; according to my will
Her way shall be. Then up rose Hercules,
Merry of face, though hot and panting still;
But the fair summer day his heart did fill
With all delight; and so forth went the twain,
And found those men desirous of all gain.

Ah, for these gainful men! somewhat indeed
Their sails are rent, their bark beat; kin and friend

Are wearying for them; yet a friend in need
They yet shall gain, if at their journey's end,
Upon the last ness where the wild goats wend
To lick the salt-washed stones, a house they raise
Bedight with gold in kindly Nereus' praise.

Breathless they waited for these latest words,
That like the soft wind of the gathering night
Were grown to be: about the masts flew birds
Making their moan, hovering long-winged and white;
And now before their straining anxious sight
The old man faded out into the air,
And from his place flew forth a sea-mew fair.

Then to the Mighty Man, Alcmene's son,
With yearning hearts they turned till he should speak,
And he spake softly: Nought ill have ye done
In helping me to find what I did seek:
The world made better by me knows if weak
My hand and heart are: but now, light the fire
Upon the prow and worship the grey sire.

So did they; and such gifts as there they had
Gave unto Nereus; yea, and sooth to say,
Amid the tumult of their hearts made glad,
Had honoured Hercules in e'en such way;
But he laughed out amid them, and said: Nay,
Not yet the end is come; nor have I yet
Bowed down before vain longing and regret.

It may be, who shall tell, when I go back
There whence I came, and looking down behold
The place that my once eager heart shall lack,
And all my dead desires a-lying cold,
But I may have the might then to enfold
The hopes of brave men in my heart? but long
Life lies before first with its change and wrong.
So fair along the watery ways they sped
In happy wise, nor failed of their return;
Nor failed in ancient Tyre the ways to tread,
Teaching their tale to whomsoe'er would learn,
Nor failed at last the flesh of beasts to burn
In Nereus' house, turned toward the bright day's end
On the last ness, round which the wild goats wend.

E made an end, and gazed about the place,
With rest enow upon his ancient face,
And smiling; but to some the tale did seem
Like to the middle of some pleasant dream,
Which, waked from, leaves upon the troubled mind
A sense of something ill that lurked behind,
If morn had given due time to dream it out.

Yet as the women stirred, and went about
The board with flask and beaker, and the scent
Of their soft raiment 'mid the feasters went,
The hill-side sun of autumn-tide at least
Seemed to come back unto their winter feast;
Rest, half remembering time past, did they win,
And somewhat surely wrought the tale therein.

N late December shone the westering sun
Through frosty haze of the day nearly done,
Without the hall wherein our elders were:
Within, the firelight gleamed on raiment fair,
And heads far fairer; because youth and maid
Midwinter words of hope that day had said
Before the altars; and were come at last,
No worse for snowy footways over-past,
Or for the east wind upon cheek and brow,
Their fairness to the ancient folk to show;
And, dance and song being done, at end of day,
With ears pricked up, amid the furs they lay,
To have reward of tale for sound and sight
So given erewhile. The flickering firelight,
And the late sun still streaming through the haze,
Made the hall meet enow for tale of days
So long past over: nigh the cheery flame
A wanderer sat, and a long sunbeam came
On to his knees, then to the hearth fell down.
There in the silence, with thin hands and brown
Folded together, and a dying smile
Upon his face, he sat a little while,
Then somewhat raised his bright eyes, and began
To name his people's best belovèd man.27