

Apollyona

By Mrs. Richard S. Greenough

Think not that I was always the bowed and broken man you see me now. Though my hair is white, yet I have scarce seen thirty years. Strange and fearful is the tale I have to relate.

Strange and fearful must be the penance I must still undergo ere I can merit mercy. Yet great and wonderful has been the compassion shown to me, in that I stand to-day upon the upper earth, a living man; and so I pray and dare to hope. And now will I recount the story of my sin.

Five years ago I left the lands whereof I was lord, in quest of some knightly adventure wherein to show myself a worthy servant of the saint to whose service I had vowed myself in the sore sickness from which I had but even then recovered.

I journeyed on, until, after several days, I saw in the distance a purple, white-crested wall rising high against the sky; and I knew that I saw the Pyrenees, the rocky bar that rises to shut Spain out from France. I took new courage at the sight, and pushed on my horse. The wall rose higher and higher as I advanced, breaking into numberless snowy-topped peaks. It was nightfall ere I reached the foot of the mountains, so I halted at a peasant's hut that lay half-hidden by the low spreading branches of a great oak-tree, and, knocking at the door, craved shelter for the night.

An old woman, brown and wrinkled, opened to me, and bade me welcome. She spread for my horse a provision of hay and straw, beneath the shelter of the oak; then leading me into the cottage, which was lighted by a little brass lamp, she set before me a bowl of goat's milk and a loaf of black bread.

"Once I could have offered you better cheer," she said sorrowfully, "but now this is the best I have."

While I was eating, the old woman from time to time opened the door, and gazed anxiously forth towards the mountains. She sighed heavily each time, as she returned to her seat. As I looked around the cottage, I saw on the wall the cross-bow and pouch of a hunter. I asked the old woman if she lived alone in the hut. She answered that she had one son, a hunter; but said no more. Seeing her disinclined to converse, I asked no other question. After I had finished my meal, she showed me a pallet of straw in the corner, and I lay down and fell asleep. I was soon awakened by the entrance of some one, and, opening my eyes, I saw a young man of striking form and features, though pale and haggard. He threw himself upon a stool, folded his arms on his chest, and fixed his eyes upon the ground, while the old woman placed food before him, and begged of him to eat. He took no heed of her words, and presently, rising, began to pace up and down the room, while the old woman stood with an anxious face, watching him. After a while he went to the door, opened it, and gazed forth towards the mountains. Suddenly he gave a loud cry, and exclaiming, "I see her," he sprang from the house, and sped towards the glittering peaks. The old woman burst into tears and wrung her hands, as she watched from the door his headlong course.

I rose much perplexed, and asked of her the meaning of this strange scene. She wept some time before she could answer me; at length, with many sobs, she related to me the story of the hunter, who was her only son.

He had been the bravest and most successful hunter on the Pyrenees, and was also the gayest and most light-hearted of them all. Every morning he started at sunrise alert and joyful, and returned at nightfall laden with game. But, at last, one night he did not come home. His mother

sat up waiting for him all night long. The sun rose, and yet he had not returned. The next day all the hunters of the neighborhood went in search of him. They came back, bringing his cross-bow and pouch, which they had found by the side of a dead ibex, on a height covered with snow. They had tracked his footsteps higher and higher, until they led where the bravest of his comrades dared not follow. They searched for him seven days, then they gave him up as lost.

One night his old mother was sitting mourning, when the door opened and the lost hunter entered; but so pale, so changed as hardly to be recognized. He did not return his mother's caresses, nor would he answer her questions as to where he had been. He ate ravenously of the food she placed before him, then, throwing himself down, without a word, fell asleep. Early the next morning he left the hut again, and had only returned that night. His mother knew that he had seen the Witch of the Pyrenees, and that she had bewitched him.

No sooner had the old woman spoken the name of the Witch of the Pyrenees, than a longing to see her came over me; such a longing as I cannot describe. I forgot my quest, I forgot my vows as a Christian knight, I forgot my hopes of salvation. I thought of nothing save of how I might behold the Witch; and, without waiting for the sun to rise, I saddled again my horse, and, taking leave of the old woman, I pursued my way up the mountains.

At first, the path led through gently rising slopes of sod, bordered by spreading trees; but as I advanced, it became steeper and sterner, till I was obliged to dismount and make my way forward on foot. Great rocks began to rise before me, barring the path; and I heard at intervals the roar of hidden torrents, rising, as it were, from beneath my feet. I climbed with difficulty upward in the moonlight, which seemed brighter and stiller in those mountains than I had ever seen it before. I felt no fatigue; for the insatiable desire that possessed me to see the Witch gave me strength. At length, after climbing several hours, I came out upon an open platform covered with small grass. Around, on every side, rose bare and desolate peaks. No living thing was to be seen. There was no cloud in the heavens; there was no breath stirring upon the earth. The silence around had something ghost-like in it. I shivered, though I felt no cold. Then the fever again came over me, and I looked around, eagerly searching for some trace of the Witch.

All at once I heard a faint, distant breath of music. It ran through me like poison. My limbs failed under me, and I sank on the ground, in the shadow of a great rock, which rose on one side of the plateau. The sweet, poisonous voice came nearer and nearer. I heard a low rustling rising from every side; and I saw, with horror indescribable, glistening snakes, with slow, writhing motion, making their way amid the soft, green grass towards that side of the plateau to which the voice was advancing. I lay as one paralyzed, unable to move, my eyes strained towards the direction of the voice. Nearer and nearer it came; at length it sounded close to me, and I saw the figure of the Witch rise up in the moonlight and pass on to the plateau.

My blood runs cold now, in this bright sunlight, and amid this joyous company, as I recall her form. Though hundreds of years old, she had the face and shape of a young girl, beautiful beyond the beauty of mortal woman, but with a hideous strangeness of loveliness. Her cheeks and lips were pallid as those of a corpse; her eyes shone like the death-lights that flicker over new-made graves, and her long, floating hair was white as frosted silver. In one hand she carried an ebony cup; in the other a branch, thick set with poisonous berries. Her long, white garments trailed behind her, leaving a greenish light upon the grass. A deathly chill pervaded the air as she advanced,—a chill as of a charnel-house.

Singing, followed by the snakes, she came forward, until she reached the middle of the plateau. Then she seated herself. The snakes crowded close to her, their white throats and scaly backs shining in the moonbeams as they writhed and pressed about her, uprearing their crested heads,

and swaying them in motion to the song. Softly singing, she fed them with the berries, tasting the fruit herself from time to time.

As the snakes greedily closed around her, they became impatient, and grew angry with each other, hissing and darting forth their forked tongues; and one, the largest of all, suddenly turning its rage upon the Witch, reared itself from amid the writhing confusion of glistening folds, and, drawing back its head, struck at her, fastening its fangs in her white arm. The Witch laughed aloud, and patted the snake's head as the sharp teeth closed on her flesh. The laugh, clear and silvery, re-echoed again and again from the surrounding peaks. A host of demons seemed laughing in the air. A deeper chill ran over me as I listened, and yet I would not have moved to fly if I could have done so. Her beauty filled my senses to overflowing with delight; and the very horror she inspired increased her charm.

When the Witch had fed the snakes, she smoothed and caressed the head of each, singing to it a low, whispering song; and the snakes opened their mouths, and let fall from their fangs drops of poison into the ebony cup. When each snake had paid its deathful tribute, she rose and waved her hand, and all the serpents, glittering like silver lines across the grass, withdrew to their hiding-places.

As they disappeared, the Witch looked around. Her eyes rested upon me as I lay in my armor in the shadow of the rock. She drew in her breath eagerly. Her eyes grew larger, and shot forth blazing light for an instant, then, veiling them with her long lashes, she stole towards me, gliding like a ripple over the sea.

She stood before me, and gazed upon me steadfastly, with a smile upon her lips. She bent over me, and said softly,—

“Good knight, it is cold and lonely on the mountain-top. Will you not come with me?”

As she spoke, she laid her hand upon mine;—and my soul fled from me, and left me a prey to the Witch; and I rose and followed her. Led by the Witch, I descended. Where the way had been rough and steep, it was now carpeted with moss, and fringed with blossoms; but beneath every flower crouched some toad, or centipede, or noxious creature, whose eyes shone out on me with an exulting glare as I passed. But when I looked on the beautiful face of the Witch, I thought no more of them; and so she led me through flowery paths, until we reached the mouth of a great cavern, which opened at the foot of a steep precipice of gray rock. The Witch entered first, then turning, held out her hand and smiled, and bade me follow. I sprang forward to seize her hand. As I crossed the threshold I heard a mighty rush behind me, and, looking back, I saw that a cataract was pouring from the rock overhead so as to close the entrance of the cave. But I cared not, so long as I was not divided from the Witch.

She smiled more sweetly than before, as the torrent poured down, and bade me welcome, saying that she had long waited for me, and that all was ready for my coming. I was about to answer her, when suddenly I perceived that she had vanished. But as I was sure that she would soon return, I was not disquieted, but began to look around me, and to marvel at the wonders of the place. The floor was paved with small pebbles of different colors, so arranged as to form a mosaic of inextricable pattern; the walls were curtained with tapestry, woven of fine, green grass and flowers, corniced and fringed with rows of glow-worms, whose brilliancy shed a soft, intermittent light around.

Broad and soft divans, covered with a web of delicately shaded feathers, surrounded the cave, and invited me to rest. I sank down, and waited for the Witch's reappearance.

As I waited and listened, I thought that I heard from a distance a faint cry, as of one in pain. I sprang to my feet, fearing that harm had come to the Witch, for I thought only of her. I looked

around for the way whereby she had passed out, but I could see no break in the continuous tapestry of green and flowers. While I was wandering up and down, seeking to follow her, the hangings parted just before me, and the Witch appeared. I sprang towards her, saying,—

“I heard a cry as of one in pain, and I feared that harm had befallen you.”

She answered,—

“Can you fancy that harm could befall any one in this cave of delights?”

And she laughed as she spoke. The laugh re-echoed from the softly lit cave as it had done before from the rugged mountain peaks. Again a host of demons seemed laughing in the air, and again I shuddered.

The Witch held in her hand a crystal goblet, filled with a golden liquid. She held it out to me, and bade me drink. As I took it, the glow-worms sent out more brilliant light, the grass grew greener, the flowers deeper, and the pebbles on the floor shone bright. But, as I raised it to my lips, an invisible hand struck the goblet from my hold. It shivered as it fell, and the liquid ran along the floor, leaving a mark as though lightning had passed there. I looked at the Witch, but her face was smiling and gentle as before.

“Had you thirsted, you would have held the goblet more firmly,” she said. “Let me give you to eat.”

And she took from her bosom a purple fruit, shaped like a heart, and bade me eat. But ere I could taste of it, it was dashed to the ground. It burst into a flame, blazed for an instant, then went out, leaving a few black ashes.

“Neither are you hungry,” said the Witch; “but you are tired, and must sleep.”

So saying, she took me by the hand, and, leading me to a divan, seated herself by my side. As I sank back, I raised the hand I held to my lips; but ere I had pressed them to it, I saw a drop of blood upon her wrist.

“I have scratched myself with a thorn,” said the Witch, and she wiped away the blood; but there was no sign of a scratch beneath to be seen on her blue-veined wrist.

She fixed her gleaming eyes steadily upon me, moving her lips in a strange, low rhyme of words that I could not understand. Then I can remember little, save that a drowsiness stole over me, and that through it, as through a cloud, I saw the eyes of the Witch shining upon me; and I heard her voice fainter and fainter, as she murmured the rhyme of strange words over me.

When I awoke, I found myself extended on a pile of cushions. My armor had been removed, and I was arrayed in a loose silken robe. Around me stood four open censers, filled with aromatic spices and with scented woods. The flame which rose from them shed a changeful light around, dimly and by snatches revealing the rocky walls and fantastic furnishing of the chamber.

The seats were of the knotted roots of trees, each imaging some horrible and repulsive creature. On one side an anaconda rolled itself in sinuous folds around a rabbit, whose jaws were strained asunder by its death agony; opposite, a polypus was drawing into its loathsome mouth a struggling ape, which tossed its arms wildly above its head; here, a leopard, lithe and sinewy, pounced upon a cowering antelope; and a little further, the thick-necked hyena revelled upon some ghastly relic torn up from a grave.

My observations were interrupted by the sound of a low chant rising from below. I started up and listened. Women’s voices were singing a slow, mournful measure:—

“I saw a star fall,
In my dream;
It shot down headlong,

With a gleam
Of fading light,
Into the night,—
Lost, lost, for ever lost.”

The voices paused; then again repeated, in tones that were like the distant moaning of the pines,—

“Lost, lost, for ever lost.”

There was something in the warning accent of the song that disquieted me. The fumes of the burning essences, which had hitherto soothed me into a state of half-unconsciousness, all at once cleared away from my senses. I arose, and looked around over the floor. I saw a crevice whence came a faint glimmer of light. I knelt and looked through the aperture. Below was a vast, dimly lighted hall. In its centre was a great loom, around which was standing a group of maidens. To my horror, I perceived that each of them wore a serpent as a girdle; the serpents' heads were turned upward, and rested upon each maiden's breast.

On the loom was a web of strange design. It shimmered and glanced as though jewels had been melted for the dyes. I had scarcely time to snatch one look at the band of serpent-girdled maidens, when all the serpents raised their heads, and, angrily hissing, menaced the damsels, with uplifted crests and widely gaping jaws. Thereat the maidens began hurriedly to weave the web, and sang no more.

When the snakes heard the sound of the loom they again couched their heads upon the maidens' bosoms, and seemed to sleep.

After they had worked for some time in silence, I felt a sudden throb in all my pulses, and saw the figure of the Witch gliding forward from one of the darker recesses of the hall. The maidens did not raise their eyes as she approached, but I saw them shiver as with cold.

The Witch came near and examined the web.

“It is soft as a dead child's hair,” she said; “as firm as a drowned man's grip.”

She turned away.

“Bring me my robe made from the veil of the great temple,” she said, “and the ornaments that Astarte wore of old.”

The maidens disappeared, and presently returned, bearing a garment of blue and purple and scarlet, embroidered with such richness that I had never seen the like. And they attired the Witch in the robe; and they placed upon her long white hair a coronet of golden towers, and around her neck and arms they clasped the wondrous ornaments that Astarte wore of old.

When she was thus arrayed, she was so marvellously beautiful that my heart stopped beating, and I felt the blood rushing in my ears. I staggered back, and fell upon the cushions; one consciousness alone left me,—the remembrance of the beauty of the Witch.

As I lay, a curtain was drawn aside, and the maidens I had seen entered in procession, each bearing a lighted torch. They formed themselves into two rows, holding aloft the torches they carried; and then I beheld the Witch gliding towards me in her royal, rainbow robes, the greenish light trailing from her footsteps.

She approached and took my hand, and said softly,—

“Arise, my guest, and deign to sup with me.”

And I arose, and the Witch led me forth into a great, glittering hall. On every side I saw the transparent sheen of falling water, but all was still,—there was no sound save the low murmur of the Witch's voice as she spoke to me. The hall was illumined with a silvery light that shone through the surrounding cascades. The floor was covered with fine white sand. In the midst stood a table made of an enormous seashell. On it were piled luscious viands and sparkling wines.

The Witch placed me at the table, and seated herself beside me. With her dainty fingers she presented me with food, and poured sparkling wine into the goblet that stood near me.

At first I had thought the Witch and myself were the only beings within the hall; but, as I looked more attentively around, I began to perceive strange and monstrous forms behind the encircling sheet of falling waters. They gibbered and mocked at me as I glanced from side to side, their transparent outlines appearing and disappearing in the ceaseless motion of the cascades; and writhed and contorted themselves in silent ecstasies of demoniac glee.

“What are those forms that gaze, mopping and mowing upon me?” I said to the Witch.

And she replied,—

“Nay, mine honored guest, your eyes are dazzled by the light that plays along the water,—ye behold nought else.”

And, looking upon her as she spoke, I forgot again to glance upon the moving waters with their unearthly forms. I ate and drank, and the Witch watched me with gleaming eyes.

When I ceased eating,—

“Come,” said the Witch, who had tasted nothing, “let us sit and talk awhile together.”

And she led me to the upper end of the hall, where I perceived a divan beneath a canopy. Yet I was sure that it had not been there when I entered.

As she placed herself beside me, the rainbow folds of her dress fell so close that they rested on me. I looked down upon the rich embroidery, and wondered whether I had heard rightly, and whether it were indeed the veil of the great temple.

“How beautiful is the robe!” I said to the Witch. And she answered, smiling,—

“It comes from far. Shall I tell you its history?”

And I prayed her to speak on.

“When Titus had banded his legions around Jerusalem, so that no one could enter or go out of the city; and when the Jews were so pressed by hunger that they had no longer even leather or parchment to devour, and mothers ate their children, and men opened their veins and drank of their own blood; then some of the priests of the temple said to each other,—

“‘Jehovah has deserted us. Let us call upon the Demons. Perchance they may hear and save us, even now.’

“And at midnight they met in the inner court of the temple. The night was dark and wild. The wind howled along the crests of the barren mounts around, and brought to their ears the distant cries of the Roman guards, as they relieved each other. The watch-fires of the beleaguering hosts glimmered in a circle all around the city, telling how close the besiegers had come, and revealing the artisans, busy on the great catapults and battering-rams and movable towers, by the aid of which the city was to be stormed on the morrow. All was motion and preparation in the camp without; while within, the wailing of the imprisoned Jews, and the despairing moan of women and children, rose from the city below, to the mount of the temple.

“The priests built a fire of cedar wood, such as the Demons love, in the middle of the court; and around it they traced the magic circle, and the forbidden signs. Then each priest cut a lock of hair from the right side of his head, and cast it into the blaze, repeating the invocation to the Demons of the Air. But the Demons of the Air were deaf to their call, and would not answer.

Then they sacrificed anew, each throwing a lock of hair cut from the left side of the head upon the pile, and they repeated the invocation to the Demons of the Earth. And the ground shook and opened before their feet, and they saw a flight of shadowy steps. They were hastening towards them, when they heard a sound like distant thunder, saying,—

“ ‘Come not with empty hands into the kingdom below.’ ”

“So each priest, with fear and trembling, laid his hands upon such of the treasures of the temple as stood nearest; and one of them tore down the veil of the tabernacle, and bore it away. Long years it remained hidden among the treasures of the Demons of the Earth, until, in recompense for a service I had rendered them, they bade me choose from their treasury that which I most coveted, and I took the veil.”

I was filled with astonishment as the Witch spoke. Seeing my wonder, she asked me if I wished to behold all the marvels contained in the treasury of the Demons. I had no sooner answered, than she laid one hand upon my shoulder, and placed the other over my eyes; then she whispered some words that I could not understand, and suddenly I felt myself uplifted and borne through the air, the Witch’s hand still over my eyes, the other still resting on my shoulder. A long time seemed to elapse, and still I felt the quick rush of the air upon me. At times it was cold as ice; at others, we would pass through heated blasts that scorched me, and again we would float through soft, scented air, such as I never breathed on earth. At length I rested on my feet, and the Witch removed her hand from my eyes.

I found myself in a hall of incalculable extent, lined with polished steel. Around, on pedestals of porphyry, stood colossal statues of iron, each with fiery eyes. The shining steel around reflected these myriad fires, and diffused a blinding light. I veiled my dazzled eyes with my hands, but so intense was the glare about me that the bone and muscle seemed but as a ruddy veil before my sight. Gradually I became accustomed to the brilliancy, and was able to look about me. On every side I saw piles of gems and of precious metals; but these were the least of the wonders of the place. The Witch showed me, preserved there, the curious works and cunning inventions of mighty races whose very names are forgotten, whose cities lie buried hundreds of feet below the ice of the poles, where the earth, she said, first grew cool enough for man to live thereon; and, as she showed them, she told me of the wars they waged against the Demons of Fire ere they could dispossess them, and of the centuries of their increasing empire, until, at length, they met and fought till they destroyed each other, and their memory perished from off the earth. And she displayed to me the crowns and sceptres of all the monarchs who have ever ruled over mankind; for, at the death of each, the Demons steal their royal insignia, and replace them with others fabricated in the depths below. And so I beheld all the history of the world written in diadems; and I marvelled to see how small a thing is earthly state, and how fleeting are man’s most hoarded possessions. And I saw also the magic wands of all the sorcerers. The vipers still twined, living, about that of Aaron; but around the others were but dried and faded skins. And the Goblet of Dreams was there, with ever shifting sides of uncertain hues, and the Cap of Soothsaying and the Sandals of Speed. A lifetime would not suffice me were I to attempt to recount all the wonders I looked upon: the shell of the tortoise, from whose withered sinews still breathed a low, harmonious plaint; the girdle of Masinta, with which she snared the kings; the cup whence the draught of hemlock poured death through godlike veins; the hauberk of the hero who led the Scandinavian hosts into the halls of victory:—I cannot recount the thousandth part of what I gazed upon. But one thing more than aught else drew my attention. It was a small, black vial, from whose mouth a violet cloud curled ceaselessly upward. I questioned the Witch concerning it.

It is nothing," she answered quickly, "nothing;" and she sought to draw me away. I yielded, and she led me on through wonders without ceasing. As long as I heard her sweet, whispering voice, I remembered no more the vial; but at every pause the thought of it returned upon me, and I wondered what it could contain, and why she so anxiously sought to draw me from it. I determined, at length, to obtain possession of it, if possible.

The Witch still seemed uneasy.

"Come with me into the gardens of the Demons," she said, as if she suspected my secret resolve.

She led me tip some steps, to a sculptured golden door which she unclosed, and we passed out into gardens of wondrous beauty, interspersed with thickets of flowering shrubs, and groves of lofty trees. But every thing wore a strange and ghost-like look. The light was reflected upwards from the ground, which was formed of gold dust. Above, instead of the blue sky, was a black vault, void of sun or moon or stars. No cloud floated over it. It was like the darkness ere the earth had being. No breeze waved the trees around; their boughs and shining leaves stood motionless; the gorgeous flowers on every hand gave forth no perfume; no blade of grass stirred as we moved on.

The Witch led me over the green lawns towards a fountain. I stooped to dip my hand in it, but drew back astonished. No water had met my touch,—it was a sheet of polished and fretted crystal. I turned aside to pluck a flower. Its stem resisted my effort; it was hard as iron; and, looking more closely, I saw that it was an enamelled counterfeit. "The birds, at least, are real," I said to myself; and just then one sailed slowly down and lighted near me. I laid my hand upon it to caress it. Its feathers were cold and unyielding, and I perceived that it was a curiously constructed machine.

"See how much nobler are these than the perishing delights of earth," said the Witch. "No storms bring desolation to this land; no fierce winds shiver the adamantine trees; no worm destroys these shrubs; no blight withers these blossoms, nor does the envious night conceal the beauties around. The trivial and ceaseless change of hours and seasons is unknown here. Such as you see them, these gardens have existed ages before the flood."

"But where are the Demons?" I questioned, looking around, for I saw no one.

The Witch laughed mockingly.

"Where?" she rejoined. "Answer, O Demons, where are ye?"

And a deafening chorus of voices, above, below, on every side, replied,—

"Here are we, here!"

So threatening was the sound, that I started, and laid my hand instinctively upon my dagger.

At the gesture a peal of such demoniac laughter arose that I dropped the weapon, and sought to close my ears. After a while I removed my hands. A dead silence was around me. I heard only the singing of the unreal birds.

I felt myself unable to endure the presence of the crowd of unseen beings, and I said to the Witch,—

"Show me, I beg you, the Demons who fill these gardens."

She looked at me with a strange smile.

"They are not beautiful to look upon," she replied.

Nevertheless, I persisted in my entreaty.

"You do not know what you ask," she said. "You will not dare to pass through the fiery veil."

But still I insisted, and the Witch no longer said me nay.

“We must obtain permission of the King,” she said; “but he is my friend of old, and will refuse me nothing.”

She led me across many broad and glittering terraces, until at length we paused before a wall of solid rock. It was so vast that its summit lost itself in the darkness above, nor could my eye measure the extent of its surface on either side. In its centre was an enormous portal of some metal unknown to me, curiously banded, and fastened with massive chains.

The Witch tapped gently. At the summons the chains fell, the bars unclosed, and the giant gates swung backward with a jarring clash.

A vast, black hall appeared before us, lighted with pyramids of fire, which flamed in rows on either side. At the upper extremity of the hall was a mighty throne, which blazed so fiercely that I could not raise my eyes to it. I could see no living form in the hall.

The Witch led me towards the throne, stretched forth her hand, and said,—

“O most powerful enemy of God, thou who dost unsubdued maintain thy sway over hosts of those whom he calls his children! great Mammon, hear and grant my prayer. Let this child of earth behold thee and thy subjects as ye are.”

A deep and awful voice answered,—

“He has not passed through the probation.”

And the Witch made reply,—

“Truly, great Mammon, I ask a hitherto ungranted boon; but I hold dear the desires of this child of man, and therefore again I beseech thee to fulfil this my request.”

“So be it!” said the awful voice. And thereupon I heard a crash as though the foundations of the earth were being loosed, and a blinding curtain of flame wrapped itself around me, so that I lost all consciousness of where I was, and deemed myself drowning in a fiery sea. Then the reverberations ceased, the curtain of flame was withdrawn, and, raising my bewildered eyes, I saw, seated on the dazzling throne, a terrific shadow of gigantic size. Its port was regal beyond the majesty of earth; it held a shadowy sceptre in its cloudy hand, and on its blackened brow it wore a diadem. But, gazing steadily upon it, I saw through its breast; and, where there should have been a heart, there was a stone.

Horror-stricken, I averted my eyes; and, lo, the hall was full of shadows, and all in their bosoms carried stones for hearts. Some of the shadows wore the mien of weighty magistrates; some had the martial bearing of the leaders of armies; some presented the semblance of holy priests. Students, wan and wasted, were there; princes and magnates also. Nor was the crowd composed of the shadows of men alone. I saw there women, some old and haggard, stooping with weight of years; some young and fair, with rounded forms and graceful outlines: but all alike bore in their bosoms a stone instead of a heart.

And I shrank and shuddered, and said to the Witch,—

“Lead me away.”

But she smiled in mockery, and replied,—

“Nay, have you not your wish?”

And I implored still more earnestly that she would lead me away; for I feared in my own thoughts that, did I longer tarry, my heart, also, would turn into a stone.

And the Witch made obeisance to Mammon, and we turned away.

She conducted me through spacious banqueting-rooms, lined and paved with marbles from the inner chambers of the earth, of brilliancy such as I had never seen before.

“When mortals seek for these stones, they find only what Nature has cast aside as failures,” said the Witch. “The Demons only have access to the secret recesses where she stores her precious things.”

We passed on through sumptuous courts and gleaming galleries, until my brain ached with the incessant glare; for all were lighted from the ground, which gave a ghastly and unreal aspect to every object that I beheld. Moreover, I still shrank and shuddered at the presence of the silent, shadowy throngs which filled the palace.

The Witch remarked my uneasiness.

“Come,” she said, in her sweet, whispering voice, “let us return into the gardens, and repose ourselves under the adamantine trees.”

And again I gave up my soul to her as a bird yields itself up to the fowler; and she led me through golden gates into the glittering gardens. But here, also, were the shadows. I closed my eyes not to see them; and, turning to the Witch, I prayed that she would take from me the newly bestowed gift of sight.

She breathed three times upon my eyelids, and, when I again opened my eyes, I saw no more the shadows with their hearts of stone: I beheld only the face of the Witch shining upon me.

We seated ourselves beneath the adamantine trees, and the Witch began to tell me a tale in a voice so sweet that I could have listened to her for ever.

“When Sardanapalus was king of the East, and his power was so great that no other prince’s name was spoken in all the earth save his, he went out one day with a mighty train to hunt. He took his way towards the hills, to the north of the city, where a wild boar, of enormous size and great fierceness, had made its appearance, and was devastating all around. The dogs sought for it long in vain, at the place where it had last been seen; at length, in a deep fell, they found it, and forthwith gave it chase. The creature was swift and wily, and led the king and his train very far away. At last, rising beyond a barren plain, they saw a high mountain. Its peaks were bare and scorched no grass or trees grew on its arid sides; no birds sailed over it; the sunlight, bright on all beside, refused to touch it; a dark shadow veiled it, although there were no clouds in the sky. The boar, which still seemed as fresh as when the dogs first roused it from its lair, took its unwieldy way across the plain, and hid itself in the recesses of the dark mountain.

“When the king’s attendants saw where the animal had taken refuge, they all drew their bridle-reins, and besought him to go no farther. But the king scoffed at their importunity, and bade them go on. Then an old man, who had been the king’s governor in his youth, told him that a prophecy was written in the most ancient of the sacred books, that, should the king once set his foot upon that mountain, the kingdom would be destroyed.

“But the king jeered at him, and bade all his train rejoin the hounds, who were barking shrilly and loudly, having brought the boar to bay. And he set spurs to his horse, and forced him up the mountain side, and all the courtiers followed him.

“When they reached the defile wherein the boar had been brought to bay, they found the dogs in a sore plight: some tossed here and there, dying; the rest mangled, bleeding, fearing to approach more closely, encircled, baying furiously, the monster, who stood, his coarse mane bristling, his small, red eyes glowing, the white foam flying from his jaws as he gnashed his frightful tusks and glared around. The king ordered a second pack of hounds to be unleashed; but just as they were dashing boldly forward upon their foe, and Sardanapalus was eagerly bending from his saddle to view the strife,—for he delighted in such contests, and the longer and the fiercer they were the better he was pleased,—a strange dog, of wonderful size and beauty, sprang

down the rocks, and seized the boar by the throat with so close a grip that he laid him dead on the ground.

“The king turned white with rage at this bold intrusion and the speedy close to which it had brought his sport, and he forthwith ordered one of the slaves to slay the dog on the spot. The slave went forward to where the hound stood proudly over the prostrate monster, and, drawing his short, two-edged sword, stabbed him to the heart.

“As the dog’s dying howl rang out, a cry of grief sounded from above; and, looking up, they saw on an overhanging point of rock the figure of an old man. They had scarcely time to glance upward ere he was gone; and though the king ordered search to be made for him, he could not be found; and Sardanapalus, in a sullen mood at the loss of the chief pleasure of the day, turned back towards the city, while his attendants rode with downcast heads, pondering on the rashness of the king, and on its probable evil consequences.

“A week passed by, and nothing unusual occurred. Day by day, with unfailing punctuality, the wonted messengers arrived from the different provinces which owned the sway of Sardanapalus, and all brought the accustomed tidings of peace and prosperity everywhere. The sun shone bright, the heavens were without a cloud, and the doomed king looked around him and laughed in his heart the prophecy to scorn.

“At noon, on the eighth day, the guards on the palace wall saw a mighty crowd approaching, following an old man, who led a black horse by the bridle. The confused cries and shouts of wonder and astonishment of the people filled the air, and reached even to the inner chambers of the palace where the king sat. As the old man drew nearer, the guards perceived that the horse’s daintily-stepping hoofs were of gold, and that its flowing tail, and the ample mane which it tossed impatiently from side to side, were of shining silver.

“When the old man, leading the horse, had reached the great gate of the palace, he made obeisance to the captain of the guard, and humbly craved an audience of the king.

“And Sardanapalus, surrounded by those who were with him, came out upon a balcony above the great court, and ordered the old man and the wonderful horse to be brought before him.

“The old man prostrated himself, and said,—

“ ‘O most powerful king! deign to look graciously upon thy servant, and to accept the gift he brings: a horse from the plains which crown the Mountains of the Moon.’

“And the king, with courteous words, accepted the gift, and ordered as much gold as three horses could carry to be given to the old man.

“As the stranger rose from the ground, he glanced for an instant upward at Sardanapalus; and all those who stood around him on the balcony closed their eyes involuntarily, as at a bolt of lightning; and even the king shrank back an instant, as does a sleeper before whose closed eyelids the light of a lamp is flashed.

“The king’s governor, who stood behind him, bent forward and looked earnestly at the retreating figure of the old man, who, conducted by the slaves of the court, was leading the horse towards the king’s stables; and said,—

“ ‘O king! unless my eyes deceive me, I behold again the old man who stood on the peak of the Fatal Mountain, when the strange hound was slain. I beseech you, O king! send away the horse and its giver. I foresee that no good will come of the gift.’

“But Sardanapalus, who loved a noble steed, and cared for no pleasure save the manly one of the chase, paid no heed to his governor’s words, and began to congratulate himself on his good fortune in becoming the possessor of such an unequalled barb. While he was still expressing his satisfaction, the captain of the guard of the stables entered, with a troubled face, and related that

when he had conducted the old man to the stable of marble, for that he had judged the horse worthy of that place of honor, the stranger had requested to lead in the steed alone. They had waited long for him to come out, and had at length followed him within. The horse was there fastened by the bridle, but the old man had vanished.

“The king knit his brows.

“ ‘What! does the old man despise my gift?’ he exclaimed. ‘Seek him throughout the city, and bring him before me that he may name his own reward. It shall never be said that Sardanapalus was a niggardly giver; sooner shall he have a province for the horse.’

“Then again the governor, still more alarmed at the old man’s disappearance than before, implored the king to send away the horse; but Sardanapalus rebuked him sharply, and ordered the master of the hunt to have all in readiness to start at daybreak the next morning. Having done this, he proceeded, followed by his great officers, to the council chamber, and there listened to the reports, sent in from his different provinces, and transacted all affairs of state for that day and the next; for he was a wise and prudent ruler, and prized the welfare of his people above all else.

“The morrow broke fair and cloudless. A cool, inviting breeze tempered the heat, and waved the branches of the trees upon the hanging gardens which surrounded the palace. As the sun rose redly over the eastern hills, the trumpets sounded in the outer court; and the king with all his officers and attendants, arrayed in hunting garb, came forth from the inner apartments. The horses stood ready for them. The black barb, superbly caparisoned, awaited its rider. It stood quiet and unmoved; but all the other horses seemed wild with affright. They were backing and rearing, their eyes starting, their nostrils distended, and the sweat pouring from their haunches. The slaves could with difficulty restrain them.

“ ‘What is this?’ said Sardanapalus, laughing as he saw the scene of confusion. ‘Is there a lion in the court?’

“And he patted the neck of the black steed, with its mane of shining silver, and vaulted into the saddle. As he settled himself firmly in his seat, the horse turned its head over its shoulder and looked at him. The same bolt of lightning that they had an instant seen on the day before, again blinded the eyes of all around; and again the king shrank, as does a sleeper before whose closed eyelids a sudden light is flashed.

“They left the city and careered gayly across the plain, until at length they reached the open country. Ere long the brisk cry of the dogs and the cheery calls of the slaves gave notice that the game was scented. At that instant the black barb made a furious bound, and darted away with incredible swiftness. In vain the king used every art of horsemanship to check its speed. It spurned at them all, and still flew onward like the wind. For a while Sardanapalus heard behind him his attendants, as they sought in vain to rejoin him; but gradually the sound of their cries and the trampling of their horses’ hoofs died away, and he was in the wilderness alone, still borne onward as by the sweep of a mighty wind.

“The horse stayed not its course by field nor by flood, till at last the king saw, rising across the barren plain, the dark outline of the Fatal Mountain. Again, as the prophecy rushed upon his memory, he strove, with straining nerve and swelling muscle, to check the headlong course of his steed, and again he found his every effort powerless. As they neared the mount, the horse raised its head and neighed. The sound reverberated like thunder from the scathed and riven peaks, and lost itself in hollow mutterings among their obscure recesses.

“The horse sprang up a rugged and stony defile, and, winding its way with unabated speed through a series of labyrinthine turnings, finally bore its rider into a deep and narrow gorge. Scowling rocks rose on either side till they seemed to touch the sky. A sulphurous stench filled

the air, so that the king could scarcely draw his breath. No trace of life, not even an insect nor a tuft of moss, was to be seen. It seemed the very home of desolation.

“The steed dashed over the masses of broken rock which obstructed the valley. Darkness began to close about Sardanapalus as he was borne forward. It gathered fast, until, when the horse finally halted, he could distinguish nothing.

“The king’s first impulse was to throw himself from the back of the golden-footed horse; his next, to gaze, giddy, bewildered, and perplexed, through the darkness around. He saw a faint light gleaming from the all but inaccessible mouth of a cave above him. As it caught his eye, an irrepressible fever of curiosity seized upon him. He clambered with difficulty, groping his way, up the rocky face of the precipice, and stood at the entrance of the grotto. An unexpected sight met his eye.

“Beside a crystal lamp, on a low stool, sat a Woman spinning. Her robe, which fitted closely to her form, was of scarlet; her long hair, unbound, caught the light and shone like fire. Her eyes were cast down upon her work; and she was singing a sweet, strange rhyme.

“As Sardanapalus looked upon the Woman, the remembrance of his wild ride, of the Fatal Mountain, and of the ancient prophecy in the sacred book, faded from his memory as a wreath of morning mist disappears before the noon-tide heat. He would have drawn near and spoken to her; but an awe, hitherto unknown to him, fettered his limbs and chained his tongue. He stood motionless, gazing on her”—

“As I on you,” broke from my lips.

And the Witch smiled, and her eyes gleamed, and she repeated,—

“Yes, as you on me.”

“The Woman span, still singing her sweet, strange song, until the wool on the spindle was ended. Then she arose from her seat beside the crystal lamp, and, moving towards the king, she said, without raising her eyes,—

“ ‘O stranger, speak! wherein can I serve you?’

“But Sardanapalus was so amazed at her beauty that he answered her never a word.

“Then she took him by the hand and led him gently forward, and placed him on the seat whence she had risen. And she set before him vessels of gold and of silver, and she served him with meat and wine. Then she made him to recline upon a couch of cushions; and she again began to spin, singing the while her rhyme.

“And, as Sardanapalus listened, his strength melted as wax before the fire, and his manhood fell away from him like a garment that is cast aside; he forgot his kingdom and his people, his honor, his glory, and all that he had hitherto loved and delighted in; and, as the fool’s soul left him, he closed his beclouded eyes, and tears of soft pleasure rolled down his sunburnt cheeks, and rested on his manly beard.” And again the Witch laughed as I before had heard her, and again the mocking fiends seemed laughing in the air.

“When the lords and attendants saw their king borne away by the black steed, they tore their hair, and, roused the echoes with their lamentations. They knew not which way to seek the monarch, nor dared they return to the city without him.

“Then the old governor spoke. His words were few. He said,—

“ ‘To the Fatal Mountain! There shall we find the king.’

“And the train, suddenly struck into silence, obeyed.

“Long they sought Sardanapalus in vain among the riven peaks and blasted recesses and ravines and shadows of the mountain. At length the old governor, with a few others, made his way through the tortuous defile into the darkness of the valley; and there, on the face of the

precipice, they saw the glimmering of light from the mouth of the grot. They climbed the rock and entered. They saw the Woman in her scarlet robe, sitting by the lamp of crystal, spinning and softly singing; and on the couch beyond lay Sardanapalus, asleep.

“ ‘Accursed one!’ said the governor to the woman, ‘by what devilish arts hast thou ensnared our king?’

“And she answered, smiling gently, ‘Nay, my lord, I knew not that it was the king. A stranger, weary and fasting, sought refuge here, and I gave him food and rest. Did I not well?’

“But the old governor hearkened not to her words. He stood by Sardanapalus, and implored of him to rise. Then the king sat up, and looked with a vacant and irresolute air around upon his servants.

“ ‘Hasten hence, O king! I beseech you. It is evil for you to be here,’ prayed the governor.

“But the king paid no heed. He still gazed vacantly around, until his eyes rested on the Woman. Then a sudden light broke from them. He arose and drew near her. And the Woman, with fair words and downcast eyes, bade him farewell. The king cast himself on the ground at her feet, and prayed of her that she would come with him. And the governor and those who were with him grew crimson with shame to see the degradation of so mighty a monarch; but the Woman was in no wise moved by his entreaties, and obstinately refused to leave the cave. Then the king rose furiously to his feet, and ordered his attendants to seize upon her and bear her away. The governor would have again spoken, but Sardanapalus, foaming with rage, cursed at him with a fearful oath, and bade him hold his peace for a dotard; and again he commanded his courtiers to lay hold upon the Woman and bear her away. And they raised her in their arms and bore her from the cave; but, as they moved forward, they gazed at each other in affright. No weight rested on their arms. They seemed to be bearing a vision away.

“Warily they descended the precipice. When they had reached the ground, according to the king’s command, they sought for the black horse; but it was gone, and no one ever beheld it more.

“They made their way with difficulty over the rough and jagged rocks, the king holding himself ever beside the Woman, as she was borne forward in the courtiers’ arms. As they neared the exit from the labyrinthine windings of the valley, they saw above them, sharply defined against the impending shadow, the figure of the old man. But, as they gazed, it vanished into thin air, cheating their sight. They were terrified, and pressed forward more rapidly, casting anxious glances over their shoulders; but Sardanapalus had seen nothing, his eyes were fixed upon the face of the Woman.

“They halted as they emerged from the shadow of the mountain; and the king with many entreaties implored the Woman to forgive him for having brought her away by force, and besought her thenceforth to accompany him willingly. And she answered him, saying that, since resistance would be vain, she must perforce submit. But, although her words were discourteous, they delighted the king, who trusted to propitiate her later.

“He caused her to be mounted upon a white horse, and he rode on by her side, bending from his saddle-bow to catch each accent of her low, whispering voice; and so they proceeded slowly on, until at even-tide they entered the city and gained the palace.

“Nothing could equal the astonishment of all the people at the sight of the strange Woman riding at the king’s right hand. As the rumor spread amongst the crowd that he had brought her from the Fatal Mountain, the old and the prudent shook their heads ominously, and held their right hands behind them, with the fore and the little fingers extended; but all the young and

middle-aged were loud in their praises of her beauty, and of the grace wherewith she managed her milk-white steed.

“As side by side with Sardanapalus she passed through the great gate and entered the outer court, a sharp, rending sound was heard; and the pointed summit of the great obelisk which Ashur had raised long centuries before, crashed down, splintering the jasper pavement, and sinking deep into the ground.

“But the king did not turn his head. He heard nothing save the Woman’s soft voice.

“When she had dismounted, he led her into a magnificent hall, and prayed her to repose herself a while. Then, leaving her, he bathed himself in warmed and scented waters; he caused his beard and hair to be curled in long ringlets, according to the custom of his ancestors, which he had never followed before; and he arrayed himself in his most precious robes. And all his officers and courtiers wondered; for Sardanapalus had hitherto bathed only in water cooled with ice from the frozen mountain peaks, and had paid no heed to the adorning of his person.

“When the king was thus attired, he returned to the hall where he had left the Woman; and presently a sumptuous banquet was served to them, and all the great lords of the kingdom presented the different viands. The old governor was also there; but his eye was dark, and his cheek was pale. It was he who poured out wine to the stranger. As he offered to her the golden goblet, his hand trembled. She drank, and gave it back to him, smiling in his eyes.

“ ‘Serve me ever such wine as that, for I will drink none other,’ she said.

“And his heart quailed, for he read in her smile that she had drunk the poison knowingly.

“The deadly draught seemed but to enhance the brilliancy of her beauty. Her eyes flashed brighter under the countless lamps; her lips took a ruddier hue; a lambent flame seemed playing beneath the soft tints of her skin. The king sat like one in a dream, gazing upon her; and all around gazed likewise, spell-bound by her loveliness,—all save the old governor, who had shrunk away in dread.

“But, as the dark hours wore on, the smile faded upon the Woman’s lips. She sighed, and looked wistfully around.

“Sardanapalus entreated to know her wish; and she said to him,—

“ ‘O king! know that I am bound by an oath to spin a certain number of skeins every night. Should the morning dawn ere I had fulfilled my appointed task, my beauty would wither away and my frame shrivel and be consumed like a green bough cast into a fiery furnace.’

“At this, Sardanapalus sprang hastily from the couch whereon he had been reclining, and ordered the wheel of the Fate Amryta to be forthwith brought from the treasury. The wheel was of carven crystal, and there was a tradition that whatever was spun upon it would turn into threads of gold; but so stubborn was it that none within the memory of man had been able to turn it.

“The wheel was brought. When the Woman saw it, she smiled, and ran her fingers over it.

“ ‘It is as I left it,’ she said below her breath. But the sound was lost in the humming of the wheel; for, to the wonder of all around, she turned it with the slightest motion of her hand, and the silk they brought her she span into threads of gold.

“As she span, she began to sing again the low rhyme that the king had heard in the mountain cave; and again, as then, slumber overcame him, and he sank back on the cushions and fell asleep. And she span and sang until the morrow’s sun was risen, and all the earth awoke.

“Day by day and night by night passed on, and closer and closer drew the spell about the doomed king. He entered no more the council chamber, where his great officers attended in vain. Embassies from distant princes were kept ignominiously waiting, and then dismissed without an

audience. He bowed no more before the altars of the gods; the priests were forbidden to enter his presence. He studied no longer the welfare of his people, but galled them with taxes, and oppressed them with burdens, that he might squander the revenues of a province upon a single feast. For now there was nought but endless revelling within the palace, the king striving by every display of magnificence to delight the Woman.

“Lapped in luxury, sunk in sloth he lay, while his people murmured and complained,—at first faintly, then louder and louder: but the sound of their discontent, ominous like the distant roar of a rising flood, reached not the ear of the king. He listened but to the one whispering voice.

“So, led by the old governor, with Belesis and Arsaces, the great lords of the kingdom took counsel together.

“It was night. The city below was hushed in sleep. The cool breeze stole whispering through the trees and flowers of the hanging gardens without, and brought their sweet odors to the chamber where Sardanapalus lay sleeping. The light of the solitary lamp was faintly reflected by the gilded ceiling, and glanced here and there on the projections of the shadowy walls. Beside the lamp sat the Woman in her scarlet robe, spinning bright threads of gold, and singing the unknown rhyme. From time to time she raised her head, as if to listen to some distant sound. At last she smiled, and bent her face over the glittering line that ran fast between her fingers. As she smiled, an invisible door in the wall behind her opened, and shrouded forms crept stealthily forward. As they neared her, with a bound they sprang noiselessly upon her. The great lords of the kingdom held her in a stern and vengeful grip.

“ ‘Hence to hell, Accursed One!’ said the old governor; and he aimed the stroke of his dagger at her breast.

“Slowly, and as if repelled by an invisible force, the weapon retreated from the wound, and fell upon the floor at their feet. No blood stained its shining blade; no gash marred the smoothness of the soft, white bosom on which, with staring eyes and blanched faces, the great lords stood gazing. The Woman laughed low. At the sound, they shrank close to each other.

“ ‘It were easy to send you whence ye should never return,’ she said; ‘but I will rather that ye tarry yet a while on earth to behold the fulfilment. Now, begone!’

“And, like dogs cowering under the lash”—

Here the Witch suddenly stopped. She rose, and turned her head aside in the attitude of one listening. I also hearkened; but I could hear nothing. As she stood thus, her eyes gave forth flashes of gleaming light, as they had done when she had first perceived me on the plateau at midnight, and her lips parted eagerly.

“Wait for me awhile; I will not tarry,” she said.

And, as she spoke the words, she vanished from my sight. The garden seemed to darken as I gazed around.

I sat I know not how long, bewildered and overcome with sudden grief, when a cloud of the strange birds flew fluttering towards me, and, settling on the low branches, began to sing with wonderful trills and cadences, all in harmony one with the other. But, marvellous as was the song, it had no power to cheer me; its sound was hard and false. I knew that no sunlight gladdened the songsters, that no warm nests received them, that no loving mates awaited them, no downy fledglings claimed their care; and I turned impatiently from their sweet, unmeaning warbling.

I looked upward through the branches of the trees. The formless void above filled me with drear disquietude. I longed to see once more the glad light of the sun, the soft glory of the moon and stars.

I glanced at the flowers. Rigid and bold they stared at me. No little thrifty bees or low humming insects fed from their empty cups; no sweet perfume rose incense-like from their blossoms. I remembered the violets and lily-bells of earth, and sighed to behold them again.

I grew restless. The moments seemed to fall like lead upon me. The Witch did not return. Fear lest she had deserted me seized upon me. I felt it impossible to live without the sight of her beauty before my eyes, the sound of her soft whispering voice in my ears. The gardens became hateful to me. I determined to seek for the gate of the treasury, in order to find there some amulet whose virtue might enable me to follow her.

At length I discovered the golden door whereby she had led me into the gardens, and I again entered the treasury. The colossal forms of iron stood as before upon their pedestals, and the walls and vault of polished steel reflected the myriad fires of their eyes.

As I passed along, searching for the charm I coveted, the small black vial, with its violet cloud curling upward, again met my sight. My curiosity returned upon me tenfold. I took it in my hand, and bent my face over it. As I inhaled the vapor, I started and recoiled. So pungent was the odor that my sense could scarcely endure it. But I took courage, and drew it strongly in. The violet cloud spread around me higher and higher, broader and broader: gradually it faded into a pale-gray tint, and then into milky white. It opened; and, looking as into a magic mirror, I beheld my past unrolled before me. I saw my father's castle, the daisy-sprinkled fields whereon I had sported when a child. My little playmates, some dead, some changed, and some forgotten, passed in review before me with the cheery laugh and open brow of other days. I saw my father in his shining mail again, on his roan war-horse, cross the drawbridge the last time he sallied forth; and again my mother sat in her chamber and wept, waiting for the tidings that never came. Again I saw myself the orphan heir, surrounded by flatterers and minions, thinking only of what pleasure the day might bring, caring nothing for the morrow. The face of an old beggar whom I had repulsed looked out at me with sorrowful eyes. Again he stretched forth his withered hand to me; but I could not give to him,—the time had passed.

Then I beheld myself wearied of my luxurious and thoughtless life, setting forth, a knight-errant, upon my quest. I saw myself climb the mountains, mindless of my duty, thinking only of the Witch. Once more I lay on the plateau at midnight, and once more the Witch appeared; but I groaned with horror as I looked upon her. It was a skeleton form that moved softly towards my image in the mirror; it was a fleshless hand that conducted me down the flowery descent into the magic cave. Shuddering with dread unspeakable, I saw and knew that it was loathsome, pitiless Death that I had followed.

Still I gazed, and I saw all that had befallen me in the kingdom of the Demons, until the mirror showed me myself as I then stood. For an instant darkness covered my sight; then I saw myself raise the vial to my lips and drink; and as my image had done, so also I raised the vial and drank; and I knew no more until I found myself lying at the foot of a stone crucifix. Around me were stern and lofty mountains; the sun, red and fiery, was sinking into the far distance of the western main.

As the remembrance of all that had passed since I last saw the light of day rushed over me, I covered my eyes with my hands, and groaned aloud. Shame, remorse, and horror mingled their bitterness in one seething cup, and held it to my shrinking lips. How had I fallen! What had I become!

Since then five years have passed in bitter penances and ceaseless prayer. I feel my span of life fast shrinking. Soon shall I cast off the heavy burden of my dreadful past. For, remembering the miracle that brought me up from the fearful realm wherein, first of all mortals, my foot has trod,

I, even I, most wretched and guilty of sinners, dare to pray to the spotless Mother of God to receive, in that last hour which soon must come, my most miserable soul.