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THE EVERLASTING QUEST



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THE
EVERLASTING QUEST

BY
HENRY L, WEBB

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TO MARY

WHEN the world grows old
And birds no longer sing,
When sunlight's cold
And no bells ring ;

When buds are small
And meadows never seen,
When the oaks fall
And larches lean 5

When children cry,
Cursing their hour of birth,
And devils eye
The fading earth :

Then, even then,
Could you again be born,
The love of men—
The flowering thorn—

Would break in white
On this bewildered star
With the old delight,
The passionate war.

THE TWELVE TABLES

THE Chaldaean *Epic of the Twelve Tablets* is a harsh and primitive compilation, relieved by a few dramatic moments, a rare touch of pathos or terror. Its poetic value, like that of the labours of Herakles, lies in its significance as a whole. The half-funny, half-sublime exploits of Gilgamesh might be called "*The Martyrdom of Man* ". Like the Wandering Jew and his Mahometan counterpart, El Khudr, he is incarnate restlessness. What the myth represented to its compilers, who can say ? But to a dweller in the twentieth century Gilgamesh seems to have what we lack—the secret of eternal youth ; to be the spirit that affirms, mocking at the world which denies ; the lover of women and adventures, but,, first and last, of adventures ; to have in him that which defies Earth, which Earth cannot satisfy, which nothing can satisfy ; to be, in fact, mankind.

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Further, if the Lilitu of the Chaldaeans were no more than vampires escaped from the night of the lower world, they seem suggestive enough of our gnawing desire for distances, our hatred of the attainable, to take their place in this poem, though they are not found in the Twelve Tablets. Similarly, the identity of Gilgamesh with Nimrod, and of Nimrod with Orion, may rest on the slenderest evidence, but the temptation to imagine it is irresistible.

The following is a rough outline of the original.

In the first tablet Gilgamesh is the idol of the young and the beautiful, the enemy of the old and the wise. The latter beg Ishtar to destroy him, and for this purpose the Gods create Ea-bani, who possesses some of the characteristics of Proteus and the satyrs. But Shamash the sun-god thwarts the plans of Ishtar by sending the hunter Saidu to trap Ea-bani and make him the comrade of Gilgamesh instead of his future enemy. The capture of Ea-bani is brought about by one of the sacred courtesans : at the loss of his chastity his magical power over the beasts of the earth deserts him, and

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thenceforth he is only fit for the life of cities. The exploits of Gilgamesh and Ea-bani lead to the passion of Ishtar for the former and his contemptuous rejection of it. The goddess, in fury, strikes him with leprosy ; Ea-bani dies ; Gilgamesh leaves his country and wanders over the deserts of the west, crossing the dark Mountains of Mashu, traversing a forest where jewels hang among the leaves, and reaching at last the tower of Sabitu, "the maid of the throne of the seas." Through her pity he is led to Arad-Ea the sailor, who pilots him across the Waters of Death to his ancestor, Shamash-napishtim, dwelling on the island of the blest. The eleventh tablet contains the reminiscences of Shamash-napishtim—his account of the Deluge and of his own escape. At length Gilgamesh returns home and celebrates the funeral rites of Ea-bani. His lament tunes the heart to the pitch of grief even across this vast distance of centuries. Finally, he calls up the spirit of his comrade to question him about the life to come, and with the sombre utterances of the awakened shade the twelfth tablet ends.

THE EVERLASTING QUEST

When Babylon was a little village
And all the roaring streets were tillage,
When Gods and daemons haunted the shade,
Crying like birds from glade to glade,
There lived, far away in the southern land,
Gilgamesh—the King whose hand
Would crush a lion's skull in play;
Who'd merrily jest in the thundering fray
And carol at the end of the longest day ;
Gilgamesh, whose sun-bright laughter
Would set the maidens hurrying after
From the windy housetop, down the stairs,
To wait for him as unawares
In some loud thoroughfare—to meet him
With a soft storm of scent, and greet him,
Peeping shyly up, and say :
" O Gilgamesh, light of our day,
Our Good Shepherd, may thy sheep
Thrive as those planets the wild Gods keep
Roaming beyond their azure bars."

So Gilgamesh would turn aside,
Laughing, and take him home a bride

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Whose spirit should watch and her eyes weep
Over the children slumbering deep
And the old, mouthing in thorny sleep,
While he, the rough and merry lover,
Crossed the howling desert over,
Mad for the chase and bloody wars :
For sweet to women are their tears
And dear to warriors their white scars,
Dear to the old their many years.

From month to month, from spring to spring,
He roamed the land where he was king,
And ever, throughout the breadth and length
Of that old town, long out of mind,
He gathered with his beauty and strength
The brightest blossoms of womankind,
Till from his stormy kisses grew
Youngsters like Gods, like bulls and horses,
Proud and swift as the watercourses,
And girls—dark, sweet, benign as doves.
Yet he, for all his thousand loves,
Was called of men " the laughter-lover,"
Of women, " he whose heart is true."

But old men ever are full of hate :
They sit, they wag their beards, and prate
How he's a fool who squanders on love
His nights, which should be used to prove
Why the planets wheel astray ;
And all the sweet of youth, they say,
Is hateful to the sullen Gods,

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 3

And hateful is woman, though as fair
As almond flowers in the bright, blue air.

The old men came with their maces and rods
And wrathful eyes ; they prayed the Gods—
" Heap curses on this Gilgamesh
Whom all men love and women follow !
Let him be sick and die afresh
Every day, as long as reeds are hollow
And fire burns and women lie.
Let him who stole our sons to fight
Far away, and took delight
To leave not a maiden in our town—
O Ishtar, let him behold thy frown
And shiver as a cypress tree
In the offshore wind by the curling sea !
Let none but vultures hear his cry
Whom now men love and women follow ! "

O Rose, thorned Rose of Youth,
The sudden flower of truth
Outflashing, in a moment strangely dying !
All-cursed be the heart
That takes the common part,
To your sweet challenge sullenly replying ;
But deep and lovely be his rest
That wears you, spite of thorns, upon his
breast.

Who shall deny your power,
Prince of the morning hour,

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To rob the garden of all her beauty else ?
Who gainsay your right,
Scorner of age and night,
To hear the fiery tale your Mother tells ?
For city-dwelling men are old,
But Earth for ever young, tormenting, bold.

Youth, my love ! My own
To-day—to-morrow, flown !
Pour out your wine before the dark descends:
One hour to us is given ;
For us an island-heaven,
Thronged with wild loves and golden-hearted
friends,
Rides, for a trice, the storm-dark swell—
Yet now, bright creature! even now—
farewell !

The taloned Gods, the far-hearing,
Turned their ears to the wind and, peering
Over Zagros, heaven's wall,
They saw the swamps where the herons call,
And doves, who know the past, and thrushes,
And the king, hunting in the rushes :
They heard his voice ; they heard the
prayers
Of the old men rise, like jangled airs
That Shutu sings in the apple-trees
When he brings the pestilential breeze
From the south-west, where men grow pale
Nor turn again to tell their tale.

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 5

The Gods grew dark with wrath ; they rose
On loud blue wings over the snows,
Circling above the evening light—
Like cormorants before a flight
With ruffled feathers and muffled cries,
When the air turns black and winds rise.

They brooded on the light, the earth
And mortal clay ; they thought on birth,
Dreaming, and as a man in dream
Sees phantom shapes that only seem—
A winged bull ; a God, yet human ;
Immortal flowers; or a steadfast woman—
So they, the Gods on the white wall,
Saw Ea-bani come to being
Out of the mists that swirl and crawl
In the tall reeds ; and then, decreeing
That he should slay young Gilgamesh,
They thundered on their wings afresh,
Shadowing the peaks.

His hair was yellow
And long ; it whispered as the mellow
Barley whispers in the early wind ;
He knew the thought in a serpent's mind
And what the sky-blue insects hum
And the haunted past and fates to come.

Lovely and cold are the Gods—
Cold, lovely, their works.
Yet who can discover their ways
Or love the cold-shadowing Gods ?

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The Gods glowered down at him together,
Where he loomed large in the gloomy weather
By the mouldering reeds of the old river,
And muttering each to each, they wondered—
"What have we dreamed? What have we
done ?"

But, high in heaven, Shamash, the giver
Of berries and buds and children, pondered
As he leaned from the yellow boat of the sun :
" Alas for Gilgamesh ! " he said,
" By Ea-bani's hand to fall
And go beyond his children's call,
Drowsing—so young ! with the sullen dead ! "
So at even, when the barque
Touched the spangled shore of dark,
Shamash walked across the world.
He passed the ships with their canvas furled
On the purple edge of the western land ;
Soundly the sailors were sleeping on the
sand,
And rocking masts, as the tide rushed by
Cut small blue arcs from the great blue sky.
He heard the hills of Lebanon
Booming loud, singing on
As they sang of old and will sing to-morrow.

But deep in the vale of Ishtar's sorrow,
Hard by Byblus and the sea—
The Vale of Tammuz, the Weeper's Dihgle,
Wherein Gods and men must mingle,

Bearing that which none can flee—
There, in that shaken and tumultuous place,
Where gleams of water and gleams of light
Fall and return and interlace,
He found Saidu, the cunning in chase :
" O hunter Saidu, cunning in chase,
Go, cross the sands toward the rising sun
And strike south from the village of Babylon;
Catch Ea-bani in the shallows
Bathing, or when he's pulling mallows—
Yellow flowers for his yellow hair.
Lead him away to the busy towns,
Show him the paved streets, the gowns
Of women, trimmed with flowers for the
marriage sale ;
Show him the towers painted with bulls
Where children play when the air cools,
And humming spears, iron chariots,
And smooth, ringing earthen pots.
Bring him to Gilgamesh at night :
Weary, dazed, how could he fight ?
Then set bright fruits for the pair to dine,
Lying on couches, and perilous wine—
Dark as a pool when clouds blow up—
And the harp and a wild song, as they sup.
They will be comrades long ere day break
And live and die for each other's sake.
For love, as grasses by a lake,
Springs aloft when the heart is young,
And ever the strong loves the strong.
So Gilgamesh will live still

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Like a scarlet lily, and take his fill
Of life and love and hardihood."

O sorrowful race of man,
Groping a little span
Between an iron earth and iron skies !
Too blind to keep one course,
Too weak to seize by force
The one bright fruit it seems a God denies :
Yielding too soon the battered gate
To change and circumstance and mournful
fate!

Let us be blind no more !
If there were Gods before,
Long they have vanished in the huddled Past;
Only their blood remains,
Coursing in human veins,
In lovers, heroes, prophets, bounding fast :
They but return as golden wraiths
While men burn on through storm to grander
faiths.

In the solemn lee of a black wood
Sat Ea-bani, all alone.
A star-haunted cypress tree,
Darker still than dark could be,
Towered above his head, and he
Watched the stars through the branches
blown,
Peeping, hiding, yet ever sliding

Up from eastward, down to westward,
 Like drops of dew on the dark hair
 Of a Child come in from the midnight air—
 A Child too lovely to be true,
 Too honey-sweet and debonair :
 There is no Child, nor dark hair—
 Only the drops of falling dew.

To Ea-bani came the beasts,
 Full-fed from twilight feasts—
 The panther, jackal, and wild ass,
 The boar from the quaking black morass ;
 Herons that watch their own shadows
 And cranes from the wide water-meadows ;
 Gull, cormorant and pelican,
 The wild goose and the wild swan ;
 The thrush, piping in the spring rain
 His harsh delight, his shadowy pain ;
 The red-legged partridge, the ortolan,
 The quail and the wise wood-pigeon :
 They gathered round him in the gloom
 Gently, and with such unseen motion
 As carved snakes on a royal tomb
 Or distant ships over distant ocean,
 Or shapes that gather on the loom
 When the pale queens all are weaving,
 With talk to keep their minds from grieving
 On the dark land where battles are :
 From dawn star to evening star
 They weave the Gods, the feathered and
 scaled :

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—Ramman, who dwells in a thunderclap,
And the wild boy Tammuz in the sap,
Allat, the Lost Wind underground,
And she who yet has never found
A lover, though she long has sailed
Over the earth and round and round—

The lonely Lilitu :

And doves they weave, with such blue sheen
And half-turned head, they seem to coo ;
Or dwarfs with tails and brown eyes,
Trapped on the border of Paradise ;
Worn-out lamps from heaven hurled,
And flowers, and flower-like butterflies ;
Things that have been, that have not been ;
All the fighting and joy and teen—
The bloom and marvel of the stormy world.

So round Ea-bani came
The ghostly brutes : they lowered the flame
That burned and changed in their cold eyes,
As when a curtain of golden dyes
Is drawn in the temple porch at night,
While the censer swings with mocking light
And swift from heaven a God descends.
Behind the orbs of these, his friends,
Ea-bani knew the lurking Gods,
Their power and lust and speed in chase,
Their ghastly beauty, sombre grace,
Their skill to fashion life from clods,
And hatred of the human race ;
Their laughter, heard when a soul departs ;

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 11

The thoughts, no prophet ever told,
That prowl about their desert hearts
Like tigers striped with black and gold.
Such things he saw, deep in the eyes
Of brutes, and oftenest would surprise
The look in dams ere giving birth
To their glossy cubs ; therein he found
The blind Builders of the Earth
And the dark Kindlers of the Stars.

Lovely and cold are the Gods—
Cold, lovely, their works.

Over the tilled and watered ground
The hunter Saidu wriggled and crawled—
A stubborn man of slender girth,
Pied and streaked with ancient scars.
He saw the cypress : a partridge called
With a dry clutter, near the wood,
And Saidu followed. The panthers stood,
Pricking their ears. A jackal holloed.

Slowly, and inch by inch at a time,
The hunter crept. A sad, green light
Over the trees began to climb—
The false dawn : without affright
He saw the eye of brute and bird
Turned softly bright to where he lay,
Watching the grass his body stirred ;
Nor brute nor bird spoke any word—
No speech of brute nor human word

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Nor talk of bird had they to say ;
But, hush ! In the top of the cypress tree
There was news from the southern sea,
For the souls of sailors the sea has drowned
Pass every night to the western bound
Of the shrouded earth, by two and three.

The cypress waved. The stars glistened.

There Ea-bani sat and listened.
He heard no voice, nor any calling,
Not a whisper, not a roar,
But a sound as of water falling,
Falling on a hollow shore ;
And the murmur of vast ships churning
The ancient deep ; the mad, red burning
Of gaunt cities yet unborn ;
The sob of loved from lover torn
(A little sound, yet how much sorrow,
How wild hatred of each morrow
And the mocking bed and the echoing room !)
And, rolling out of spangled gloom,
Very far away, he heard
A sound that almost seemed a word—
The sound of bells ; the rustled wings
Of birds that never passed by day
Nor marked the Babylonian clay
With slender arrows, as though to say
" A child of the Gods has passed this way " ;
A sound of armies that for ever pour

Through a dark hall to a dark door :
 And that half sound, half quietude,
 The starveling poet feels and sings
 When over him sweeps the fabulous brood
 Of pleading, misremembered things
 That long have tried and tried to be—
 Pity and comradeship and love :
 Planted by Gods, they never throve,
 But fled away, far over sea,
 To live in caverns, haunted places,
 Cursed swamp and whistling dune,
 And felons' eyes and wizened faces,
 And the barred and shuttered souls
 Of little bastards and of foals
 Whose dams were taken from them soon.
 Ah, soon the dam is taken from the foal,
 The lover from the loved is torn so soon !

Nearer his prey the hunter stole.

A blackbird, when the dawn was nigh,
 Shouted up the tawny sky :

" Wearily passeth the night,
 Merrily cometh the day !
 Sweet are the song and the flight,
 Swift is the Bird Delight,
 Swift the returning to clay !"

The jackal holloed suddenly :
 " Sleep not, Ea-bani, sleep not! "
 And all the panthers joined the cry :

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" Sleep not, sleep not! "
Then Ea-bani saw his foe ;
His soft eyes began to glow
As when above the steaming fen
Mars rides up like a masthead light,
And men whisper aghast to men,
" The Gods are sailing the air to-night! "

Saidu the hunter crept away.
He had no fear, but he crept away
To the slumbering city.

Soon the day
Poured over Zagros, heaven's wall,
In a silent storm of gold ;
And the Gods began to call
On the ranges clear and cold ;
And birds began to sing
In blown leaves or on the wing ;
And men awoke, and Ishtar's daughters
Combed their hair at the temple doors ;
And the old Euphrates' waters
Flowed beneath the sycamores,
And down their ropes the spiders lowered
away
From the green dusk of leaves to the
mirrored ray
And the green dark of water ; and, like a
flame,
Leaping and shining down the pillared glade,
Child of the shadowy Gods, himself a shade,
The dream-bewildered Ea-bani came.

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 15

Before the eldest poet learned to sing
Or the tongueless voice of the harp
Was heard in treble sharp
Or booming chords of woe,
Hearts knew the ebb and flow
Of the foamless tide of dreams,
How they come, how they go,
Fed by a thousand streams—
The huddled faces of flowers,
The look askance of a bird,
The silence of old towers,
The eyes of a driven herd,
Children's voices ringing
Over a meadow,
Old men singing
In the shadow,
Or the woes of love that long have lost their
sting.

There is a buried city in every heart :
Far down it lies
Under roaring skies ;
There the light is green ;
The rapid swallow is seen
Cleaving the solemn dusk slowly, apart.
For in that town the swift and transient things
Eerily, gravely pass,
As serpents through the grass,
As fish, far out of sight,
Or stars in the holy night.
There come no little creatures,

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No dwarfs with ancient features,
For all loom as large
 In the lonely halls
As waves on the sea-marge
 When night falls :
The moth goes by on far-shadowing wings.

Hatred is there with pain and the doubts
 that crawl
And return on their fatal path
With the ponderous spirits of wrath—
Spirits like those that rise
To brood in the yellow summer skies
On human destinies ;
Thither no laughter comes
Nor droll beetle hums ;
None there has tears
Or hopes or fears :
It lies forgotten and deep.
 But deeper still
Lies a creature asleep,
 Sleeping its fill
Till its mate calls from the world and it
 answers the call.

All day long Shamash passed
In a brazen boat without a sail,
And toward evening came at last
In a copper boat without a mast
Down, down—beyond the town,
Beyond the fields where slaves were hoeing,

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And the pink almond orchards blowing,
Beyond all seas and silences
And fierce, blue hill and mocking dale,
To the scarp of night, where the dead wail,
Lifting their hands to pray for light—
Yet still their night is moonless night.

Lovely and cold are the Gods—
Cold, lovely, their works.

Before the shadows on the plain
Fell prone beneath the cypresses
Like stone Gods whom Time has slain,
The hunter Saidu had returned,
And with him one whose beauty burned
As the wild arum in a murky wood
With its purple tongue and spotted hood.
He stood far off among the trees :
He had no spear nor any snare
Save the chill that has its lair
In the red lips and braided hair
Of the daughters of Ishtar—
Those cold women who unbar
The lovely palace of the heart
To spend a night there and depart ;
And none can lodge in it again
But the birds of night and pain.

Far away,
Beyond the cornfield Saidu lay,
Hugging himself, biting the straw

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As evening passed and he watched the play.
For, black against the western flare,
Picking poppies for her hair,
Ishtar's daughter wandered, singing,
Through the harvest toward the shaw
Where the birds, in circles winging,
Came to Ea-bani's call.
He saw her come. He felt her bringing
Hope and fear and freezing pain,
Laughter, and all love's carnival,
The wine of cities, their maddening dreams,
Their howling night of broken gleams
And sorrows in unbroken chain,
And death, which turns men into clods,
Yet makes them haughtier than the Gods.
Far *off* he knew her bringing these,
As the swallow knows the south-west breeze
Bringing the heat, and, ill at ease,
Wheels in the sky, ere north she goes.
She called him with soft human words :
He railed at her in the tongue of birds
And cursed her with the serpent's hiss.
Yet she stole near, and sang him this
With arch mouth like a dark rose
And mocking laugh and cold eyes.

" Come, there is sleep in my hair !
See, there is fire on my lips !
Aha, will you try ? Would you dare ?
In the sea what is subtler than I,
Or what bird in the air ? "

They stood (the wild lad in surprise
 And she with slyly feigned quiver)
 Where in mist the river flows—
 The sliding, cold Euphrates river,
 Fearful, phantom-lighted river,
 Sire of beasts and child of snows.
 She raised her arms, glittering and small,
 Then, like a moth that folds her wing,
 Sure that her mate is following,
 She dropped them to her side, and laughed
 Softly. She let her garment fall.

For seven nights and seven days
 Ea-bani was her thrall.
 Seven nights, he saw no star,
 Though all the stars followed their ways ;
 Seven days, he heard no sound
 Of all the fiery babble of birds
 Or bellowing of the bison herds
 Or parley of brutes that prowled around ;
 Seven dawns and seven eves,
 Unseen, unheard, fluttered the leaves ;
 Seven eves and seven dawns,
 Shadow danced on the secret lawns.
 Yet he saw nought but lips and eyes,
 And what should Ishtar's daughter see—
 Born to feign and not to be ?

They say, when lovers meet
 And each to each is sweet,
 There springs from heaven's sod a scarlet
 flower;

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And if their love be true,
It blooms, for ever new,
So gracious, even a God can feel its power :
Among those dancing companies
The thunder-browed Immortals take their ease.

But if their love decay—
The poppy of a day—
The Gods with iron claw root up their pledge ;
From heaven's dizzy wall
Peering, they let it fall
From peak to cloudy peak, from ledge to
ledge,
Down to the earth—in dust to lie
Unseen, forgotten, to all eternity.

When the eighth day pearled the skies,
Ea-bani called his friends—
Called the panther from his lair ;
The boar from his swamps in the river-bends.
But they stood far *off* with a timid stare
Or slipped away to their dens in wrath.
He whistled the sparrows on the cornfield
path,
The thrushes lost in the orchard trees
And boding doves in the coppices ;
But they flew past with sober speed
And, if they heard, they took no heed.

Then Ea-bani knew the truth
And cried in bitter, bitter ruth,

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 21

" Ah, I have lost the tongue of birds—
Forgotten quite those whistle-words
That streamed up from the heart of me
Like bubbles of sound from a singing sea !
And all the calls of beasts are gone
That I drew them with from their forest-
halls—
And what is left worth dreaming on ?"

Again the child of Ishtar sang,
And over the swamps her singing rang—
So lost, so small—as a linnet's tune
Might rise from earth to the rocks of the
moon.

" The king with lights of blue and green
Changes midnight into day :
O, the sheen of city-nights
When the stars go far away !

" Faint the stars : fiery the wine :
Love flies hunting with naked blade.
Lips divine and ruby jars
Fade to-morrow, for ever fade !"

So she returned to the city, bringing
That fire-eyed creature in her wake ;
And yet it was not for her sweet singing
Nor for her hair nor her laughter's sake
That he followed after like a foal :
It was because she had thieved his soul,

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Tempting it out in the hum of night,
Haling it forth with never a word—
A wild, sad thing like a draggled bird,
Cast away in the deeps of night.

She led him through the amber crops,
Singing softly, to where the town
Floated on the palm-tree tops
With its blue smoke and its walls of
brown :

She led him in a chain of posies—
Vetch, snapdragon, Persian roses,
Velvet-skinned as Persian maids ;
The shy mallow that shrinks and fades
As young love in the grasp of love ;
The briony that trailed above
Their hollow nest in the forest night ;
The dead men's lamps of aconite ;
And white poppies, to signify
That in a charmed sleep he must lie,
Until she chose to let him go.

If woman thinks her power to show,
How can any man say no ?
For she is starlight, soft from heaven,
And the great wind from oversea ;
She pours out life, as dew at even,
On the withered spirit's flower ;
She is the flaming present hour
And holds the future on her knee.
If woman dares her power to show,
Or beast or goddess she must be.

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 23

She led him through the roar and glow
Of the mad and merry market street;
He saw the butchers thumping their meat;
The almond-skinners looking wise
Beneath their brows and yarning lies ;
The onion-sellers librating along ;
The vintners squatting among their jars ;
The drunkards bubbling into song
Of idle loves, forgotten wars ;
He saw the melons cut in rounds
And grapes piled up in purple mounds
And partridges, hung by their feet—
The very birds he used to greet
In dew-grey dawns, watching them pass
With silken furrows through the grass ;
And many another bird was there
Whose madcap thoughts he had seen, laid bare
Like cobwebs in the winter air.
His eyes grew red and round and wide,
For the walls closed in on every side ;
The towering ziggurats of the Gods
Rose and rose till they hid the day ;
And as a beast forlornly plods
Behind the boor whom he could slay,
So he, with his tiger spirit flown,
Followed a drab through the stinking town.

All turned to watch his going by.
Man cried to man, " His frame is slight,
Yet hath he wrath and the lust of fight
And many a spell, deep-drawn from hell."

24 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Others laughed : " Nay, let him once
But feel our hero's massy shoulders,
Hard and huge as mountain boulders,
And thighs that would snap the Gods' own
bones! "

But some wild girl with a fiery sigh
Murmured, " His eyes are like onyx stones,
Nor ever gold was half so fair
As the gold that streams in his yellow hair.
Ah, would that I with him might lie
One night, and in the morning die ! "

So when Gilgamesh came out to greet
The dweller in the wilderness,
The common folk in a boiling press
Plunged and roared down the narrow street
To see the battle, taking oath
That never was such a fight, for both
Were grim as mountains, still as seas :
Men are not born to-day like these.

But Ea-bani hung his head :
" Alas ! I have lost my soul," he said.
Loud laughed the hero, long and loud—
Whereat, like monkeys, laughed the crowd.

" Come then," cried Gilgamesh, " to-night
We will be drunk—to-morrow, fight."
The mob swirled back in eddies vast :
Like wild stallions the two went past,
And Marduk quivered in his lonely shrine.

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 25

Gods ! how the great hall reeled with song
And how its floor swam red with wine !
All night the king his peers among
Chorussed the music wild and sweet,
For bridals, paeans, dirges meet,
That bubbled out of the desert's heart,
Drawn thence by Ea-bani's art.
Deep in the bowl each plunged his arms,
Raised them, blood-red, above his head,
And swore, with prayers and muttered charms,
Faith each to each, alive or dead.

Moons waxed and waned; the years drove by.

x

The king was tired of revelry ;
Seldom he fought or hunted now,
But his eyes were bright, and knit his brow ;
The little cares of state grew dim ;
His counsellors gloomed, and women would
say,
" The Lilitu hath looked on him,
And soon or late he'll wander away."
But Ea-bani, all day long,
Charmed his ear with the peril of song,
And under the golden-fretted night
The strings cried up to heaven's height—
So insolent, so proudly clear,
That many a child sat up in fear
On its little mat, dreading to spy
Great Gods peer in at the window high.
What words he sang, no man might know,

26 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

But they were never of things below—
Or why did they make men's blood run cold
And women mad ? Still, hour upon hour,
The bard would play, and the king glower,
Nor sport with his children, as of old,
In the cool of the day on the palace tower.

Moons waxed and waned ; the years drove by.

Then came one night of revelry.
Once more the dim hall rocked with song ;
Again its floor swam red with wine.
So fierce the drinking, the feast so long,
That the cressets flared out, one by one,
Till the orange lamp was left alone,
Flaming queerly, then sinking low,
Like a soul that would, yet cannot, go.
And ever, as the music soared
From dulcimer, psaltery and pipe,
Striking the columns and shining roof,
The hero's song rolled out and roared,
And he thundered on the table with doubled
 hands
—As a bull, in the flat Chaldaean lands
When spring has come and the grass is ripe,
Scatters the sod with horn and hoof.

Behind the dais whereon he sate
The night was blue, with silver stars—
Live lamps, whose wills reverberate
Even in the heart of rocks and flowers—

And on the blue his towering bulk
 Loomed up, vast, as an unknown cape
 Will change and expand its monstrous shape
 To shipwrecked men on a drifting hulk.

The minstrels played, but they drank full
 deep.

At last they slumbered : in their sleep
 Their lips would move, their faces twitch,
 Their fingers pluck at the wakeful strings,
 And eerie chords sprang out of the gloom
 Like voices of madness, tales of doom,
 Inscrutable foreshadowings.

Half up the wall in her high dark niche
 A marble Ishtar stood. The light
 Fell on her face, her breast—no more.

The guests lay strewn about the floor.
 The stars rushed down the slope of night;
 Under its haunted dome the owls
 Chilled the air with their quivering howls :
 Between the pillars, in and out,
 Hither, thither, round about,
 Bickering and gibbering, flew the bats,
 If bats they were—or were they those
 That have burst through from Aralu,
 The Underland of No Return
 Where dust in eternal eddies plays—
 The dust of dour, world-winnowing kings,
 The scattered dust of lovers true,

28 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

The pollen of ten thousand springs ?
Were they those whose eyeballs burn
In *empty* sockets—were they those ?

The panther cubs and half-tamed cats
Dragged from the table bones and flesh :
Only the hero, Gilgamesh,
Was still awake and singing still,
But in a soft voice, lower and lower,
For there was witchery in the hour.

The marble Ishtar moved. A thrill
Troubled her cold, blind eyes.

Lovely and cold is night :
Cold, lovely, the might
Of the Builders who spanned from the moun-
tains a cavern of sky :
Who then is the warm, the true,
The soul of the earth, ever new ?
The Gods gave cunning, indeed, of the ear
and the eye,
The Gods made lust, and fashioned it
blind :
But man and his mate made Love and the
flower of Mind.

Fair the Immortals, but cold !
Mortality knows how cold
Are the ways that they follow—ay, even the
lamps of their home.

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 29

Intolerably serene,
They move, but are never seen :
Only some echo, falling from their dome,
Warns us to seek each other's breast,
Love true, live hard : soon comes eternal
rest.

Yet sometimes they will try
With phantoms of the sky
And calling waters to deceive the heart,
Mocking our ecstasies,
Our little loves, our sighs,
To promise a wilder sweet, a keener smart—
Hells, builded of breath on a glass,
And rainbow heavens—but they like bubbles
pass.

We strive, but strive alone ;
And when our sun is gone,
No plummet falls to our untroubled deep :
Yet blindly, ere the end,
We cherish and defend
The round-eyed Morrow in its cradle-sleep ;
From dawn to dawn its beauty grows:
Love true ; live hard : there are no laws but
those.

The marble Ishtar stirred again :
Did not her breast heave, as in pain ?
And out of the upper air came cries.

30 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

The hero nodded on his throne.
The guests, without a snore, a moan,
Slept like the dead. He watched alone,
Nodding, nodding.

The Gods are cold :

They are never young, never old ;
They cannot die ; they were not born ;
Their hearts are hollow, their home forlorn.
How sweet is earth, and the sons of earth
How warm and comely!

Then Ishtar came

Down from her niche in a lapping flame
Which softly muttered as though in mirth
Or roared ahead to make her path
Who shows no pity and feels no wrath—
P'or she is Earth and the Hunger of Earth.

Toward Gilgamesh she moved, and said,
Throwing back her broad, bright head,
Ablaze with beauty and desire—
" Come, little fire, to the heart of fire !
O Gilgamesh, whose heart is true,
This is the hour to lovers due ;
Soon, soon the longest night is through,
And early withers the mightiest form.
Haste, little storm, to the heart of storm ! "

The hero sat and pulled his beard.
Much he scorned and much he feared—
So he smiled on her and pulled his beard.

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 31

Nearer she drew and nearer still—
Then spoke with the voice of the hidden rill,
And whispered as the summer grass,
And murmured as the twig where the leaf
was,
And sorrowed as the mountain wind
Which has blown for ever, time out of mind,
On the mountain brows with ages lined.

Nearer she drew—nearer yet,
With blind eyes and slumbering smile—
(Who once has seen, can he forget
That blank gaze, that stony guile ?
Who has seen Life, can he forget ?)
" He who will be my lover
And these stone limbs uncover,
Shall he not descry
Blue secrets in the sky ?
His blood shall feel the moods
Of the wraith-saddened woods ;
And when he seeks for treasure
In the earth, the sea, the air,
It shall be the blackbird's pleasure
To whistle ' Here !' or ' There !'"

The hero stared and pondered sore.
A gleam of dawn through the open door
Stiffened his heart, for well he knew
She would be but stone when the night was
through ;
Yet every moment he felt her power

32 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Pressing him down—lower, lower,
Like the vast bell of a poison flower.

He saw the cats' eyes shining, shining,
Under the tables : there, reclining
In dour mistrust, they seemed to say,
"Who?" and "Why?" and "Whither
away ?"

He loved and hated, burned and froze,
He knew her now—the sweet World Rose
Who tears and blossoms her glorious way
Out of the slime, up to the day,
Through blood and horror, hatred and
tears—

Old as the age of all the years,
Young as this morning's gossamers.
He knew her by her conquering head,
Her night of hair, star-garlanded ;
Her dreaming, dark, autumnal ways ;
The way she spoke, as through a haze
A pigeon coos ; the way she moved,
Still as a girl that love affrays
With arrowy proofs that she is loved ;
Long since, he had known her plashing
laughter,
Her sudden furies, and thereafter
Long golden summers of delight:
These he knew, yet knew as well
Her stone limbs, her throttling spell,
Her blind eyes—blind as the night.

Much he feared : more he scorned.
 Quoth he : " 'Tis said, that thou hast mourned
 Ten thousand times at summer's end
 For lusty Tammuz, once thy friend,
 Yet still he eats the dust of hell,
 Whom love's own Goddess loved so well !
 And what of the jolly shepherd-lad
 Who pastured his goats on Zagros Wall ?
 What tore his limbs so? Who drove him mad ?
 Didst thou not lead him in thy thrall,
 Nights and days, among the flowers
 By hidden ways through summer hours ?
 Did not thy tiger loveliness
 Turn him to a goat of the flock
 And hunt him with his dogs ? Confess !
 A godlike jest, to tear and mock
 What thou hast made, what thou hast loved !
 And Allalu, the sparrow-hawk—
 That soul of the air ! How hast proved
 Thy love for his impetuous being ?
 No more he'll cleave the blinding day,
 Falling like night upon his prey :
 In shadow he grieves the listening wood
 With ' Oh, my wing !' and ' Oh, my wing!' "

Silent the marble figure stood—
 No rustle made, no finger moved ;
 But a sweat broke out on her curved brow.

The lamp guttered : the shadows fled
 Along the walls, then up, and now

34 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Dropped to the floor like vampires dead.
The lamp guttered : its life gasped out.
Up in the sky some phantom muttered.

Unseen, unseeing, she stood. " I wait,"
She said. Her voice was marble fate.
Dark was the hall.

The Gods are dark :
Hard are their loves, their mercy stark.

But Gilgamesh, in that evil hour
When whirls of the air have fearful power,
Flinched not a whit. With wrathful shout
He banged the board, and flesh and fruit
Rolled to the floor with ghostly bruit.

" Thou ? *Thou* wouldst have me be thy
leman ?

Mother of Earth! Thou monster ! Demon!
Thou ghastly beauty, thou wild cup
Of poison that foams up and up
Over the brim of the world ! O beast
Of nightmare loveliness ! O feast
Of meats that make the reveller mad !
Thou loveless, pitiless lover, clad
In starlight and oblivion,
Reeling to death, yet reeling still
To drunken life anew—then on,
Kissing and crushing, to fulfil
Thy sightless lust, thy grinding will !
I will have none of thee—I curse

Whatever is that makes thee fair,
 Thy howling fury, and—ah, worse !
 That midnight sweetness. Have I care
 Whom the dark Gods may break or bless ?
 Little it boots to live, unless——"

The hall was dark and no man stirred.
 'Tis said that in the deep of night,
 When sounds are far between and slight,
 The Gods can better hear the prayers
 Of men and even children's cares.
 Maybe—yet have they ever heard ?
 Or, hearing, have they ever stirred ?

"What wilt thou, sweet," she said, "of me?"

How soft—like that unreal sea
 That haunts the shell—her voice could be!
 Softlier it broke than break of day,
 More softly fled than shadows flee,
 Yet seemed as a thousand echoes rolled
 From worlds forlorn and far away.

But Gilgamesh with wine was bold.
 He cried, "Unless thou'lt answer now
 What I shall ask thee—Why and How
 The world was made, and Whence it is,
 And Whither stream its destinies—
 I will not be thy love, nor sing
 Hymns to thy planet in the spring,
 Nor pile thine altars with frankincense.
 Why ? How ? Whither ? Whence ? "

36 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

" Who art thou to question Gods ?
The bents and soft-howling heather
Crouch and quiver, rustle, shiver
On the blasted mountain-scar !
Do they ask the Whence and Whither ?
Do they question Why they are ?
Never, never ! Mountain weather
Falls upon the mountain-scar :
They who dwell there fade and wither,
Drooping in the cruel weather,
Fading in eternal war.
Art thou tougher than the grasses
Waving on the Zagros passes ?
Think'st thou like a fiend to hover
In my storm and never tire ?
Or to drive against the driving star ?
Thou art mine, my flower, my lover!
Speak, and the world shall vanish far,
Far below, and the planets grow
Larger, larger, swinging high
Over the blind earth, where lie
The slumbering heaps of flesh and bone
That thou wouldst waste thy love upon.
Little fool! Little flower !
The hour is thine, only the hour,
Who art thou to dare the Gods ?"

'Twas the last hour before the day,
When heaven has ears, when the wind's away,
And the soul has thoughts that knew no sire.
But what of the hour ? The hero turned

From her who shook for him and burned,
 And with a cataract of mirth
 He flooded the silver sky and earth.
 Then hollow the voice of Ishtar rang—
 Yet, was it a voice—that muffled clang ?
 Or vampire's wing caught in a lyre ?
 Or a passing soul, just drawn from its clay
 In this frightful hour before the day ?

*" The world was made to please a King
 By dancers dancing in a ring:
 Out of a Joyous Heart it burneth,
 And to a Broken Heart returneth"*

Together the thousand guests awoke
 As dawn across the pillars broke,
 Thinking they heard some thunder-cry,
 Yet scarce as loud as the willow's sigh—
 A cry from over the desert rim.
 Their eyes turned to the king's high throne,
 Dilate with horror : they saw not him—
 Only an old man sat thereon,
 White-bearded, bowed. The guests were
 hushed,
 And up the east the sunlight rushed.
 They stared and stared, while hours fled by :
 The sun burned high ; the cisterns flared.
 At last they whispered, one to other,
 " He has dreamed of the Earth Mother,
 And who knows where his spirit has been,
 What it has suffered and what seen ?

38 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

A dream, a dream can make us old—
Older than years of labour could."

High in her niche, unseeing, cold,
Aloof, the marble Ishtar stood.

Then, one by one, the guests crept out,
Shivering in the heat of day
For horror, and spread the tale about
Some Gods had made the king their prey,
Driving him through the black of the sky,
Like thistledown ; and, being told,
The wise men came, bent double, old,
With silent sneer, triumphant eye—
And proffered each his remedy.
But Gilgamesh sat on, nor moved.

Forth from a corner of the hall
Spoke Ea-bani : " Who has loved,
Comes not a second time in thrall :
Who sees the Mother face to face
Thenceforth is an outcast of the race.
Let us go hence, the king and I,
Between the bitter earth and sky ;
A fighter and a seer together
Can draw their food from the wild weather,
Thrive on the laughter in the breeze
And find in storm a charmed ease.
We fade in cities ; we would seek
The grim, hard things that never rot—
The desert sand, the vulture's beak,

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 39

The wind, the sea, the mountain peak,
Scorn, hate and grief: such things are not
As woman's love—a dream, a rhapsody,
A divine pose, a mortal ecstasy.
I have known love, and burst its bubble,
Its fine, blue world of aery trouble ;
And Gilgamesh has seen her eyes
Who is our blood, our joy and pain,
The fire in the heart, the cold regret;
Think you that he will be again
Foiled by the wisdom of the wise ?
Who once has seen, can he forget?"

The Wise

" Thou art a poet; he, a king.
Can he forget his city's God ? "

Ea-bani

" If I should choose it, Gods would spring
Like whirls of mist from the evening sod."

The Wise

" Thou'rt but a poet; he, a king."

Ea-bani

" A king indeed, for he has wrung
An answer from her sullen tongue
Who never answered fox or hare."

40 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

The Wise

"Where poets are, sure, folly's there,
Thick as the seeds in autumn air."

Ea-bani

"We shall learn the flying secret,
Half of honey, half of sour :
We will plunge into the cavern
Where Immortals hide the flower
Of delight—to know the seeds
And ardent fruitage of the world,
Where its rapture, whence its weeds,
Of what sort its fatal hour,
By Whose wild whim and hurricane power
Its gentle blossom, its massy rock
Must meet in dust of the battle-shock,
Round and about, shattered and hurled :
And as one who, from the portals,
The song, the empty jars
Of the candle-lighted tavern
Turning, looks upon the stars,
So he turns to me, his singer,
His soul of mirth and sorrow-bringer,
Weary of the Gods you keep
In four-square homes of sultry sleep—
Turns to find the true Immortals
In the eye of beast and bird,
In the shouted, secret word
Of the desert and the ocean,
In the mazy midnight motion

Of those that cannot speak but true—
The ghosts that rise from Aralu
Just at the fall of dew."

The Wise

" But he is a king ! A great king ! "

Gilgamesh

" A king should be tart and gnarled as ye,
Not a lad for drink and fight
And spitfire girls and a hunt by night.
Your laws—your jowls, too—madden me."

Ea-bani

" Eerie and bright are the flowers of delight
That heave on the dark of the sea."

The Wise

" But you are a king ! Why, for a king
It's a shameful thing to sit and string
Word to mad word, as poets do,
Or walk the cornfields, two and two,
With lying jades, and call them true,
On summer eves in the falling dew.
Nay, men should tremble at a prince's nod."

Gilgamesh

" Let fools go wrangle with the wise,
Till they see with one another's eyes.

42 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Hereafter I'll return. But now
I heard the shield of a hidden God
Out of the limitless profound
Of night let fall its iron sound.
A challenge to a fight with Gods !
Who has not yearned to face such odds ?"

Ea-bani

" They are lighter than the air,
They are here at once and there,
And they mock the children's prayer
From the sky :
But the hero may defy
All their charms, their vanishing forces
And the following hoofs of their thunder-
horses,
If he dare—if he dare ! "

The Wise

" A dream can make us old, but dreams
Will never make us wise, it seems :
Yet the wise are ever the old."

Ea-bani (singing)

" Cold, cold—the Gods are cold :
Never young, never old ! "

Gilgamesh (singing)

" They cannot die, they were not born ;
Their hearts are hollow, their home forlorn."

Both

" To sound their hollow hearts we go—
What they have wrapped in dreams, to know!"

Shaking their heads, the wise departed :
" Our daughters will be broken-hearted,"
They said, " but we will possess our souls
In peace, and over our drinking-bowls
Govern the world with golden rules.
(Gods grant there come no foreign fools
To batter our walls ere we've begun !) "

Along the corridors, one by one,
They paced to where the queens were sitting
By a fountain in the early sun ;
Over their dark and splendid heads
A host of birds forever was flitting—
A sheeny cloud of blazing reds,
Cool greens, and lights so softly golden,
They were like sleep to be beholden :
And there upon those ancient men
The eyes of youth were fastened. Then
Followed a silence like the sea's
While the tenth wave towers toward the shore;
For the wise stood, just within the door,
Like uncouth caryatides,
Twisted and still, and nothing said,
Till a girl screamed, " Gilgamesh is dead ! "
Then the old men told their tale
To weeping eyes and faces pale.

44 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

THE LOVES OF GILGAMESH

His First Love

" And is he gone, and is he old ?
Well, long ago his kiss grew cold
And his hand was steady beneath mine."

His Wild Love whom he caught in the Desert

" What ! Do they say
His beard is grey ?
Let him drink wine,
And let his loves away
While yet we are young
And our legs are strong,
Our breasts round."

His Love who bore him the most Children

" Surely, 'tis sad when heroes age,
And their anger takes a piping sound ;
But then their sons with twofold rage
Hurl the battle hither and thither.
Ah ! then call them to me hither,
My children—all boys! For it is sad
When a hardy fighter grows old and mad."

His Love who bore him none

" His hair turned white *
In one night!

His eyes, they said,
 Blazed in his head !
 So once before—
 How long ago !
 In sorrow and pain
 He needs me ever—
 His spirit's demesne
 To cool his fever—
 And he so sad, they say,
 Who once was fierce and gay
 And full of whims and young disdain !
 Ah, could I cherish him,
 Save him, nourish him,
 Feed from my breast his spirit of fire,
 Bring back his laughter
 With jesting—and after,
 Lay down my burden and die in the mire ! "

His Young Loves whose Hearts were Light

" He'll come again at springtime,
 When the buds are new ;
 In the windy springtime,
 When grass is peering through ;
 In the ringing, rainy prime
 He will come whose heart is true.

" He will return hereafter,
 When flowers are everywhere ;
 He will come with laughter,
 With spindrift on his hair;

46 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

He will return hereafter
Out of the morning air."

His Little Children

" He will bring us treasures—
A dog, a bow and arrows
And sweetmeats, posies
And tales of foreign men :
He will bring us captives
With rings in their noses—
Four or five, half alive,
Like a skewer of sparrows :
And he will be our playmate,
To fill the lion's den
And feed on foreign men,
For he will come again—
Surely, he'll come again ? "

His Father and his Mother

" Maybe he'll come hereafter :
Maybe, he'll come again.
Trees will be green hereafter,
And out of the chilly skies
Yearly will fall the rain.
But we shall never see
The red buds on the tree :
Dust will be on our eyes."

His Sweetest Love, whom he left a Maid

" O, surely he will come again
 Remembering the tree
 Yonder by the water-side
 That shadowed him and me ?
 For it is but a little thing,—
 O, such a dreamy, silly thing
 That sends my love from me,
 Cheating me of the pain
 Whereof a girl is fain.
 Ah, no ! by the waterside
 The tree will bloom again,
 Red and white
 (Like a bride),
 White and red
 (In a royal bed),
 But I shall be forgotten quite,
 Sitting among the old
 As one whose tale is told."

Past the lion-gods of stone
 That know not ruth for human needs
 The pair paced down the corridors
 With a hunting spear and a pipe of reeds :
 The echoes of their ringing tread
 Crashed and returned, behind, ahead ;
 And never have those ancient doors
 Given forth a wearier moan
 Than when they swung—reluctant, slow,
 Opening on the world of woe.

48 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Full long they stood, that shining pair,
Like beetles before a badger's lair—
So vast the doorway towered above.
They gazed upon the town below—
The boiling mart, the cool palm-grove,
The seven-coloured temple towers
(Whence fall, about the midnight hours,
Sighs and howls and soft alarms),
The wide, brown walls, the men-at-arms,
The leagues of plain and burning air—
The storm of life, the pride, the glow,
The wonder-world, the world of woe.

But Ea-bani said at last,
" I hear a humming in the blast
From the south-west, where men grow pale
Nor turn again to tell their tale.
I hear a voice crying on the tower,
' Pluck no more the meadow flower :
The seed is sown ; the tale is told/
Ah, would we had let alone the secret,
Half of honey, half of sour !
For now too soon our hearts grow old,
Our force dries up, our blood is cold :
Dark is the sea, the earth forlorn."

But Gilgamesh, with falcon scorn :
" How is the sun less golden,
Because one heart is craven ?
Or grow the meadows old,
If hearts that once were brave
Darken with doubts forlorn ? "

Yet Ea-bani deeply sighed,
 Nor all his thews, nor all his pride
 Served him to fight the Gods' cold will:
 For who has learned their mournful secret
 Dies or fares for ever ill,
 Since pity rips his heart for men,
 Yet whither he goes, none cares or knows.

That night he never slept, but heard
 The cry of brute, the cheep of bird,
 Grow faint and sweet and fainter : then
 (As when a ship from the harbour blue
 Puts out to challenge vacant seas)
 All sounds were lost in stillnesses,
 And his soul fled high up the empty sky,
 Heavily winging to Aralu
 With flight unguessed on earth, unheard,
 Afraid of the dark, homesick, forlorn.

But golden in youth up-sprang the morn ;
 The flower nodded ; loud sang the bird.
 For man, the king of beasts, may die,
 Yet darts the vivid dragon-fly
 And bursts the rosebud, laughs the bird :
 Ay, the dearest soul, the sweetest face
 Vanishes, and its empty place
 A stranger fills, and no man born
 But dies and finds oblivion deep
 Ere the Gods turn once in their troubled
 sleep.

50 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Soon Gilgamesh, awaking, heard
The babble of dawn and its ecstasy.
He stretched, and curled his lip in scorn,
Smiling up at the empty sky.

" For how can Ea-bani die ?
He is a poet, a seer, a wizard ;
He holds the threads that draw from heaven
The Seven Fiends in their inky blizzard—
The Fiends that dusk the west at even
And rip the trees and thrash the seas ;
Why, he was born of dreams, the child
Of all in the mind of the Gods most wild,
Most stormy and rent by ecstasies.
How could he, so fathered, die ? "

The morning lark went up the sky,
The hero lay and stretched and chattered:
Little to Ea-bani they mattered.

Then Gilgamesh at last turned round,
And listening, heard no breather's sound ;
And gazing, gazed on a sunken cheek,
As grey as rain, as chill, as meek ;
And feeling with his live, warm hand,
Shivered, yet would not understand.

But at the last he called and raved,
As if the spirit might yet be found
Not yet quite dragged beneath the ground.
The echo answered : the rushes waved.

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 51

Twelve nights, twelve days, he sat forlorn,
Thinking, " I spoke to him with scorn
And he was dead the morrow morn! "

Vain is the blossom of dreams ;
Foredoomed, the toppling schemes
That tower and burgeon in the human mind :
The fire of youth dies down
And wisdom, age's crown,
Comes late to men already deaf and blind ;
And even in their steely prime
Loves, pities, melt them like a tropic clime.

Too soon our petals fall ;
Too soon the carnival
Of love and fight and laughter flames away :
Too swift our mating is,
Too brief our ecstasies,
To sound the mighty deeps of mortal clay :
And death's unstarred, immortal night
Shrouds the dear peril of beauty from our
sight.

Yet see this slight, fair race
Meeting, with hardened face,
Pains huge as hell, sharp as an out-worn
knife !
Pitted against vast odds
Or wild, star-scattering Gods,
They drink in death the flashing wine of
strife.

52 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Ah, let us honour and love, who can,
Woman, the sweet of earth, and wild-heart
man!

Full slowly the summer burned away ;
The autumn rain fell, day by day,
And the hero scanned the empty heaven,
Crying, " The leaves, the flowers, are shed,
The corn is reaped and ground for bread ;
More madly, night after night, the Seven
Ride down the horror-hunted dead ;
Far seen, the cranes come beating south,
Trumpeting with brazen mouth ;
The grapes are gathered, the apples got ;
Red walls are bare of the apricot :
And ° O, too soon !' the pigeon coos,
* Too soon depart the greens and blues—
Blue bells that drooped over the pool,
Grasses that trooped in billows cool
Across the dunes ; from plummy woods
And uncouth moorland solitudes
The bloom is flown ; the chaff" is blown
From the lonely floor ; the winds moan,
And the last poppy is overthrown—
Soon laid low, alas ! too soon.'

' O, can it be," cried Gilgamesh,
" That so bright eyes now cannot see ?
And could he die that was born so wise
To read the tale of the midnight sky,
The 'meadow's laughter, the forest's wail,

And love and war to be hereafter ?
 Shall that sweet mouth nevermore
 Jest or sing or gaily entreat
 The women to leave their broidering
 And mourn for Tammuz on summer eve ?
 Ah, it is Tammuz that is dead—
 The fieriest wine of earth all shed ;
 The lamp has failed in the empty shrine,
 And the king's rose is withered.
 How shall I find the Gods in their lair
 Or mount the vanishing steps to their throne
 To strip their clangorous secrets bare ?
 How pass—companioned once so well—
 Alone on earth, alone in hell,
 With beasts, men, Gods, for ever alone ?

" Nevermore, oh nevermore
 By forest dark and sleepy shore
 Will music be :
 No more will notes of golden distress
 The blinded, swimming soul oppress
 With unfathomable forgetfulness
 Beneath a phantom sea.

" By sleepy shore and forest dark
 Never shall the soul cry—' Hark,
 The Gods come forth !'
 —Hearing within the whirring chords
 The trill of larks, their broken words,
 Or the clang of thunder-shapen swords
 High in the cold, blue North."

54 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

At last shot out of the dark of mourning
A single thought, now bright, now pale,
As a sole flamingo, homeward turning,
Flies out of the following gale—
The thought of her he left a maid,
The green water, the purple shade,
The broidered flowers on her garment's hem,
And the orange-blossom that rained on them
When the wind stirred. Ah ! well he knew
How she leaned her head like a saucy bird
And laughed at him. Her image grew
As an ivory plaque in the craftsman's hand,
Inlaid with lapis and silver and gold,
Grows wild of beauty and keen of mould ;
He saw her face, her laughter heard,
Her shrill reproof and pert command.

Like a ship, when the fishermen have hauled
All night, and the moon from the sky has
 passed,
And, mile by mile, they have tacked and
 crawled
Homeward, to touch the land at last—
So Gilgamesh turned home, and came
Where the city towered in a quivering flame,
Golden with heat of the noon and dumb.

But they at the gates who saw him come
Drove him with spears and wrath away,
Crying, " A leper hath no home,
And our king hath gone hence many a day."

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 55

Scaly of skin, death-white of flesh,
Cursed, hideous, dumb—stood Gilgamesh.
Of her he left a maid, thereafter
He thought no more. From the profound
Of heaven there fell an iron sound,
A clang of cruel, transient laughter—
Ishtar's voice—Goddess of laughter,
Mother of love, of earth and sea,
Of the haunted past and fates to be.

For many a year, the leper wandered :
With many a tear he searched and pondered
The hearts of the Gods—their serpent ways,
Their ancient quests and long-planned jests,
And the bale they brew through summer days.
In many lands he trod the sands
With burning feet and twitching hands,
Staggering toward the trees, the grass
By the Water of Life which never was,
Toward pools that shone, and then were gone:
And in all the cities, on all the shores,
In palace and fane, that he chanced to pass,
Only the drunkards, thieves and whores
Looked on him softly and sighed, " Alas ! "
Aye, many a year the hero wandered,
Many a mile would ride ;
Or, hour by hour, he sat and pondered
At the dark waterside.

Down, down, and ever down,
On the old Euphrates river

56 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Where the rushes bend and shiver
And the willow sweeps the flood,

Down the river float the barges,
While the heron on the marges
Seems like a carven God to brood

Grimly on those passing shadows
Rowing down to the coloured meadows,
The lovers' paths, the children's meadows
On the Babylonian shores :

And the carp glides smoothly under
At the steady, muffled thunder
And the beaded swirl of oars—

Flicks a tail and plunges deeper,
As if he, too, were a silent keeper
Of the river-destinies.

Who can have told the birds and fishes
That of all man's dreams and wishes,
Loves and fears and prophecies,

Some as bubbles would be broken,
Some would fade, some be unspoken,
Some like ghosts would haunt the mind ?

For the dancing beauty that men follow
Soon grows old and soon rings hollow
And like a seed goes down the wind.

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 57

Through months and years with idle tears,
Self-scorned, self-pitied, Gilgamesh
Cried upon Ea-bani's name
To ease his woe, to cleanse his flesh :
But no ear heard, no helper came.

The leper's mind grew harsh and seared ;
Like an autumn forest thinned his beard.

One eve of spring the sky was low :
The swallows, circling to and fro,
Gathered to scan the northern skies.
But tears flooded the hero's eyes,
For he remembered his comrade's grief,
His simple heart, his love betrayed,
The sudden ancient words he said,
Fearful, far-echoing ; brooding so,
He begged, not for himself, relief,
But for his friend—the peace of even,
Unshattered by the hard-eyed Seven—
If only the Gods could hear mankind.

Sudden, sad, as a blast of wind,
The Shadow of Ea-bani came :
" What would'st thou, who hast called my
name ?"

But Gilgamesh in horror cried,
" Art thou indeed his Shade ?
Then tell me this—what a Shadow is ?
When the flower of me must fade ?"

Ea-Bani

" Why dost thou ask what Shadows are,
Who soon a Shade must be,
And wearily beat with shadow-feet
The furrows of the sea ? "

Gilgamesh

" Nay, tell me now what the Shadows are,
And when my flower shall fade ?
And whither away, when in the clay
This white body is laid ? "

Ea-Bani

" The Shades of kings are proud as hawks,
Ten feet from wing to wing :
Round and round, without a sound
Their nothingness they swing.

" Proud, too, the Shades of fighting men
That fell beneath the steel :
Whirring loud as a locust-cloud,
They soar and sink and wheel.

" Sadly, with none to cherish, fly
The ghosts that have women been :
Foul and fair are equal there,
For none are ever seen.

" We cannot see : the light is dim ;
Our eyeballs wither fast.
But I have known when children, blown
By the Lost Wind, have passed
In huddled herds, like frightened birds
When blows the desert blast."

Gilgamesh

" But tell me truly, tell me now,
When shall I be a Shadow?
And shall I there remember her
I danced with in the meadow ?

" I danced with her, I kissed her mouth
In the orange-flowered meadow ;
And she would hide by the waterside,
Betrayed by her shadow.

" O tell me truly, tell me now—
Shall we not die together ?
And if we do, then tell me true—
Shall we be Shades together ? "

Ea-Bani

" Each soul that comes to Aralu
Brings worse and wilder weather :
The Wind with thunder whirls asunder
The souls, like leaf or feather.

60 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

" Even lovers that for love have died
And cared for no man's blame,
Are forced apart with fluttering heart,
Crying each other's name :
And who could trace the dearest face,
With every face the same ? "

Gilgamesh

" By her flying feet I'll know her,
By the warm red mouth I kissed ! "

Ea-Bani

" Chilled is our heat, and heavy our feet
In a thousand-fathom mist.

" And thy life is but a blast of wind ;
It ends ere well begun—
Scarce seen, then lost, as morning frost
Flies from the early sun.

" Thy loves, thy children, what are they ?
Sweet once, yet faded soon :
They come and go, as mallows blow
Between the dawn and noon.

" Think not of them, but let them pass
As the leaves when they are over,
And turn to the One that dwells alone
Till she may find her lover.

" She dwells alone in the blue of the air
And the loud, unbridled sea;
To be her mate is the hero's fate
Who from himself is free.

" And she is called the Lilitu ;
He only can be her dear
Who always takes the path that shakes
His heart with sorrow and fear.

" She is the Greatest Shade of All
For whom men run their race—
Now near, now far, as the drift of war
Clouds or reveals her face."

Gilgamesh

" O, I would have a love like this,
To follow and woo for ever
With savage suit for bitter fruit—
Storm, hardship, struggle, fever."

Ea-Bani

" Yet I would not deceive thy heart,
Who once wast dear to me.
To be her love is but to prove
She is a Shade like thee :
She, too, must beat with shadow-feet,
The bitter, barren sea."

62 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Stealthy and sad as the dying blast
The Shadow of Ea-bani passed,
Sinking below the troubled ground
With scarce a stir, with never a sound.
But Gilgamesh cried, " Stay, alas !
One question more, ere thou must pass !
Shall I ever cleanse my flesh from these
Scales of dishonour and foul disease ? "

From far beneath the settling ground
Came a breath, a thought—less than a sound :

" If thou canst find a maiden kind
To love thee as thou art ! "

Untracked, unseen, as the secret wind
Did the Shadow of Ea-bani part,
And no more answered nor ever heard,
Though Gilgamesh, with many a word
Of mild endearment, wild entreating,
Called him again : ah, never meeting
Of two that love seems half so sweet
As when they know they cannot meet!

So Gilgamesh went round the earth,
And up and down the earth went he.
Seeing many things of little worth—
But a maiden kind he did not see.
Full many a mile would the hero roam
And many a shrine discover,
Ere the leper found the Gods at home
Or a maid to be his lover !

But once, when the red south-wester blew
 And pillared the sand and tore the sky,
 And buried the wild goats ere they knew,
 And struck down birds as they rose to fly,
 Into a dark palm-grove he fled
 Where grows the tree that travellers dread—
 The Great Black Palm of Eridhu.
 It hides the centre of the earth :
 None guesses its age or takes its girth ;
 Its height—they know that made the stars;
 Its lacerated bark records
 Their vast, veiled loves in antique scars,
 Cut with their forked and jagged swords.
 High in its tossing boughs, men say,
 Sweet Tammuz laughs the summer away—
 Tammuz, the long lost youth of the world
 Who lies in Ishtar's lap upcurled :
 Ah, would that we might wheedle him down
 To earth again, with laughter crown
 And fetter him with a golden hair !

Thither came Gilgamesh, and there
 He saw a creature, divine of feature,
 With bright, bright limbs and wind-blown
 hair
 And merry mouth and wide, blue eyes—
 A creature like those that merchants see
 When lost, far from their native skies,
 Struck mad with the desert ecstasy.
 Aloud she cried, and " O," said she,
 " What does a traveller wandering here ?"

64 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

And Gilgamesh, in love and fear,
Fell at her feet. Cried he, " O, save
One whom the Gods to sorrow gave !
If thou wilt love me, thou, a maid,
But for one instant, it is said,
I shall be whole."

But answered she,
" I love thee not, I love thee not!
I have a love who loveth me,
And—love thee ? Nay, I love thee not."

Cried Gilgamesh full bitterly,
" Say that thou lovest me, or I die ! "
But with a saucy laugh said she,
" Hence, old white bear, as thou hast come !
I have a golden love at home,
And he is mine, and his am I."

Then, as he gazed, within her eyes
Drifted a thousand mysteries ;
Her light darkened ; her limbs grew hard,
Like rocks with veins of metal barred ;
Though she smiled, her teeth were bare ;
And, To ! the wind roared in her hair,
And she was gone above the air
Or plunged beneath the rocking ground—
Who knows where ? for the Gods are dark,
Nor leave, save death, a single mark.
Then once again that thunder-sound
Fell through the sky, and the Mother of Earth
Mocked her child with iron mirth.

But Gilgamesh, after many a year,
To the uttermost west of the world drew near.

West, far west, high overhead
Flutter the souls of the newly dead,
And high on the Mountain of Mashu
Great white goats pass to and fro,
Lest any living man win through
To plumb the secret of Aralu.
To and fro in the air they pass,
And their far-flung shadows on the grass
About the world go to and fro.
For ever and ever about they go,
The old, white goats of Mount Mashu,
And this is the thin, faint song they sing,
Made of the sorrow of everything
That's torn from its home to Aralu.

Song of the Mountain Goats

" We are the mountain goats of old Mashu—
 The oldest hill
 And the coldest hill
That ever a ghost sailed by, or bird o'erflew.
High on the rim of earth we dwell, and see
The souls drift over, down to Aralu.

" Sadly they rise from home, as loth to flee
 The streets they know,
 Where children go
Whom yesterday they fondled on their knee :

66 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Slowly from that mysterious cup they rise
High up—then, down the night and out to sea!

" Far hence the soul its bitter home descries :
 Thefe, they say,
 The grass is grey,
The flower in ashes breaks, and the voice dies
In heavy air, and none can touch his mate :
Alone, in countless company, he lies.

" Ho, wizened souls ! and souls that harassed
 Fate,
 Facing the stars
 In silent wars !
Ho, weaklings ! And ho, kings of love and
 hate !
All with the leaf its windy journey share—
All, as the flower, to death predestinate.

" Where are the lords that rose on men's
 despair
 To glower alone
 On a shadow-throne
Like homeless comets in the peopled air ?
And where those lovers, hot for life and
 tears—
Those maids that soured the Gods, they were
 so fair ?

" Where are the merchants with their sober
 fears,

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 67

Their grand design
(The sprite of wine) ?
Where are the cunning hands that harped?
The ears
That heard ? The eyes that flashed out, grey
or blue,
Across the philtre-cup—among the spears ?

(They see Gilgamesh ascending)

" We are the mountain goats of old Mashu !
Our beards are long,
And we troll a song
To hurry the withering souls to Aralu.
And who is this—far down, forlorn,
Small—shining like a globe of dew? "

Gilgamesh (coming up)

" I am the pride of the life to be ;
In my blood is the bound of the headlong
sea:
The plunge of the gale,
The sea-mews' wail,
Are sweet as the touch of my love to me.

" The fires of To-morrow burn my veins :
The madness of birds, the roaring rains,
Maidens dancing,
Stallions prancing—
These are my soul, yet these my chains.,

68 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

" For I would know what the sea-mew saith,
And why the meadow blossometh ;
 And things to come
 Which yet are dumb
Fid know—and, ere I learn, comes death."

The Mountain Goats

" We are the Fates who overhang the earth ;
 We tell no tale ;
 We hear no wail.
No mysteries to us are death and birth:
As bubbles burst, and others rise again,
So are the spirits of men and such their worth."

Gilgamesh

" Still I would know what the sea-mew saith
And why the meadow blossometh."

The Mountain Goats

" The flower in the field and the babble of
 birds are vain—
Vain, the dancing of girls and of seas and the
 roaring of rain."

Gilgamesh

" Yet the secrets of Gods, in face of death,
Open like flowers to a summer breath ; *
And to the face of death I'd go,

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 69

What has been wrapt in dreams, to know.
But most of all would I discover
The Well of Life, and bring its waters
That men may drink : for, ah ! my soul
In this foul body is such a lover
As limbs and flowing hair, sweet faces,
And all their slyly shifting graces,
And iron-thewed sons, and wild, gay daughters,
And the still comrade, all-comprehending,
And dogs and horses without ending,
Can never sate. I would this earth
Were all one woman, and I her lover,
Or one sick child, exposed at birth,
And I its father. But I must go
Round about this world of woe,
Bent beneath love's dark thunder-cloud
Yet never by its glory riven.
Ah, why was love, so lion-proud,
To an all-shunned, dirty leper given ?"

The Mountain Goats

" Press on, then, little one ! Thou hast the
heart
Whose beat defies
Calamities :
What shouldst thou buy in the world's babbling
mart ?
Their eyes are closed, their hands with trade
are numb :
Hard, merry life is not the merchants' art.

70 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

" But in the waste, where fall no echoes in
Of feasts and loves,
Where only moves
Darkness without the eyes, darkness within—
There mayst thou forge thy pygmy majesty
And such pale glory as can be won, mayst
win."

Gilgamesh

" And the Water of Life, O shall I find
The water that gives a child to hear
The speech of birds, to the old good cheer,
Beauty to women, sight to the blind ? "

The Mountain Goats

" When thou hast known thyself to the
lowest deep,
When youth's grown old
And sorrow cold,
And thou hast learned to fail, yet not to weep—
Then to the Water of Life which never was
Thou mayst at last draw nigh : drink well,
and sleep ! "

With heavy heart the leper sank
Into a darkness, plunging, rank
And filled with aery, hopeless sound—
A thronged night, a magical gloom,
Alien as the over-arching tomb,
Close as the tomb, yet vast, profound.

All the night and all the day
 The Lost Wind sucked the souls away,
 But Gilgamesh went stumbling on
 Nor ever saw the golden sun,
 Nor all the dainty, dancing sights
 Of earth, nor heaven's amber lights :
 Under a canopy of dead
 The one live man crept down the scaur,
 Till he reached at last a daylight shore.
 In that one night had forty nights
 And forty days passed overhead,
 But now, at last—a daylight shore,
 The dash of waves, a summer sea !

Yet though the water was bright and blue
 And though the wave danced merrily,
 There was a shudder on the sea,
 There was a horror in the blue :
 For, far away on the other side,
 A cursed shadow floated wide—
 The shadow of Aralu.

West, due west, high overhead,
 Passed the souls *of* the newly dead ;
 And west, far west, had the hero come,
 Right to the shelve of the world—the last
 Edge of delight, where blossomy meads
 By solemn skies are overcast.
 There had Sabitu her home
 In a ruined tower, by mournful reeds—
 The maiden with a mother-heart,

72 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

The spirit of comfort, whose mild art
It is to soothe whom men deride:
She is the soul of eventide,
The cool, long kiss of autumn peace,
The rhythm of the eternal seas.
Sweet, sweet, sweet are her treble calls
From the twilight trees, when dew falls ;
And rich beyond all tale her pity ;
Moving as birth or death her tone,
When she singsto the beasts of earth some ditty,
Half dirge, half lullaby ; alone
She sits in her tower at the World's Dark End,
Brooding for ever—the soft, still friend
Of little creatures slow to move,
And sad, frail things, benumbed by fears,
And man, who can but struggle and love,
Chasing delight, though blind with tears.

Aloft, alone stood Sabitu,
Lovely as autumn's latest flower,
All alone on her night-black tower,
Hedged in by ever-whispering reeds
And the stealthy voice of the lapping wave,
All alone was Sabitu,
When she saw on the darkness of Mount
Mashu
Stand out a white and shuddering form
Like those the plague of Shutu breeds—
The silent plague in the shrieking storm :
Huge, ghastly and tortured, it whispered,
" Save

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 73

One whom the Gods to sorrow gave—
Love me one instant, thou, a maid ! "
—Words that full'often he had said
In many a tavern and flowered city
Where maids looked out, but not in pity—
For they with whom sweet pity dwelt
Were old and sad, or bold and bad :
Was never a maid that pity felt.

But Sabitu was sorely afraid ;
For she by the random Gods was made
Half soul, half woman, and had known
Nor sight nor sound of man, for none
Had passed that ancient Mount Mashu
Save the dead on their journey to Aralu :
Only in dream had she gone down
The broken stair, to cherish and crown
With summer calm man's parched brow—
Only in dream—but well men know
How in her dream she'll come and go
With solace in the fall of her gown,
How with cold starlight shell conspire
To redden and bless the hearth-fire,
Or set a glory on the hair
Of common sluts, till they seem as fair
As faces peeping from Paradise.
O, she has heaven in her eyes,
And women that she has looked upon
Can fashion a palace under a stone
To keep their lovers content for ever.

74 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

" O save ! " cried Gilgamesh, " O pity
One that in many a flowered city
Has sought for mercy and found it never ! "

She looked into his eyes
Woebegone with memories :
She saw his sorrow, his body's plight,
And pity came down on her spirit like night;
He was a leper, hideous, lost, alone:
Long on the tower she stayed, as carved in
stone,
Then with light foot awoke the echoing stair,
And gave the kiss of greeting. Lo ! each to
each was fair.

His flesh was whole,
His lips were red ;
From body and soul
The horror was shed ;
Merry and bright,
His roving eye
Flashed, as the light
From a clearing sky ;
His limbs were strong
And lissom again ;
He knew no wrong,
He felt no pain.
But rude desire,
Like a prince on his horse,
Spurred him with fire
To run his course :

The sweet air rang
 With their lovers'-names,
 And flowers up-sprang
 From the earth like flames :
 The winter was past,
 It was spring at last,
 And sorrow was over
 For bird and for lover.

So Gilgamesh and Sabitu
 Lodged in the tower at the World's Dark End,
 Watching the shadow of Aralu,
 Hand in hand, as friend with friend :
 For sweet it is when tameless, wild
 And lonely spirits meet at gaze,
 As panther with panther, or child with child ;
 Each looks at each in fiery amaze
 Like strangers that have dropped their clue
 In some sad country of wizardry
 With no moon in the sky.

Ah, safely, safely Sabitu
 —Tender as a sprite, as woman small—
 That night lay down in her wide, dark bed,
 And sweetly Gilgamesh let fall
 Across her breast his lion head.
 But never star rode up the heaven
 Nor ever cloud with the dawn was red,
 Nor 'sang any bird at noon or even
 On all those frontiers of the dead,
 Save one.

76 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

At the falling of the dark
Of that one Bird the song was heard—
Yet not a song, nor whistle, nor cry,
But a sound to make man whisper, "O,hark!"
For neither on earth nor in the sky
It seemed, but nowhere and everywhere ;
Aye, and forever would it roll
Its echoes through the inner ear
To where, beyond ecstasy and fear,
In golden quiet sits the soul.

But Gilgamesh, when fell that sound
Into their little world, gazed round
And over the sea and up in the sky.
Yet nothing saw but sea and sky:
Then felt his heart turn stony-cold,
As one who in a trice grows old,
And called aloud to Sabitu—
" What sound was that ? O Sabitu,
Give me of thy warmth, for I am cold ! "

" Alas ! " she cried, " that thou shouldst hear
That voice which freezes the heart—too drear
To them that know not : drearier far
To me, who know what Birds they are.
For they are the kings that hated men
While still they ranged the earth ; and now
Unseen, with wordless curse, they go
long the marges, to and fro,
st any spirit return again
the world—for, ah ! to feel the sun,

To hear the rain fall, hour by hour,
 Or watch the bee from flower to flower—
 These are what spirits dream upon
 Yonder, since earth was first begun :
 Yet has not one returned—not one ! "
 Said Gilgamesh, " Thy Birds are nought :
 They are of air, not to be fought
 By mortal man. Then let us love,
 Though stony be the skies above
 And the Lost Wind howling and seas up-
 wrought."

The spring rushed by ; the summer, too,
 With lurid beauty tore away ;
 And, solemn-wing'd, the autumn flew
 Toward those bright creatures of a day.
 Then nuts began to brown and harden ;
 Apples dropped in the ruined garden ;
 And down from the midnight of Mount
 Mashu

More and more chilly the Lost Wind blew ;
 More dolefully yet and yet more high
 The Hell-Birds raised their hunting-cry ;
 In yellow volleys on the breeze
 The leaves were hurried across the seas ;
 And nearer each day on the dancing blue
 Crept the cold shadow of Aralu.
 Yet there were roses still beneath the tower ;
 Still Sabitu wore in her hair a flower
 And gave him gifts, deep-drawn from
 beauty's dower.

78 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

With what a dark distress
Does simple loveliness
Fill the deep, hungry caverns of the heart!
The impatient crocus bud—
The pigeon in the wood,
Conning in tenfold gloom her tragic part—
Aye, every lovely sight and sound
Gives of its sweetness an unhealing wound.

Never can man find peace :
Into his drowsiest ease
Drops Beauty, like an arrow from the sky,
And he puts out to sea,
Yearning, yet wearily,
As one that to his love draws never nigh—
For in the morrow is her home
And only to the threshold will she come.

Yet at her silver voice
Man cannot but rejoice ;
How should he sleep when his fair love's
awake ?
And though the world be lost,
Little he counts the cost
Who joyfully bites the steel for her sweet
sake—
Lover, fighter, poet, seer,
Shaping the world to glass her, bright and clear.

The days grew short, the shadows long :
The rising sea howled down the song

That Sabitu would sing her dear;
 And on her heart an iron fear
 Closed in. For he would watch, long hours,
 The blue of the air, the green of the seas,
 As though some vast and vagrant Powers
 Were ambushed in the essences
 Of air and water, light and sound,
 And would be his, could they be found.
 Ah, had she known *whose* voice was calling,
Who, wave upon wave, was slowly entralling
 Her lover ! But she never knew :
 So all day long her low, sweet song
 Was drowned by the silence of Lilitu.

For Lilitu is she that sings
 Beneath all tones an undersong :
 Never the outward ear enslaving,
 She stirs the dark of the soul with craving
 For woes to bear, never yet borne,
 And gaunt, grey hardship, edged with scorn,
 For horrors to face through an endless
 night
 And mad, inhuman, bitter things.
 Whom she loves, to him she sings.
 She is the sadness in falling rain,
 In dawns that break on revelry
 And in that old, pale beast, the sea.
 The mournful hue of distances,
 The autumn rosebud, fashioned in vain,
 The wild swan's melancholy flight,
 The unbroken stellar silences—

80 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

All are arrows in her armoury :
Whom she loves, she tries with these.

At even, in the garden roaming,
Gilgamesh foreknew her coming,
Who she was, and why she came—
' The Lady of Night who hath no Lover,'
The frozen-hearted, the desert-rover,
Who burns with ice, as love with flame.
His lips grew thin : his eye looked sorrow.
At last to his love he cried, " To-morrow
I'll play no more this lovers' game."

But ere the dark came over heaven,
She took her harp of golden wires
And sang of Gods and the Sleepless Seven
Who quench with a spell the starry fires. †
Softly she sang—too soft, too sweet,
For a lover dreaming of snow and sleet
And pounding waves in awful caves
And the icy shadow of Aralu.

She brought him roses, white and red ;
He never saw, and nothing said :
But only watched, as she sang of home,
The momentary towers of foam
Rising and falling on the shore
Evermore and evermore,
Like prisoned souls in Aralu.
Thus she sang, nor ever knew
What Powers are leagued against lovers true.

" O turn not from the roses red and white,
Nor toss that stormy head
Because their story is but candlelight!
The petals fall; their pygmy fires are sped:
Thy sun and stars of beauty share their flight.

" O stay and hearken to the lonely bird
That brings the gold of even
And sings an older song than any word !
Grant me love's flaming hour, his fleeting
heaven,
Before gold fades and song no more is heard.

" When thou art gone, flowers will forget to
bloom,
And dove and leaf to sing :
A lover's grief no candle can illumine,
But day grows bleary as a blinded thing,
And night, an echoing, shadow-peopled tomb."

Her lip quivered on that heavy word :
Each looked at each, and never stirred,
For a thousand voices, floating up
Like bubbles from a mile-deep cup,
Flung it back with gibber and boom
And the broken voices of the shore—
Mocking laughter, dying scream,
Now a whimper, then a roar :
So cry the ghosts at a bolted door,
Thrust from life for evermore,
Evermore !

82 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

While their kindred sleep and dream
And babble in their sleep and snore,
And far more blest they seem
Than the clustered ghosts a-cold,
Yet who is blest, till all is told ?
Who has rest, save in the mould ?
Thus the sea with summoning tone
Cried and seethed about her throne
Who long had dwelt, how long ! alone,
Where the waters champ and churn—
The Wild Waters of No Return,
The whistling waste that bounds the world.

How beautiful she was, with her tresses pearled
By foam of the sea ! How still her ways,
Giving a charm to weariness !
There were a glory in distress,
A light upon disastrous days,
A rest in very sorrow's riot,
If under those unclouded eyes
The life be spent—those evening skies,
Blue sanctuaries and pools of quiet.

She saw him waver, and sang again,
Foreknowing all his piercing pain
And shadow-chase and bitter defeat.

" Dark and high is the Wall of the World,
White the Water of No Return.
Ah ! kiss thy sweet, ere thou art whirled
Where no love is, nor lovers meet*
Where neither tears nor kisses burn."

" No ! It may not be.
 Man is restless as the sea,
 Masterful as the plunging air.
 I go—I have no other care—
 Across the Waters of No Return,
 And sail to the Isle beyond the Earth.
 I cannot stay : my temples burn
 When I watch the white-whipped firth
 And feel the arrows of the brine.
 For I have seen the Lilitu
 Rising from the early dew
 Like a mist, and drunk her brew
 Of flame and lament and bitter wine ;
 And bending down, she calls to me
 Out of the fates and flowers to be—
 Calls from the shimmering Otherwhere
 That few desire and none discern.
 Beyond the Waters of No Return
 She rides her horse down the blue of the air
 And swims below the green of the sea."

For that one night the sea was calm,
 Stirred but by ripples; and every palm,
 Which many a thousand years had waved
 Like fans behind a great queen's throne,
 Hung still. It seemed that all things craved
 To see what fate from heaven would fall
 On these two creatures, all alone
 At the World's Dark End—so sweet, so
 small!
 With rounded back and silver shoon

84 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Like an eavesdropper walked the moon :
Now more of horror was on the blue :
And, far in the west, there seemed to be
Such stifled whimpers from Aralu
As a child might utter within its tomb.

A horrid hour is the middle of night ;
Broods of calamity and fright
Come boiling out of its silent womb :
For just at midnight the Seven rise
From the well at the bottom of Aralu,
Where shines no star, where falls no dew ;
They have bubbles for their eyes,
To see each side, before, behind ;
So keen their sight, they see the wind,
And their furred ears hear the thistle down
Launch itself, when the thistle's brown ;
Or, sitting on the Zagros Wall
They can hear the cricket call
Under the cedars of Lebanon.
At midnight, too, fall many stars
(And woe to the land they fall upon !)
Then storms break loose ; kings hatch their
 wars ;
Plagues are let fall from heaven's bars ;
And, parched with the dust of Aralu,
The dead sneak upward to lap the dew.
Aye, dreadful the hour of middle night,
Though the moon be merry and stars be
 bright,
And fearfully Sabitu lay in bed,

Feigning to sleep : she watched her lover
 Rise to depart, yet nothing said,
 Knowing her April of joy was over ;
 For like a fate the hero moved,
 Though like a golden bird he loved.
 There in her great, dark bed she lay
 Till the Hell-Birds sang the break of day
 And she woke—poor, gentle Sabitu—
 She woke, a leper.

Far away

Shone her lover's sail on the horrid blue ;
 And though his eyes were often turning
 To where the last edge of life was burning,
 He never knew.

Yes, she that cures the woes of men,
 Taking them motherly to her breast,
 Shall never know delight again
 Nor peace, till her eternal rest.

And yet—how vain, to warn her so!
 For, at all cost, in a heavy hour
 A woman will her pity show :
 Indeed, it is her very flower,

The rose of her garden, the spark of her
 wine,
 The marvel that makes her draught divine,
 The well whose depth man cannot guess
 Though hard upon her lips he press.

86 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

When Gilgamesh, at the midnight hour,
Stole down the steps of the crazy tower,
He paced the border of the sea
To and fro, while slumber deep
Sealed the spirit of every flower,
And [even the birds forgot to weep.
" Nothing moves on the shore" said he,
" And how shall I sail to Aralu
Without a boat and a comrade, too ? "

So he spoke, musing, to himself.

Hard by, from a low, slippery shelf
That overhung the echoing ocean,
Uprose a bald, wet, one-eyed pate—
Then shoulders like a Babylonian bull's,
And legs which with a rolling gait
Had paced the decks of antique hulls
Ere man had life or the stars had motion :
Skipping over the rocks he came,
As goats will play, though old and lame,
And now on the water, now in the air
He seemed to dance, like a marshlight flame,
Till Gilgamesh cried, " Ho ! Ho, there !
Wilt sail a boat to Aralu ?"

" O Gilgamesh, whose heart is true,
I am sent to thee ! I know thy name.
I am the sailor, Arad, born
—Within sound of the surf on the world's
first morn—

Of grit of the earth and salt of the sea.
The Lilith, she hath sent for thee."

So, ere the woeful break of day
(For dawn is pale on the world's last shore)
They pushed out into the windy roar,
Then, swiftly and eerily, drew away.

Shearing across that troubled strait—
Which doubles its distance every hour,
To baffle the living and curb the dead—
It seemed they would never reach the gate
Of Aralu, though vast the power
Of Arad, and fathom-deep the swirls
Of water from his sculls that fled.
For ever the wind would chop about
And the hero shake and Arad shout ;
And light seemed the love of Lilitu
To weigh in the scale against so true
A thing as woman's heart can be,
And ease, laughter, and boys and girls.

Shrill piped the wind. Coldly hissed the sea.

But now they were half across the strait;
" Sit fast!" howled Arad to his mate,
And like a wall of air, dark brown,
The Lost Wind came in thunder down
From Mount Mashu. With long, sad wail
It sang in the shrouds : far off, the sail

88 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Like a ghostly sea-bird, disappeared.
Loud laughed Arad—but his laugh
Was caught away (as burning chaff
Is whirled from the fire) and never heard ;
But Gilgamesh saw his toothless mouth
Fall open, like a dog's in drouth,
And thought, " O Gods of my home ! to be
Adrift with a madman on such a sea ! "

But Arad beckoned and beckoned yet,
Till Gilgamesh lashed the helm, and set
His teeth, and crawled to Arad's side,
Putting his ear to Arad's lips ;
And " Look ahead—ahead ! " he cried,
" Where bleach the bones of the Gods' own
ships :
Canst see ? Canst hear them howling, too—
The starving Hounds of Aralu ?"

Right on before them lay the reef
That girdles the Isle beyond the Earth—
Pale rocks, whose monstrous cries of grief,
Titanically disconsolate,
And demon mirth and hurricane hate,
Sounded across that maddened firth
From dismal dawn to tragic even
And all the hours of the darkened heaven:
These were the Hounds of Aralu.
Nor bird of the sea nor bird of land—
No gull nor ominous cormorant,
Nor even the Hell-Birds, dared to haunt

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 89

Those fangs, now hidden, now bared to the
sky,
Champing and frothing eternally.

Now shouted the seas on either hand :
Now up from the depth vast bubbles burst,
And Arad roared, " 'Tis surely the worst
The sea can do, but if we live,
The boat must go, and 'tis little worth
To be cast on an Island beyond the Earth ! "

Loudly he laughed, but harder pulled.
His yellow features, puckered and ruled
With dykes and ridges, seemed as clay
Shaped by some child of the Gods at play
(For of such mighty frolic, 'tis said,
Come maniacs, monsters, things of dread,
And beauty, the wildest marvel of all,
That tears man's heart, yet dies in a day) ;
Like an old tower before its fall,
Seamed and cracked, he took the gale,
And, shrouded in rain and falling foam,
Vanished, returned—as go and come
The wraiths of the slain to sweethearts pale.

Suddenly, through the driving scud
Looming, immense, two faces stood
Above the prow, above the mast:
To port and starboard high they reared
Their dripping brows. The spindrift cleared
A moment, and the boat shot past

90 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Between those awful heads of stone,
Named Silence and Oblivion.
The hero gazed into their eyes,
And their eyes shed tears, yet could not see
(For all their look of sad surprise),
For they were blind from eternity.
And looking on their *grizzly* stare,
Gilgamesh laughed loud and long ;
For though the courage and limbs be strong,
Yet stony or windy forms of fear
May soon be more than man can bear.

Now they shot into glassy seas
And Arad stretched his legs at ease ;
The hero, slipping from his folly
Into a sleepy melancholy,
Sang to himself an idle song.

" O stark and barren shore,
Whereon for evermore
Are blown the fleets of frail mortality !
Why did we pass those faces of stone ?
What are we doing here ?—Alone,
And under what a sky!

" Fools, to have dreamt that we
Could leash the bounding sea
And hold the waves of disaster from their prey!
What Well of Life, how deep soever,
Could slake death's everlasting fever
Or turn his night to day ?"

But Arad rolled his storm-grey eye
 Up to the blind and stony sky,
 And grinned : " I always said, for one,
 The thing by man could never be done,
 But, as for me, I came for fun.
 For sure, there's nothing like a trip
 With death on the sea, and death in the ship,
 And above, the stony sky."

" Ay, ay ! " said the stony sky,
 Rolling the echo round and round
 Irrevocably, eternally,
 From crag to crag, bound after bound,
 Till Gilgamesh with gathering dread
 Stopped his ears and bowed his head ;
 Still Arad's voice—half laugh, half moan—
 Haunted the vast bell's monotone.

But Arad came and whispered close :
 " Why, any yearling traveller knows
 How every word a man has said
 Floats up, and echoes in the sky
 From cloud to cloud, for ever and aye,
 That the Gods may know what mischief's
 brewing :
 But all the world's so full of noise
 Of buying and selling, hates, loves, joys,
 Of this fool spoiling what that fool's doing,
 Of foxy priest and wolfish king,
 That a man must come to Aralu
 Ere he can hear that echo true.

92 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

And who once has heard—by heaven's light!
'Tis little he sleeps in the dead of night."

Each looked at each, and began to sing
(For the sky was filled with whispering—
" Night! Night! Dead of Night! ").

They touched the shore of Aralu :
No light was in the gaunt, grey sky.
They searched the hollow of Aralu
Wildly, eagerly, ecstatically.
There in the depths they found the Well
Of the Water of Life, where the Seven dwell,
And in it—the dust of hopes and fears,
Things forgotten, disasters, tears.

So they sat and took their rest
And grimly chuckled and sadly sighed ;
For grimmest of things a man may know
Is the horror of the finished quest.

Said Arad, " Come ! It we have tried
And failed, let us push on to find
The Mountain of the Gods, and beard them
so—

Let's force their Door, and peep behind.
For, as I've heard tell, an old Somebody there
Nods in a cold, dark, windy chair,
Bigger than any promontory,
With stars foaming round, like a silent sea.
And he has birds as broad as ships,
And voices that sing without lips,

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 93

And sweet as a twelve-hour sleep is their
call—

A song of love for Nothing-at-all
(But whether that is Somebody's name
Or Something else, it's all the same)
I've heard——"

But Gilgamesh up-sprang :
Icily on the slopes his footsteps rang.

They climbed the mountain, cruel and high :
It pierced beyond the stony sky,
Beyond the clouds, like floating feathers,
And light and dark, and changing weathers,
Towering far over the Zagros Wall,
Where they could see the Immortals crawl
To and fro, in their ageless wrath,
Like ants across a forest path.

They climbed for months ; they climbed for
years,

Till their limbs were far leaner than their
spears—

So lean, their very bones would rattle ;
Their tattered shreds hung white with rime ;
Their eyeballs gleamed ; their talk was
prattle.

Still they gazed up, but still must climb.

Full many a mile they mounted together
And fought their way, side by side,
Through all the stars and their dirty weather—

94 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Aye, and many a death they died.
At last, before them—the mountain summit,
The spire of the world, the home of Gods !

Far down,
Even beyond a demon's plummet,
In the cup of earth with mountain rims
Were men still fighting, women still sweet ?
Princes treacherous ? Priests at their hymns ?
Shrines full of the whisper of pilgrim feet ?

They could not tell. But, right before
Their eyes, towered up an Iron Door.
They were within the courts of heaven,
Where is neither dawn nor even
Nor hour of love nor hour of prayer ;
Yet, for ever and for ever,
Million on million spirits there
With tossing arms and lovely heads
Throng round the Door in desperate en-
deavour
To wake the Gods that sleep inside,
With half-open eyes, half-pricked ear,
On acre-wide black granite beds :
But never will they make them hear
Nor ever did, though they have tried
Thousands of years ; for these are the ghosts
Of men unborn—no voice have they :
None knows, but One, what they would say ;
But—if 'tis true, as the wise men tell
In Babylon—they dread to go

And be incarnate here below,
 Hating the terrible moment of birth
 As we the death-pang, the demon bell;
 And as we plead for life on earth,
 For eternal nescience they pray
 Silently, frantically,
 In vain—for in never-ending hosts
 The Lost Wind hurries them away
 Down to the world's all-wrecking sea.

Behind the Door what Gods lie sleeping ?
 Whose seed are they, and in Whose keeping ?
 'Tis said, there sits in the inmost chamber,
 Beyond more doors than man could number,
 An old white Potter, half asleep.
 Idly he nods above his wheel—
 A wheel as broad as heaven is deep—
 And though it seems he only dreams,
 Yet whirls, for ever whirls the wheel.

But Arad and Gilgamesh stood there
 With dropped jaw, and a drunken stare,
 Watching those lovely heads, those arms
 Tossing, stretching, for evermore—
 Like the momentary towers of foam
 That rose and fell along the shore
 Of Sabitu's bright, thunderous home—
 Like the prisoned souls in Aralu—
 Like men, women, children, bound by charms
 To live where laughter can never come
 And do the thing they would not do.

96 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

" It seems we strive not to be born ;
And then we struggle never to die ;
And then we struggle to return
To earth ; and we fail in all we try."

So Gilgamesh, despairing, muttered.
But then—as if a bird had fluttered
Into the night of a noonday tree,
And there had begun to beat, unseen,
A pulse of song in the heart of green—
Something that was not sound nor voice,
Yet soothed the spirit with silken joys,
Broke out of silence drowsily—
Out of silence deeper than the sea.

" Sleep, sleep, sleep
In the soundless caverns deep
Of the silver, silver sky !
Half laughing, and
Half weeping,
In starlight's quiet
Keeping,
None may touch you, none may guess
Who you are, what weary stress
Set you free of consciousness.
In the soundless caverns deep
Of the silver, silver sky,
Sleep, O sleep!
Sleep !
Sleep ! "

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 97

Their ears were charmed, their eyes stared
round,

Their stubborn hearts yearned to the sound ;

Their giant limbs seemed ready to fail ;

Their eyelids drooped, their lips grew pale,

" Sleep, sleep, sleep ! "

Sang the voices beyond the deep

Of the frozen silver sky :

But high,

Singing,

Echoing, ringing

Like a great bronze bell's imperious toll,

Rose the voice of the Lilith, calling,

Terrible, sweet—as waters falling,

Thunder, the wind in trees, the ring

Of the bridal chorus in flaming spring,

When life strikes through and through the
soul.

Clearly she sang, and loud sang she :

" Follow me, O follow me,

Down to the earth, down to the sea!

Who sleeps beneath this silver bowl,

Sleeps for ever, sleeps alone.

Where is fighting Nimrud's son ?

The sailor's chanty, the sailor's mien ?

Would ye die the death of an autumn
bee?

Let dark grow darker, and wind blow keen:

Who'll back to the earth and its storms with
me?"

98 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

They turned — with tears, but yet they
turned,
Weary with the weariness of dogged men :
But, deep within, the soul still burned
Like a panther's eye from its inmost den.
Alive—from heaven—they two returned
To the foot of the mountain, the dust of
fears,
Things forgotten, disasters, tears.

There, on that old, pale, whispering shore
They slept, 'tis said, of years a score ;
Twenty years deep was their despair,
Twenty years deep their rest from care :
And when they woke, and stretched, and
stared,
Their bodies of clothes and skin were bared
And the Lost Wind whistled between their
bones.
Hard by, wind-gathered beneath the stones,
Lay a heap of dust, which once had been
The first of ships to whiten the green
Of the unloved virgin sea.

Yet there, they say, with sinews creaking
And palsied hands, and never speaking,
They built a ship with ends and odds
Of the broken galleys of Sea Gods,
And, tack by tack, to earth crept back,
While another score of years flew by,
Unmarked beneath the muttering sky.

And year by year, and hour by hour,
 The hero dreamed of the ancient tower
 Of Sabitu and of her love
 And how he nevermore would rove,
 But by her side in her love-lit chamber
 Watch the white sea-horses clamber
 And scatter and drive in a falling shower.
 And once he cried, as they drew to shore,
 " Ah, when shall death no more, no more
 Bestride the world ? And when shall man
 Live blithely ? When sing once again
 With round, red mouth, and unafraid
 What God is listening from the shade ?
 And when shall a man be madly loved
 And take his maiden, unreprieved ?"

But Arad laughed, and the echo rolled
 Back from the cliffs at the World's Dark End :
 " When all youth's old, all sorrow cold,
 When all men fail, yet will not weep—
 To the Water of Life which never was
 The world may come to drink—and sleep.
 Till then, on the Ocean of No Return
 The Lost Wind blows, the waters churn,
 Nor will this stone-blind weather mend, '
 Nor love ever cease to hurt and burn."

Alas ! they came to the World's Dark End,
 But the walls were cracked, the light shone
 through
 The crumbling tower of Sabitu ;

100 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

For she, poor bird, to the world had fled,
Nor would she ever come again
Nor show him that once glorious head;
(She would not give her lover pain—
Never, never give him pain :
So she to the roaring world would go—
The wonder world, the world of woe.)
And there she healed her tortured life
Through aeons of pity and aeons of strife,
Facing her endless blackened morrows
With the king of beasts, the creature of
sorrows ;

For, though her lover for ever was gone,
Yet was he man, and men lived on,
Weeping, invincible, fugitive,
Crying for rest, for battle burning :
In the large beam of her eye to live
Even to this day is all their yearning,
And now no more in dream she comes,
But dances and sings in firelit homes.

' Aye, she was gone : and Arad said,
Peering about through the squalls of rain,
" Maybe she's sick or old or wed—
Once lost, a woman's as good as dead ;
And that's the reason we sailors take
Every chance that women make,
For a landsman, day after day, can meet
Lips like fire and dancing feet
And marvellous, unfathomable eyes,
But we must live on memories."

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 101

So Gilgamesh returned once more
To his own city.

Along the shore
Of the brown Euphrates he returned,
And chuckled to see the water-lilies,
The mares at pasture with their fillies,
To watch the otter dive, the thrushes
Skimming low across the rushes,
And rabbits, bliie with pollen, gaze
Down the grassy, sandy ways.

He saw where the silver gateways burned
As long ago ; the caravans
Streamed home with tinkling brazen pans,
Bottles of glass, and jewelled ware,
Agates, found in Choaspes' bed,
To deck some queen's proud-flashing head,
Combs, carven with lions, for her hair,
And copper rings from Palestine,
Tadmor salt and Helbon wine,
Kohl and antimony, sweetmeats, toys,
Bracelets for girls, and knives for boys :
He heard the women welcome home
Their merchants under the evening palms
With tears of joy and timbrelled psalms :
And oh, how bravely the poplar shimmered,
How homely the twilight cypress glimmered,
To men returned through sand and foam !

All great bare bones he passed the gate :
His camel's ribs seemed carven in stone.

102 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

The crowd fell silent, one by one ;
The women cowered ; the children flew ;
The blind men, who for years had sate
In that same spot, for some to cure,
Began to whisper, " What is wrong ?
Why doth none speak in all the throng ?
Is it a prophet that can cure ?"
And even the travellers, who knew
The dreadful wonders of the dark world,
Fell back in awe. The concourse swirled
Before, behind him, like a flood ;
And, " Hush, hush ! " the blind men sighed,
" Whom hath he cured ? What prophesied ? "
But Gilgamesh pressed on in pride,
And " Surely," thought he, " they know
their king,
Their laughter-lover, their battle-king ? "
Then still, like a blasted tree, he stood
And said, " My people, know ye me ? "

No creature moved: no voice replied,
Till a wine-red fellow at a tavern door
Cried, " Know thee ? How should we know
thee ?

Old Death we know, from the dusty shore,
But—thee ? Nay, nay, we know thee not."

Then up to heaven rolled such a roar
Of laughter, that the dark Immortals
Glared from their everlasting portals
Down on that little twilight spot.

There they saw the hero stand
 With knotted staff in knotted hand
 Beside his way-worn, solemn mount—
 Now looking into the children's eyes,
 So troubled with fearful phantasies,
 Now envying the old blind men
 Who, night by night, went home again.
 Then, as he saw his fathers' home
 With pillars more than man may count
 And cressets swung from its aery dome
 And all its shining doors flung wide,
 He mounted again his ancient beast
 And, half in ecstasy, half in pride.
 Into the flash and hum of the feast
 Rode, singing of the Lilitu
 Who gallops her horse down heaven's blue,
 And shouted, " Ho ! who comes with me
 Up the mountains and over sea
 For love of things that are far away ? "

The guests were dumb. But a cursed priest
 Knew that black fire of the eye, that beard
 Out-thrust to meet the things he feared,
 And began in his silvery voice to pray
 That the old curse again might fall
 On Gilgamesh. But through the hall
 The hero's laughter crashed and rolled
 Like surf when the deep-sea bells are tolled:
 And a youth, with lips at the goblet's brim,
 Stayed and faltered—then flung it down,
 Crying, " I will follow him !

104 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

For he has seen the Lilitu
Weaving, weaving her poisoned gown,
And forced the door that dead men guard.
It seems—has a fiend bewitched me, too ?—
As *if for us* his face is scarred."

Then all at once cried out on him
With gaping mouth and round, white eyes,
" The Lilitu hath looked on him—
He hath embraced a whirl of the air !
So now he goes, who was all rose,
With lily face tattered by care
And that stark aspect of surprise—
Round and about the world he goes"

Another, " Nay, but he hath been,
Surely, to Aralu, and seen
Things that have blasted out his eyes.
Ask him what passes in Aralu,
And whether it's deep, and where it lies."

But Gilgamesh turned on him his gaze :
" O fool, hard by is Aralu—
Tis on the sea, in the air,
Beneath the earth—aye, everywhere !
And neither beneath the Zagros pines
Nor deep in Lebanon silver mines
Nor on the fairest voyages
Across the dancing Indian seas
Is Aralu so far away
That you could not reach it in one day.

And the Deaf Reaper of Aralu
 Is never far from me or you—
 Reaping, reaping, hour upon hour,
 The corn and the blue, the scarlet, flower ;
 Questioned of many, never replying,
 For he hears nought of all our crying,
 Because the Gods destroyed his ears
 Lest he be moved by human tears/

Ending, he laughed—a bitter laugh,
 And seized a bowl of wine to quaff ;
 Drinking, he glared upon them long,
 Then stood full height and sang his song.

Idle, idle
 Sits the Potter,
 Yet for ever
 Whirls the wheel.

" The wheel can never
 Cease from turning,
 Nor the stars
 Their quiet burning,
 Nor the ghosts
 (For all their yearning)
 Strike the path
 To the sun returning.
 Silent, silent
 Sits the Potter,
 Yet for ever
 Flies the wheel.

106 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

" When the wheel
Will swifelier spin
And the flying cup
Begins to thin,
Beauty's self
Is fluttering in.
Fill the cup
To flash and shine—
The earthen form
With a soul of wine !
Breaks the cup,
Outflows the wine,
Yet spins, for ever
Spins the wheel.

" When the wheel
Turns softly round
And the dizzy lamp
Its shape has found
And the housewife's
Oil has filled it,
Who shall say
The Potter willed it,
If the lamp
Falls to the ground
Or fires the world
From bound to bound ?
Dreaming, dreaming
Sits the Potter :
Alone for ever
Whirls the wheel."

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 107

The king's minstrels stared in wrath,
Like tigers trapped on their wonted path,
And cried, " Shall we be oversung
By a bull's throat and a lusty lung? "
So they plucked their harpstrings, till there
came

Cunning sounds, like a thin, blue flame
Crawling into the hearts of men
And living there—beyond their ken,
Yet ever near and never tame.

Then they sang. And every guest
Hung his head above his cup,
Seeing his face as he loved best
To see it, gazing dimly up—
Vague, elusive, wonderful.
The wine shone darkly ; the night grew cool.

The Kings Minstrels

" Lovely and cold is night,
Lovely and cold are the Gods,
Cold, lovely, their works.
But who can outface the night ?
Who uncover the world
Or love the cold-shadowing. Gods ?

" Only the son of the Gods,
Born in the hush of their shrine,
Fed on the heart of the world,
Drunk with their aery wine :

108 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Only the son of the Gods,
Born in the blue of the night—
Heaven's poet, the priest—
Can face the malevolent night
As the hunter a stalking beast ;
Can lift the myriad veils
Where the frozen Immortals hide,
And plunder the dark of the world
As the bridegroom plunders the bride :
And how should he have a care
For the love of a girl or a queen,
Knowing the hearts of the Gods—
Secret, inflexible, keen ?

" Lovely and cold are the Gods,
And their works are fair."

Gilgamesh

" What of the Gods ? No more ye know
Of whom they hunt or where they go
Than ye can guess of the bittern's ways,
When once and again his woeful sound
Startles the dead beneath the ground.
What of the Gods ? What of their ways ?
To have known the spring, the wonder
days,
The moon crossing the summer night,
The fugitive cloud, the dappled land,
With shadows and flowers now dusk, now
bright,

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 109

The wise, dark autumn weather, dreaming
Of flowers to come, in meadows teeming,
The vulture's claw, the camel's swing,
Plagues, horrors, none can understand
(Gifts from some God's too palsied hand)—
To have known all these, to have felt the
 sting
Of loss, with laughter, joy, despair,
And to have laboured against huge odds—
All this is finding more than Gods.
Yet once, in some such town as this,
I found a thing far better is
Than all the pride of the eye and ear—
A maiden's pride, a woman's kiss.
Would she were here ! "

An Old Woman

" Haply she sits among the old,
 As one whose tale is told."

Gilgamesh

" Maybe—maybe ! "

A Girl

" Now who would believe that this old fellow
Whose eye is so dim and his skin so yellow
Could ever have bridled a girl—like me ! "

no THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Gilgamesh

" In fields, by waters, such as these,
Beneath the snowing orange trees
We met, and often lid surprise
Violet sorrows in her eyes,
Or spangling joys I'd there divine
And a sudden laugh, like sparks in wine."

The Old Woman

" But now she sits among the old,
Heedless—for her tale is told."

The Kings Minstrels {singing}

" There lived a queen in her palace,
Built of the sound of the sea ;
She was more fair than a dream is,
And she had suitors three.

" One was a fish in the river ;
One was a bird from afar ;
One was a God from the mountain
Where sits the polar star.

" The first could never draw near her ;
From the second she plucked his plumes ;
The third for ever and ever
Walks through her echoing rooms."

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 111

Gilgamesh

" I have seen other cities, other stars than these,
Women with larger pities, men whose wrath
 can freeze,
And I have done with your ditties of queens
 in their palaces
 Or Gods whose eyes can roam over woods,
 over seas,
Or wink and flash like foam in their empty
 sanctuaries.

" Priests have filled the earth with fools and
 the night with fabled ghouls,
Putting poison in the flower, shadowing the
 lover's hour ;
But little reck the Gods of poison, sin, or
 love's bright honey-flower."

Then priests and jesters and eunuchs and
 wenches
Banged their cups on the boards and benches,
To fill with clatter and ringing laughter
The cave of the past and the black hereafter :

" A wonderful, wonderful man is he,
To go under the earth and over the sea
And return with nought but a limp and a
 totter
And a roundabout, roundabout song of a
 Potter! "

112 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Sadly Gilgamesh rode his beast
Out of the hum of that ancient feast;
And Lilitu drew near, and sang—
From star to star her echoes rang,
And down the street and over the lea,
From earth to heaven, from heaven to sea :

" Knowest thou the weariness that grieves
the soul
And blinds the fire of the eye ?
Hast tasted hollow slumber from the poisoned
bowl
That killeth drowsily ?
Or sinkest thou, the hero of a hundred fights,
To the shame of scathless nights
And unhazarded delights ?

" Knowest thou the sea without a wind or
wave,
But a sorrow-sounding shore ?
And the silent courts where phantoms rave
Without an Iron Door ?
Inside, the Gods with open eye
Sleep, while myriads die
Beneath the unartswering sky.

" Leave the world to weary of its own repose
And clasp its withering flowers :
When the heart is broken, 'tis then leaps the
rose
To amaranthine bowers.

THE EVERLASTING QUEST 113

Knowest thou defeat, my love ? In shades
of doom
Upsprings the one sole bloom
That flowers within the tomb."

Westward he rode, westward again
In the last twilight, crawling slow,
With defiant head, between the low
Transparent walls of the growing grain.
The towers were blackened with them that
gazed :

Man turned to man, uneasy, amazed ;
And in the uncertain streets below
The blind hissed jealously, one to another,
" Is it you he has cured ? Is it you, brother ?"
But Gilgamesh rode on—his home,
The green of the world, the light of the
sky.

So now the old, long past their woe,
Or youngsters, living easily,
Can make a song of him, to say
" He loved the things that are far away,
And sank in the hush of the idle sea,
The cold blue of eternity—
Ah, Gods ! how long ago ! "

And yet—did Gilgamesh ever die ?
For some have caught his dim outlines
Among the heaven's wheeling signs
On the thin summits of the sky :

114 THE EVERLASTING QUEST

Nimrud, Orion—still he towers
Above the changing fates and flowers,
While cities fall and races pass—
Heeding no laughter and no sorrow,
Hunting a cold, divine To-morrow;
For still in the chase is his delight,
Still he strides the monstrous night
Toward the Water of Life which never was.

And even now the Lilith calls
From stars and trees and waterfalls,
From yellow street and factory
And lost lands and crowded sea,
Summoning man from the sickly mean,
Crying, " O follow, follow me !
The dark grows darker: the wind blows
 keen :
Who goes down to the hollow sea ?"

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