

APELLES, (*timidly.*)

Sweet, with whom?

CAMPASPE.

Canst doubt? then I will speak it,
Spite of maiden shame—with thee, with thee!
Whom some mysterious sympathy hath taught
To read my heart, and steal into its depths
By such sweet arts, as fixed thy image there
E'er I had learned to know its presence,—then—
(*Pauses abruptly, blushing and confused.*)

APELLES, (*ardently.*)

What then, my beautiful?

Pause not in thy sweet utterance—let it flow
On, on, for ever like a stream of joy,
Bathing my soul in bliss—Yes, we will fly,
Why should we linger here?

CAMPASPE.

Forbear the thought!

'Tis vain, impossible. Dangers environ
All unknown to thee. Death would pursue us
And arrest our flight. We must forego such hope.
The king already harbours jealous thought,
And is disturbed that yon unfinished work
Lingers beneath thy touch. I fear for thee—
Fear e'en to loiter here one moment more—
Perchance we'll meet again. List to that sound!
Some one approaches—oh, detain me not!
Thy safety asks my absence,—thine and mine—
Farewell, I must begone!

[*She goes hastily out, and immediately the king enters alone, through an opposite door. His looks are grave and severe, and by a gesture acknowledging the silent homage of Apelles, he walks towards the easel, and stands earnestly regarding the picture. After a brief survey, he addresses the Artist.*]

ALEXANDER.

Thy task goes slowly on, Apelles,—
One would fancy by its laggard progress
Thou wert enamoured of thy pictured work,
Or, like the royal Dame of Ithaca,
Whose endless web kept her unwelcome suitors
Long at bay, that thou for some wise purpose
Still undid, as she her tapestry,
Duly as night returns, all that the toils
Of the preceding day have brought to light.

APELLES.

Not so, oh king,—but difficult the task
To me assigned. It asks a master's hand
Patient and diligent, and skilled to touch,
With nicest art, each lineament and shade,
Which, when complete, shall form a perfect type
Of the divinest form the world ere saw.

ALEXANDER.

Ha! is it so? I'll probe him deeper yet. (*Aside.*)
(*Aloud.*) To thee, who that immortal picture drew

Of Beauty's Queen, rising from ocean's caves,
Eternal youth, and joy ineffable,
Breathing their hues divine o'er all her form,
Stamped, by the impress of thy master mind,
With the intense reality of life,—
To thee, methinks, after this matchless work,
All tasks within the compass of thy art
Should trifling seem. Then wherefore falter,
When mere mortal charms thy study form,
Whose glory fades, e'er to the canvas
They can be transferred.

APELLES.

Great King, 'tis easier far,
A bright ideal to invest with life,
And shape, and hue, than catch from living beauty,
Its pure light, its splendour, and its glow,
And in the moveless copy, to transfuse
The subtle charm, that still eludes all art.
I with my pencil can depict the form,
The golden hue, of yon resplendent sun,—
But can I e'er enchain its glowing light,
Its grateful warmth, its vivifying heat,
Or, the effulgence of its radiant beams,
Kindling with glory heaven's cerulean arch?

ALEXANDER.

Thou art aspiring, and would'st climb the heavens,
Prometheus-like, to snatch its sacred fire,
And kindle life in statues made of clay.
We ask not this, but are content to see
In still repose, the forms of beauty,
Shadowed by thine art.

APELLES.

Such is my aim;
But shadowed with the truth of breathing life,
The spirit looking through with eyes of light,
The smile still fitting, and the heart's deep thoughts
Writ on the brow, revealing glimpses
Of that inner world, where the soul loves to dwell.

ALEXANDER.

If this thy purpose, thou'st achieved it here,
For never copy came so near to truth.

APELLES.

Here is the outward semblance, gracious king,
But cold and passionless, compared to her,
With beauty redolent, and flushed with youth,
This is indeed an image formed of clay—
But heaven must lend its hues, its sacred fire,
Its inspiration high, to aid my art,
E'er I do justice to such matchless charms.

ALEXANDER.

Yet gods and heroes, 'neath thy daring touch,
Leap up to life, making the canvas speak
Louder than history's voice, to future ages,
Of heroic deeds and acts sublime—
Can'st thou then shrink from task so light as this?
Or is it that too low the subject seems,
For thy aspiring power?