

SISYPHUS: AN OPERATIC FABLE

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Sisyphus: an operatic fable by R. C. Trevelyan

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R. C. TREVELYAN

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OPERATIC FABLE**

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AN OPERATIC FABLE
BY
R·C·TREVELYAN

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DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

SISYPHUS	king of Corinth
MEROPE	his wife
SINON	his son
AIDONEUS	king of the Underworld
HERMES	. . . . .	grandfather to Sisyphus
CHARON		
XANTHIAS	. . . . .	a slave
EUDAMIDAS	. . . . .	king of Argolis
THANATOS	. . . . .	the God of Death
HUPNOS	. . . . .	the God of Sleep
TIME		
HEPHAESTUS		
HERACLES		
APHRODITE		
ARTEMIS		
A LAWYER		
A HERALD		
CHORUS	. . . . .	of Corinthian men and women
		<i>Shades, Furies, Slaves, Courtiers, Cyclopes, Undertakers, Doctors, Expectant heirs, Soldiers, Priests, etc.</i>

ACT I. SCENE I.

(In front of the palace of Sisyphus. Before the closed doors is a platform, raised a few feet above the level of the stage. In the street below, and on the broad stone steps leading down to it, groups of men and women are sitting and standing. It is early dawn when the curtain rises, and becomes continually lighter during the following chorus.)

CHORUS.

Light dawns; the pale stars waste;
The night is dead:
Yet Sisyphus still lives. O Death, Death!
Hither, we pray thee, haste
To his death-bed.

Haste, oh haste thee hither, Death!
Stone-dead, the proverb saith,
Hath no fellow. Moan by moan,
Gasp by gasp, groan by groan,
O just, benign and holy Death,
Draw thou forth his sinful breath,
Till he lieth cold as stone.

Thanatos, O just Thanatos!
Oh delay not; hither haste thee,
That this Sisyphus, the tyrannous, the abominable,
Thou may'st carry to Acheron away with thee!
Haste, oh haste thee hither, Death!
Stone-dead, the proverb saith,
Hath no fellow: then haste thee, Death.

(The central doors of the palace open, and SISYPHUS is carried out on a couch by slaves, and set down on the platform. MEROPE, SINON, and several courtiers, enter and range themselves at a little distance behind and on each side of SISYPHUS.)

Act I *SISYPHUS.*

Scene I Here, slaves, set down my couch.

Here let me rest awhile.

Once more would I behold the dawn with eyes

Death-dimmed, and bid farewell

Both to my loving people and to thee, my wife.

CHORUS.

Oh see! see! He faints.

His eyes close, his pale face is drawn.

Doth he live? Is he dead?

Haste, oh haste thee hither, Death!

Stone-dead, the proverb saith,

Hath no fellow: then haste thee, Death.

MEROPE. (Aside.)

I too, so do I hate the wretch,

Though I be his wedded queen,

Yet, softly aside to avoid a scene,

In Death's dull ear I whisper thus:

Haste, oh haste thee hither to fetch

The soul of my husband Sisyphus.

Stone-dead, the proverb saith,

Hath no fellow: then haste thee, Death.

CHORUS.

Hush! Beware! Beware!

But now his thin lips stirred.

Have a care!

He liveth still.

Speak no rash word,

Lest ye be overheard,

And your expectations crossed,

When he alters a tenth time to your cost,

With a last bitter codicil,

His nine-times altered will.

SISYPHUS.

My wife, my sons, draw near my bed, for I

Once more would speak with you before I die.
Where is my lawyer? Let him fetch my will.
I wish to add another codicil.

Act I
Scene I

CHORUS.
Another codicil!
Another still
To his polycodicilic will!
Ah, what may this portend?
'Tis the tenth he hath penned.
Soon may Death seal an end.

LAWYER. (*Stepping forward.*)
Behold thy will, great king! The new clause drawn
According to thy draft, and in due form
Engrossed, awaits thy signature.

SISYPHUS. 'Tis well.
Prop me on pillows, so, that I may sign,
Then die.
But first, dear wife, thine hand in mine,
Give heed to these my last words ere I pass.
How wicked past all wickedness, alas!
Beyond all vileness vile, my life hath been,
None knows more surely than thou dost, my queen.
Cruel and treacherous, faithless, dissolute, loose,
Yet ever jealous with no least excuse
From thy meek virtue, thou pure innocent soul,
Mild martyr of connubial control,
An evil lord thou hast found me; nay, a worse
Perchance proved never blameless woman's curse.

CHORUS.
Oh wondrous! Yea, most strange, if true!
Doth now remorse like gentle dew
Fall softly down in unseen shower
Upon this withered human flower?
Oh truly strange! Nay, strange, if true!

Act I *SISYPHUS.*

Scene I When forth from this crumbling house of clay,
This once so splendid palace of proud sin,
Silently like a thief into vast night
My soul shall glide, mourn me not then with forced
And grudging piety, nor with ironic pomp
Of gorgeous obsequies and prodigal pyre
Presume thou to do honour to my bones;
But unembalmed, unhonoured, unbewailed,
Let some vile slave beyond the gates bear forth
And there, a prey to vultures, dogs and worms,
Upon some dung-heap cast my carrion down.

MEROPE.

Ah my loved lord, what strange wild words are these?
Ask me not this. Rather upon some peak
Of ice-helmed Caucasus there bid me freeze
And writhe beneath the ravening eagle's beak.
All direst torments rather would I choose
Than from thy cold dead clay withhold its funeral dues.

SISYPHUS.

Strive not against my dying wish, dear wife.
By my last will in trust to thee for life
I give two thousand talents, and devise,
Together with my park at Sicyon,
My winter palace there. Then be thou wise,
And disobey me not when I am gone;
Else to the priesthood of my grandsire's shrine
The whole must lapse—(The pen, that I may sign!)
—Close-locked in strict implacable mortmain;
Whilst on that day, pious alas in vain,
Shalt thou, poor mourning widow unconsolated,
Upon my interdicted pyre behold
Thy cherished hopes to dust and ash consumed,
Last with me in the avenging urn entombed.

MEROPE.

If that be so, then to thy strange desire