

COSMOS

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Ernest McGaffey

COSMOS

By ERNEST McGAFFEY

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DEDICATED TO
CARTER H. HARRISON
OF CHICAGO

COSMOS

ONE

I

Go search the æons an you will
Where withered leaves of Doubt are whirled,
And who hath solved this riddle, Life,
Or Death—that moves with sails unfurled,
Beyond the straining eyes of man
Marooned upon an unknown world.

II

Nor tongue hath told, nor vision caught
 That paradox, Primeval Cause;
 Each age has had some parable
 Each age succeeding marked the flaws;
 While shifted, with the calendar,
 What men have termed generic laws.

III

Creed after creed behold them now
 Like Etna on Vesuvius piled;
 Till, scaled to earth by drifting sands
 They lie in later days reviled,
 And pushed aside by Time's rough hand
 As toys are, by a peevish child.

IV

For Priest-made doctrine reads grotesque.
 And earthly worship is but dross;
 Whether it be your Brahm of Ind
 Or squat and hideous Chinese Joss;
 Or Jove, aloft on cloud-capped throne
 Or the pale Christ upon his cross.

V

Why question still the blindfold graves
 Or pluck the veil of Isis dread?
 Over Death's icy mystery
 A pall immutable is spread;
 And never tear-wrung agony
 Shall move the lips we loved—once dead.

VI

Why grope in labyrinthian maze?
 Why palter thus with doubt and fear?

The Past is but the mollusc print
 The Future looms, a barrier sheer;
 The Present centers in To-day
 The hope for men is Now, and Here.

VII

Believe no scientific cant
 That man descended from the ape;
 Gorilla-like once beat his breast
 And grew at last to human shape,
 To watch the flocks, and till the fields,
 Harry the seas and bruise the grape.

VIII

For though enrobed in savage skins
 And though his forehead backward ran,
 The brute was not all-dominant
 Some spark revealed a Primal plan;
 His brain was coupled with his will
 The hairy mammal still was man.

IX

And ever as the cycles waned
 He came and went, he rose and fell,
 At times transformed, as butterflies
 That rise from chrysalis in the cell;
 And oft through hate and ignorance
 Sunk downward deep as fabled Hell.

X

But through it all, and with it all
 How-e'er the upward trending veers,
 He fought his fight against great odds
 He peopled ice-bound hemispheres,
 Endured the sweltering Torrid Zones

And stamped his impress on the years.

TWO

I

What romance hast thy childhood known
 Of God-made world in seven days?
 Of woven sands and swaying grass
 And bird and beast in forest ways,
 Of panoramas vast unrolled
 Before a stern Creator's gaze?

II

Of rivers ribboning the vales;
 Of plains that stretched in smoothness down,
 And unborn seasons yet to be
 Spring's violet banks, and Autumn's brown;
 Bright Summer, mistress of the sun,
 And grey-beard Winter's boreal crown.

III

And when at length the scheme complete
 Unfolded to the Maker's sight,
 How He, Almighty and divine
 Said in his power, "Let there be light!"
 Gave sun and moon, and sowed the stars
 Along the furrows of the night!

IV

Lo! every nation has its tale
 And every people, how they be;

Whether where Southern zephyrs loose
 The blooms from off the tamarind tree,
 Or where the six-month seasons bide
 Around the cloistered Polar sea.

V

And Science with unyielding scales
 Weighs each and all of varied styles;
 And like a Goddess molds decrees
 Oblivious both to tears or smiles;
 Points out the error, reads the rule
 And God with Nature reconciles.

VI

But who shall sift the false and true?
 What Oracle the rule enforce?
 Not man-made creed, nor man-learned law
 Is wise to fathom Nature's course;
 No sea is deeper than its bed
 No stream is higher than its source.

VII

Vain hope to solve the Infinite!
 Mere words to babble, when they say
 "Thus Science teaches,"—"thus our God"—
 Thus this or that—what of it, pray?
 The marvel overlapping all—
 Go ask the Sphynx of Yesterday.

VIII

We know the All, and nothing know;
 The great we ken as well as least;
 But sum it all when we have said
 That man is different from the beast;
 And spite of all Theology
 The Pagan's equal to the Priest.

IX

And globes will lapse, and suns expire;
 As stars have fallen, worlds can change;
 Forever shall the centuries roll
 And roving planets tireless range;
 And Life be masked in secrecy
 With Death, as ever, passing strange.

X

And trow not, Mortal, in thy pride
 That where yon beetling column stands
 Rests Permanence; 'twill disappear
 To sink in marsh or barren lands,
 Where bitterns boom, or sunlight stares
 Across the immemorial sands.

THREE

I

Of old when man to being came
 He fashioned Gods of brittle bone;
 Bowed down to wooden fetiches
 Or worshipped idols carved from stone;
 And, locked in Superstition's grasp
 For sacrifice made lives atone.

II

And Fear was then the Higher Law
 And fleshly joys the aftermath;
 He knew no screed of Righteousness
 And trod no straight and narrow path;

His Deity a terror was
A Demon winged with might and wrath.

III

And then where Nilus dipped his feet
By Egypt sands, rose temples tall
To Isis and Osiris—Ptah—
And many a God foredoomed to fall;
Where sank the shades of Pharaoh's reign?
Whence have they vanished, one and all?

IV

But whiles to other years advanced
And now by cosmic marvels won,
Men sought remote Pelagian shores
Where breeze and spray their tapestry spun,
To wait the coming of the day
And there adore the rising sun.

V

This passed; the Gods of Greece and Rome
In splendor thronged the earth and skies;
Jove, with the thunders in his hand
Apollo of the star-lit eyes,
Aurora, Priestess of the Dawn
And Pan of haunting melodies,—

VI

And countless more; their temples fair
Where reverent Pagans curved the knee,
Mid sweet, perpetual summer stood
While murmured as the murmuring bee,
The lulling sweep of listless brine
Beside the green Ægean sea.

VII

And merged in island-wooded calms
 By towering groves of ancient oak,
 where Triton's charging cavalry
 Against the cliffs of Britain broke,
 With horrid rite of human blood
 The Celtic Druids moved and spoke.

VIII

Still wheeled the cycles; still did men
 With new religions make them wise;
 Mahomet rose magnificent
 As rainbow in the eastern skies;
 With Seven Heavens of Koran taught
 And Houris with the sloe-black eyes.

IX

Brahm, Baal, Dagon, Moloch, Thor,
 And legions more had long sufficed;
 Heavens in turn with bliss diverse
 And Hells with ebon glaciers iced;
 And latest on celestial scrolls
 The prophets wrote the name of Christ.

X

We need them not; No! each and all
 Will load Tradition's dusty shelf;
 As shattered Idols, put away
 To lie forgot like broken delf;
 Humanity is over all!
 And Man's redemption in himself.

FOUR

I

The morning stars together sang
So runs the story, in that time,
When groves were loud with melody
And ripples danced to liquid rhyme;
Far in the embryonic spheres
Before the earth was in her prime.

II

Then first the feline-padded gales
Unleashed and prowling journeyed free,
To purr amid the cowering grass
Or roar in stormy jubilee,
Or, joining in with Ocean, growl
A hoarse duet of wind and sea.

III

And where by meadowy rushes dank
The yellow sunbeams thick were sown,
And brooks flowed down through April ways
O'er pebbled bar and shingly stone,
There first welled up in gurgling strain
The lisping current's monotone.

IV

And oft was heard, in forest aisles
Where rocking trees of leaves were thinned,
And drear November wandered lorn
With wild wide eyes and hair unpinned,
A wailing harp of minor chords
Struck by the strong hands of the wind.

V

And Man, through imitative art,
With clumsy tool and method crude,

Copied these echoes as he might
 To soothe him in his solitude;
 And when that other sound was dumb
 His reed-notes quavered music rude.

VI

And as the gentler graces came
 To vivify barbaric night,
 So Poesy, with singing Lyre,
 Descended from Parnassian height,
 With constellations aureoled
 Her raiment wove of flowing light.

VII

And in Man's heart a thrill leaped up;
 His eye was lit by prophet gleams;
 He sought the truth of When and How
 He voiced the lyrics of the streams;
 His beard was tossed, his locks were gray
 His soul beneath the spell of dreams.

VIII

Thus numbers came; and Poets lived
 To chant the glories of the Race;
 Their rhyme on limp papyrus roll
 Or etched on crumbling pillar's base,
 Has long outlived the Kings they sung
 And conquered even Time and Space.

IX

Aye! vain the vaunt of Heroes; vain
 The deeds that once were thought sublime;
 And vain your Monarchs, briefly staged
 In tinselled royal pantomime;
 Their House was builded on the sands
 And they unworth a random rhyme.

X

Vain are the works of man; most vain
His bubbled Glory, Aye! or Fame;
More fragile than a last-year's leaf
Unnoticed of the sunset's flame;
And naught endures unless it stands
Linked with a deathless Poet's name.

FIVE

I

How flourished then the lesser arts
As man to manhood slowly grew?
With blackened stick from ruddy fires
That on his cave reflections threw,
He scrawled the rock which sheltered him
And thus the first rude picture drew.

II

And catching hints from Nature's lore
He squeezed his colors from the clay;
Steeped leaf and bark, and dyed the skins
That round about his dwelling lay;
And, urged by vanity, his cheeks
Were daubed with dash of pigments gay.

III

So, ever as the seasons died
His mind expanded with his will;
He saw the dry leaves touched with gold
And grass grow tawny on the hill;

Found etchings on the ruffled streams
And marked the sunset's hectic thrill.

IV

And dreaming thus, with defter skill
He fast employed his nights and days,
Spun magic webs of chequered lights
And limned October's purple haze;
While women's faces from his brush
Fired, like wine, the se'er's gaze.

V

Until at last was handed down
Beyond the treasure-trove of Greece,
Beyond the strain that Sappho sung
And reveries of the Golden Fleece,
The art of Titian, Rubens, Thal,
And Tintoretto's masterpiece.

VI

Thus, too, as man with curious eye
Had noted outline, curve, and form,
In toppling surge or lofty crag
In woman's bosom beating warm,
In cloudy shapes revealed on high
Intaglios of the wind and storm,—

VII

He modelled from the plastic loam;
On shell and boulder graved a sign;
Chiselled the stately obelisks
With hieroglyphics, line on line;
Colossal wrought his haughty Kings
Or metal-traced the clambering vine.

VIII

And many an image was his work
 And many a statuette and bust;
 Some that remain, but most that lie
 As shards to outer darkness thrust;
 These buried under coral sands
 Those cloaked beneath forgotten dust.

IX

Upon the lonely washes that stretch
 Where the Egyptian rivers croon,
 And floats above the Pyramids
 On tropic nights the lifeless moon,
 The mightiest waits,—the brooding Sphynx—
 Half-lion and half Daemon hewn.

X

So Sculpture, pierced in mountain sides
 Or dragged from Mythologic seas,
 Still holds a sway; and worlds will bow
 In homage yet to such as these—
 The noble bronze by Phidias wrought,
 The marbles of Praxiteles.

SIX

I

To those who for their country bleed
 To those who die for freedom's sake,
 All Hail! for them the Immortal dawns
 In waves of liliated silver break;
 For them in dusky-templed night
 The eternal stars a halo make.

II

In History's tome their chronicle
 An ever-living page shall be;
 The souls who flashed like sabers drawn
 The men who died to make men free;
 Their flag in every land has flown
 Their sails have whitened every sea.

III

On gallows high they met their doom
 Or breasted straight the serried spears
 Of Tyranny; in dungeons damp
 Scarred on the stones their name appears;
 For them the flower of Memory
 Shall blossom, watered by our tears.

IV

But Conquest, Glory, transient Fame,
 What baubles these to struggle for,
 When draped in sulphurous films uprise
 The cannon-throated fiends of War!
 What childish trumpery cheap as this—
 The trophies of a Conqueror?

V

How many an army marches forth
 With bugle-note or battle-hymn,
 To drench the soil in human gore
 And multiply Golgothas grim;
 And all for what? a Ruler's pique
 Religion's call, or Harlot's whim.

VI

And ghastliest far among them all
 Where torn and stained the thirsty sod

With carnage reeks—where standards fly,
 And horses gallop, iron-shod,
 Are those remorseless mockeries
 The wars they wage in name of God.

VIII

Vague, dim and vague, and noiselessly,
 The Warrior's triumphs fade like haze;
 And building winds have heaped the sands
 O'er monuments of martial days;
 While Legend throws a flickering gleam
 Where the tall Trojan towers blaze.

VIII

Yea! whether sought for Woman's face
 Or, Conquest-seeking, seaward poured,
 Or at the beck of Holy Church
 War still shall be the thing abhorred;
 And they who by the sword would live
 Shall surely perish by the sword.

IX

Yet whether at Thermopylæ
 Where battled the intrepid Greek,
 Or Waterloo—their quarry still
 The red-eyed ravening vultures seek;
 Where prowl the jackal and the fox
 And the swart raven whets his beak.

X

And somewhere, though by Alien seas
 The tide of Hate unceasing frets;
 For dawn to dusk, and dusk to dawn
 The red sun rises, no, nor sets,
 Save where the wraith of War is seen

Above her glittering bayonets.

SEVEN

I

How fared the body when the soul
In olden days had taken flight?
Had passed as through a shutter slips
A trembling shaft of summer light!
And all that once was Life's warm glow
Had sudden changed to dreadful night!

II

How fared the mourners; how the Priest;
How spoken his funereal theme?
What dirges for the Heroic dead
What flowers to soften death's extreme?
Was Life to them a wayside Inn
Death the beginning of a dream?

III

We cannot know; except by tales
Caught in the traveller's flying loom,
Or carven granite friezes found
Or parchment penned in convent gloom;
Or here and there, defying Time
Some long-dead Emperor's giant tomb.

IV

Where tower the steep Egyptian cones
By couriers of the storm bestrid,

Wrapped in his blackening cerements
 Sahura lies in shadow hid,
 While billowy sand-curves rise and dash
 Like surf, against his Pyramid.

V

And on the bald Norwegian shores
 When Odin for the Viking came,
 A ship was launched, and on it placed
 With solemn state, the Hero's frame;
 The torch applied, and sent to sea,
 A double burial,—wave and flame.

VI

And when the Hindu Prince lay prone—
 In final consecration dire
 His Hindu Princess followed on
 And climbed the blazing funeral pyre,
 To stand in living sacrifice
 Transfigured in her robes of fire.

VII

Where the red Indian of the Plains
 To the Great Spirit bowed his head,
 On pole-built scaffold, Eagle-plumed,
 The painted warrior laid his dead;
 Beneath, the favorite charger slain
 And by the Chief his weapons spread.

VIII

We clothe our dead in modish dress
 Dust unto dust the Preacher saith,
 The church-bells toll, the organ peals,
 And mourners wait with ebbing breath;
 Oh! grave, this is thy mockery,
 The weird farce-comedy of Death.

IX

Nay! burn the shell with simplest rites;
 Scatter its ashes to the skies;
 And on the stairways of the clouds
 In winding spirals let it rise;
 What needs the soul of mortal garb
 Whether in Hell or Paradise?

X

Aye! lost and gone; what cares the corpse
 When Death unfolds his sable wings,
 Whether it rest in wind-swept tree
 Or where the deep-sea echo rings?
 Be laid to sleep in Potter's Field
 Or lone Iona's cairn of Kings?

EIGHT

I

Above unsightly city roofs
 Where smoky serpents trail the sky,
 Broods Commerce; in her factories
 A million clacking shuttles fly;
 Where, choked with lint, in sickly air
 The little children droop and die.

II

The rattling clash of jarring wheels
 Against the windows echoing beats;
 And when the pallid gas-jets flare
 Where sombre night with twilight meets,

Like flotsam on the stream of Fate
The toiler's myriads crowd the streets.

III

With hiving tumult to and fro
Trade's devotees, a hurrying mass,
Through the long corridor of years
In due procession rise and pass;
To earn their wage, to seek their goal
And melt, like dew-drops on the grass.

IV

And here, within the age of Gain
Our forest-masted harbors shine
With shimmering fleets; and we go on
To climes afar of palm and vine,
And in the warp of Traffic weave
A sinister and base design,

V

Of mild and hapless Islanders
Who fall before our soldiers' aim;
Of broken faith—of sophistries—
Of sin, of blood-shed, and of shame;
Oh! Commerce, Commerce, who shall tell
The crimes committed in thy name.

VI

Turn, turn my Fancy, inland borne
Where Nature's solace shall not fail
To ease the heart; view skyey seas
Where cloud armadas, sail on sail,
Manned by the winds go warping down
Below the far horizon's trail.

VII

And as the budding willows blow
 When March comes whirling past the lanes,
 With bird-note wild, and fying winds
 And undertone of sibilant rains,
 On slopes where Winter's garment melts
 Blue as the sea are violet stains.

VIII

Where cattle seek the shaded pools
 And silence folds the sun-burned lands,
 Her auburn tresses backward flung
 Mid-Summer, like to Ceres stands,
 Beside the fields of waving grain
 With harvest-apples in her hands.

IX

And stealthily through winnowing dusk
 I see the curling smoke ascend,
 Where lie the farms; and evermore
 Where hope, and health, and manhood blend;
 While stubble shorn and pastures bare
 Proclaim the waning season's end.

X

And as beyond the naked hills
 The chill November sunset dies,
 And cloudward now a phalanx swims
 Where guttural honking fills the skies,
 Black-sculptured on approaching night
 And southward bound, the wild-goose flies.

NINE

I

Behold the kindred human types
Tribe, Sept, and class, Race, Caste, and Clan;
Red, Black and Yellow; White and Brown;
Processions of Primordial Man
That wax apace, and stream across
In one unending caravan.

II

The Fisher-People with their shells
And dwellers of the Age of Stone;
The Kirghiz of the Western Steppes
The Greek, the Turk, the Mongol shown,
The Goth, the Frank,—I see them pass
Like flash-lights by a mirror thrown.

III

So, too, the Arab, burnoose clad
Who braves the stifling Simoon dry,
Adrift upon Saharan tides
His awkward camels lurching high,
Long, lank, uncouth, but staunch as Death,
Ships of the Desert, sailing by.

IV

Note the Caucasian in his pride
Who prates of moldy pedigrees;
A mushroom he, compared in Eld
To the impassive, sly Chinese;
Their records co-extant with Time
And swarming by the sundown seas.

V

Each comes and goes; as came and went
Rameses' millions; in their day

What boast was made of Egypt's Kings
 How God-like seemed their valorous play;
 But cynic years dispersed their line
 Swift hurried with the winds away.

VI

Aye! even as motes they had their grace
 For a brief moment, son and sire;
 Then passed; as foam that sinks at sea
 Or chords which flee the Minstrel's lyre;
 Where rot the walls by Sidon raised?
 And where the long-lost hulls of Tyre?

VII

And all men listen in their turn
 To the same Sirens; greed of Gain—
 Love—Hate—Revenge—the lust of Power—
 And craze o'er fellow-man to reign—
 Ambition's lure—these intertwine
 Like links that form an endless chain.

VIII

Since Power is but the instant's clutch
 And naught so trivial as a Name,
 What crucial proof shall fix men's worth
 On lasting tablets write their claim;
 So that their memories may fill
 A niche within the walls of Fame?

IX

The test is not of Birth nor Race
 Since each is worthy of his hire;
 It rests in what men do for men
 Uplifted by the soul's desire,
 To tread Life's fiery furnaces
 And save their brothers from the fire.

X

And ranging far and searching deep
 However though the annals be,
 We find but one nigh faultless man
 There was none other such as He;
 The Jew who taught and practiced Love
 The man who walked by Galilee.

TEN

I

Enough my Muse; thy message cast
 As stone from out a sling is hurled,
 Let drop to night; or re-appear
 Where morning's gathering grey is pearled,
 And the bent sun, like Sisyphus,
 Toils laboring up the underworld.

II

Let be; thy wisdom knoweth well
 The just degrees of right and wrong;
 Although mayhap unmarked by men
 Shall fall the echoes of thy song;
 Unheeded by the pilgrim years
 Unrecked of, by the heedless throng.

III

And yet before the highways part
 And thou and I in darkness dwell,
 Do thou thy swiftest Herald send
 And this as final warning tell;

'Banish all hope of gilded Heaven
And laugh to scorn the fires of Hell'.

IV

Phantasmal dance those dual sprites
Mere witch-craft mummeries of the brain;
The lying sorcery of the Priests
A worldly influence to retain;
Where shalt thou go? What quest is thine?
Where falls the single drop of rain?

V

But Courage, Faith, and Constancy,
The cardinal virtues as I deem,
May well be worshipped, as indeed
The lilies of the soul they seem;
Undying in their fragrance rare
And glassed upon a sacred stream.

VI

Know thou, the Ideal Harmony
That fills all space, below, above,
Is not in Creed, nor Form, nor Rite
Nor in those things thou dreamest of;
But holds within its breadth and scope
The sole and only note of Love.

VII

Reject all Creeds; and yet in each
Seek such material as thou can,
With here a tenet, there a thought
Whether it sprang from Christ or Pan;
And make the key-stone of thy arch
The common brotherhood of Man.

VIII

And striving thus, a happier creed
 In time to come shall burst its bud,
 The pure air cleared of battle-smoke
 And war no more by field and flood;
 Where men can lift up guiltless hands
 Uncrimsoned by a brother's blood.

IX

When nevermore in calm or storm
 Shall hawk-like hover on the seas,
 The canvas of opposing ships
 Their pennants floating to the breeze;
 And golden hopes will supersede
 The apples of Hesperides.

X

When man-emancipated man
 Through loftier purpose wins control;
 With Justice as his only God
 To reign supreme o'er heart and soul;
 And Love, sun-like, illuminates
 The one, the true, the perfect whole.

NOTES TO COSMOS

Notes to Cosmos

Certain stanzas once intended for the original are here given. They are set down according to the chapters in which they were to have appeared.

Chapter Two

Of trees that stirred in early Spring
The slow sap moving in their veins;
Of flowers that dyed the woodland slopes
The primrose pale, and daisy-chains;
Sun-kissed betimes, or overmourned
By shimmery tears of sobbing rains.

Chapter Four

And all night long the restless sea
Against its barriers rose and fell,
Till grey-eyed Dawn, by lonely sands
Saw flash and fade the last broad swell,
Before her there the ebb-tide's gleam
And at her feet a murmuring shell.

And then were heard the Elder Bards
In full, Prophetic tone sublime,
Their eyes ablaze with ecstasy
And on their lips the living rhyme;
King-honored in an age of Kings
And on their beards the frosts of Time.

Chapter Eight

And when a-down the bare brown lanes
Pattered the swift, white feet of Spring,
I saw the velvet-golden flash
That marked the yellow-hammer's wing
A-curve on high; and later heard
The robin, and the blue-bird sing.

Far seaward on unnumbered isles
Mid scent of spice and drowsy balm,
The lotos-eating Islanders
Lay soothed to sleep by utter calm;

Low at their feet the pulsing tides
And o'er their heads the tufted palm.

Chapter Nine

Stark warriors of the Age of Stone
With pristine valor all elate,
Who sought and slew the great Cave Bear
And robbed the tigress of her mate;
And, weaponed with the ax and spear,
Defied the towering mammoth's hate.

And slant-eyed Mongols, yellow-skinned,
Who traversed Western Steppes afar,
Drank mare's milk, and observed their flocks
White-clustered 'neath the Morning Star;
Or, sallying forth with lance and bow
Engaged in fierce Nomadic war.

On vine-clad hills was found the Gaul;
Above him glistened Alpine snows:
And lower down where valleys lay
Loved of the lily and the rose,
By moon-light tranced, the nightingale
Sang silvery-sweet adagios.

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