

The health of a nation

*The season of planting fields is almost done
When whisper-like through the islands come
The eager-waited message all to summon;
'Tis time to leave your hearth and homely towns
To leave the merchants launching laden tritemes
Leave your wives and mothers to the spinning
And hoplite youth at martial arts for training;
Once again it is the time for discourse
Beneath the ancient plane tree at Kos
In company with Hippocrates the Wise
And walk the Aesculapion wards
Be refreshed in vigour, with renewed delight
In platonic ideals of Health and Hygiene,
Debate with friends far into star-filled nights.*

*Upon return each to his dispensary
Renewed in ardour, with commitment filled
In philosophy, philanthropy and philotechnia
Of healing herbs, potion and incantation
A sense of change among the islands comes
With warning of a solemn declaration.
Envoys have set out from the Acropolis
The edict of the Tyrants bearing thence
The Delphic Oracle has stirred and now pronounced
On new labours of solemn, prophetic utterance
At behest of the Chief Priest-Physician
Who represents the leaders of the nation.*

*From this day forth let all of the Disciples
And Fellows of the Aesculapia
Be fit for purpose, value for the drachma
[thus the Prophet of the West did speak
From Academies of Merchandise of Rhetoric
Of the United City-States of Trade],
All other Priests and Prophets be unheeded
Now let there be a division between theses
Who do resource the wellness of the well
From those who do campaign against disease,
Let those who pay the player of the pipes
Determine the tune to which Kos will dance,
The people in the Agora to set the limits
Themselves elect new household gods of health
Affordable, dependable and available with ease
To access physic in the heat of every day
On all feast days and when markets close,
That the wishes of the merchant class prevail
All those who fail this let their names be entered
Upon the tabloids of the Ostracism
Their very name to be their shame eternal
Nor be invited to the poured libation*

*At the tables of the great and goodly,
Let those who fail our tests of probity
Be called a scandal unto all the people,
If one of them be deemed to have done murder
Their entire guild will pay collective forfeit,
Let modes of practice that here-to pertained
Be deemed oppressive of the people, arrogant
Self-serving and lacking in transparency,
All servants of Aesculapius and Hygieia
All those who heal be they now brought to heel
As having been, you might say, unsatisfactory,
The voice of the laity will be listened to
Tribunals of the people sit in council
With long and eager faces to uphold
The new precepts of the Oligarchs
Freely voting as they have been told
All right-thinking men and women ought;
Let Apollo's priests tend their gods and temples
This is the age of the ascent of Man
Declared by the will of a sovereign People.*

*Years pass, and now the planting season done
Once more unto the great plane tree they come.
Hippocrates is dead; but in the Aesculapion
New-gathered acolytes, a rising generation
The discourse hear and wonder at his insight,
Debate, discuss far into starry nights
The ideals of Hygieia, fresh as in our youth
Before the great Change swept aside the Truth*

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NOTES

Tyrants

Title given to rulers of certain classical Greek city-states

Apollo

Greek god of healing

Hygieia

Health; personified as a deity in the text of the Oath of Hippocrates

Hippocrates

The physician of the Oath; associated with the island of Kos where he is reputed to have taught under the massive plane tree which is still pointed out to visitors as the Tree of Hippocrates

Aesculapion

The ancient centres of healing based on that of Hippocrates at Kos; they were dedicated to the patron of healing, Asklepios [or Aesculapius in latinised version].