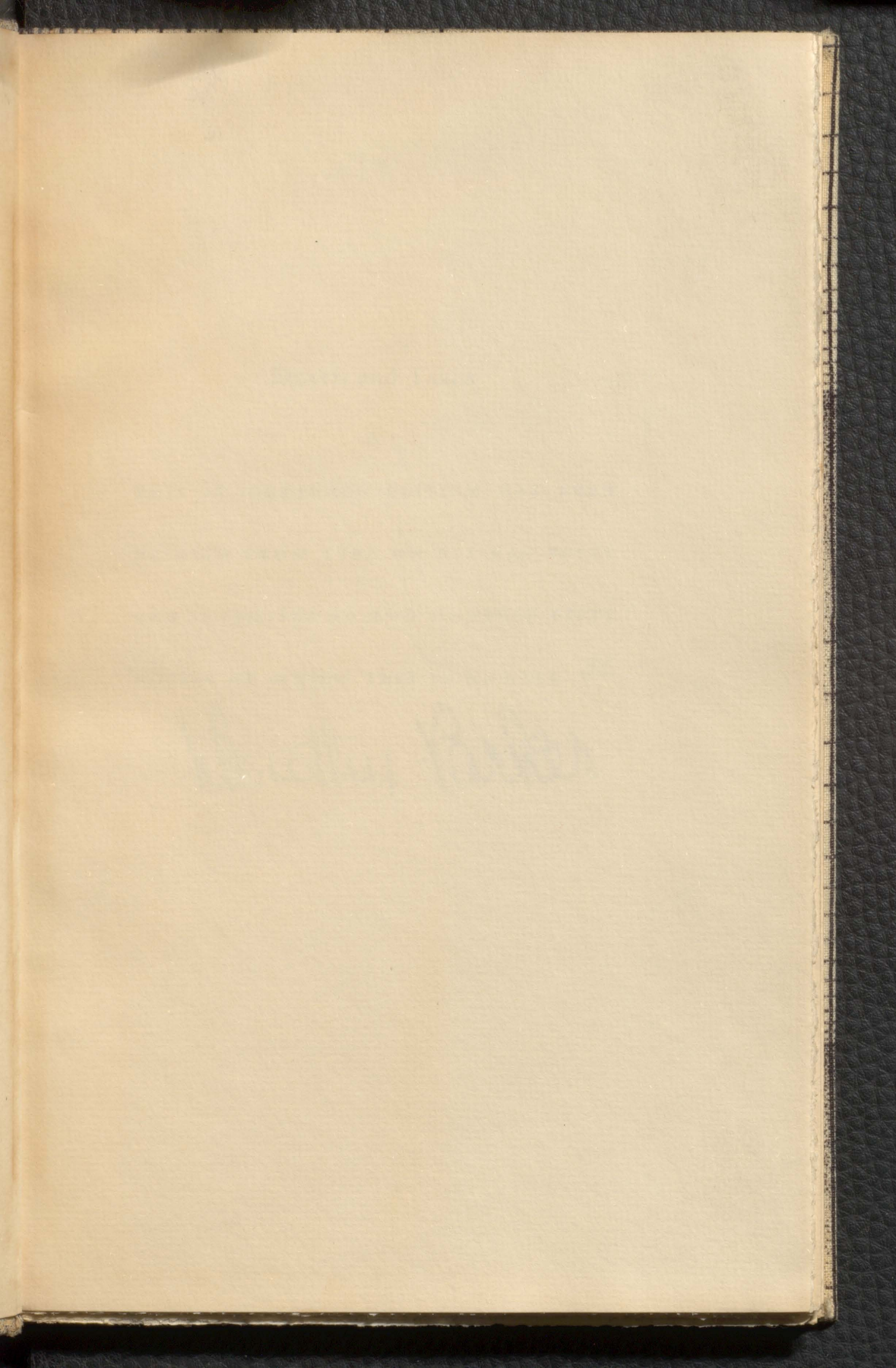


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DEATH and TAXES

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THE VIKING PRESS
NEW YORK MCMXXXI

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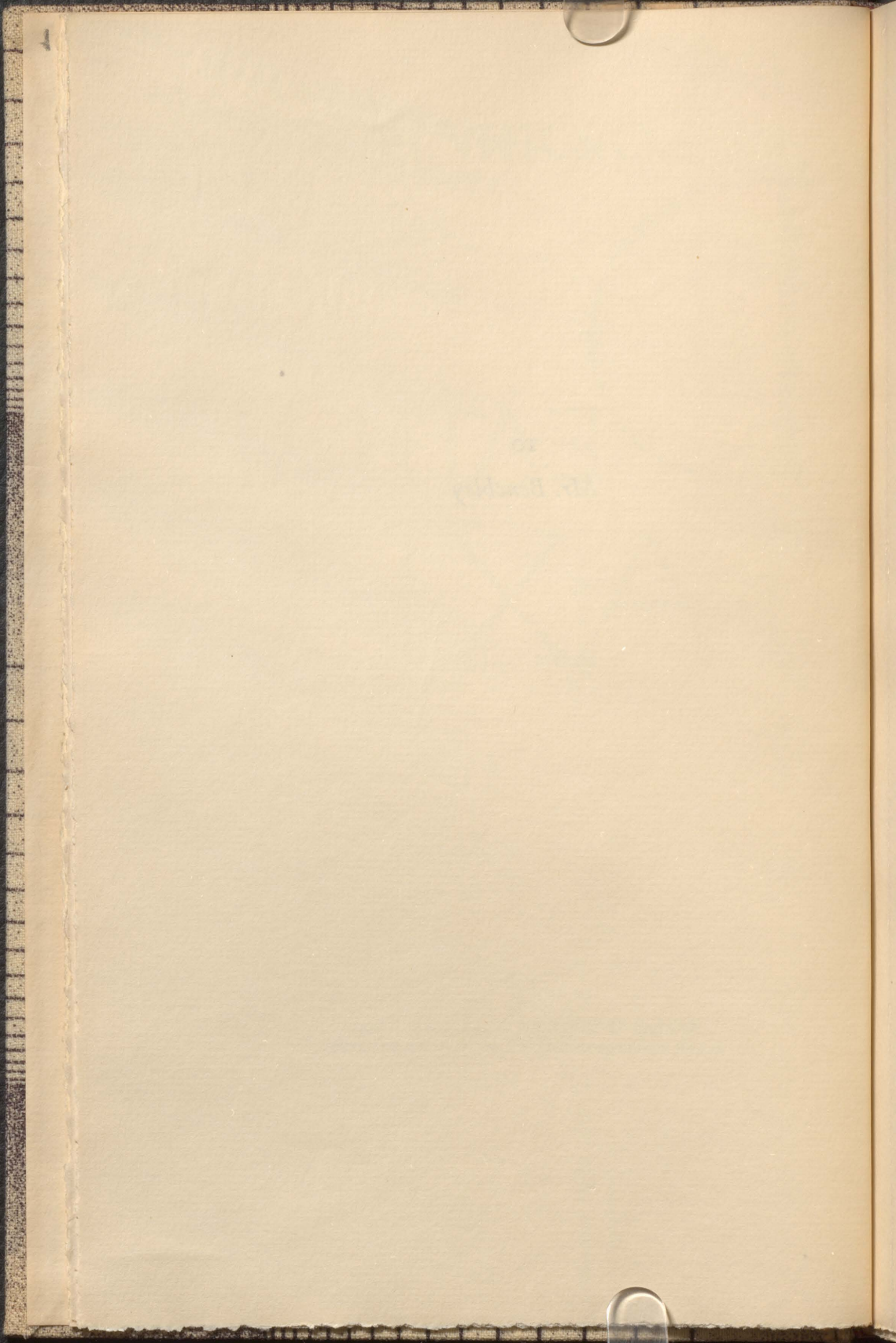
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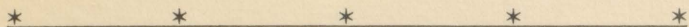
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THE VIKING PRESS
1931

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TO
Mr. Benchley





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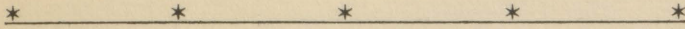
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DEATH
and
TAXES

STATE OF TEXAS
COUNTY OF DALLAS
DEATH CERTIFICATE
No. 1000
TAXES



PRAYER FOR A PRAYER

Dearest one, when I am dead
Never seek to follow me.
Never mount the quiet hill
Where the copper leaves are still,
As my heart is, on the tree
Standing at my narrow bed.

Only, of your tenderness,
Pray a little prayer at night.
Say: "I have forgiven now—
I, so weak and sad; O Thou,
Wreathed in thunder, robed in light,
Surely Thou wilt do no less."

* * * * *

AFTER A SPANISH PROVERB

Oh, mercifullest one of all,
Oh, generous as dear,
None lived so lowly, none so small,
Thou couldst withhold thy tear;

How swift, in pure compassion,
How meek in charity,
To offer friendship to the one
Who begged but love of thee!

Oh, gentle word, and sweetest said!
Oh, tender hand, and first
To hold the warm, delicious bread
To lips burned black of thirst.

* * * * *

THE FLAW IN PAGANISM

Drink and dance and laugh and lie,
Love, the reeling midnight through,
For tomorrow we shall die!
(But, alas, we never do.)

* ————— *

THE DANGER OF
WRITING DEFIANT VERSE

And now I have another lad!
No longer need you tell
How all my nights are slow and sad
For loving you too well.

His ways are not your wicked ways,
He's not the like of you.
He treads his path of reckoned days,
A sober man, and true.

They'll never see him in the town,
Another on his knee.
He'd cut his laden orchards down,
If that would pleasure me.

He'd give his blood to paint my lips,
If I should wish them red.
He prays to touch my finger-tips
Or stroke my prideful head.

* * * * *

He never weaves a glinting lie,
Or brags the hearts he'll keep.
I have forgotten how to sigh—
Remembered how to sleep.

He's none to kiss away my mind—
A slower way is his.
Oh, Lord! On reading this, I find
A silly lot he is.

* ————— *

DISTANCE

Were you to cross the world, my dear,
To work or love or fight,
I could be calm and wistful here,
And close my eyes at night.

It were a sweet and gallant pain
To be a sea apart;
But, oh, to have you down the lane
Is bitter to my heart.

* ————— *

THE EVENING PRIMROSE

You know the bloom, unearthly white,
That none has seen by morning light—
The tender moon, alone, may bare
Its beauty to the secret air.
Who'd venture past its dark retreat
Must kneel, for holy things and sweet.
That blossom, mystically blown,
No man may gather for his own
Nor touch it, lest it droop and fall. . . .
Oh, I am not like that at all!

* * * * *

SANCTUARY

My land is bare of chattering folk;
The clouds are low along the ridges,
And sweet's the air with curly smoke
From all my burning bridges.

* * * * *

CHERRY WHITE

I never see that prettiest thing—
A cherry bough gone white with Spring—
But what I think, "How gay 'twould be
To hang me from a flowering tree."

* ————— *

SALOME'S DANCING-LESSON

She that begs a little boon
(Heel and toe! Heel and toe!)

Little gets—and nothing, soon.
(No, no, no! No, no, no!)

She that calls for costly things
Priceless finds her offerings—
What's impossible to kings?
(Heel and toe! Heel and toe!)

Kings are shaped as other men.
(Step and turn! Step and turn!)
Ask what none may ask again.
(Will you learn? Will you learn?)
Lovers whine, and kisses pall,
Jewels tarnish, kingdoms fall—
Death's the rarest prize of all!
(Step and turn! Step and turn!)

Veils are woven to be dropped.
(One, two, three! One, two, three!)
Aging eyes are slowest stopped.
(Quietly! Quietly!)

* ————— *

She whose body's young and cool
Has no need of dancing-school—
Scratch a king and find a fool!
(One, two, three! One, two, three!)



MY OWN

Then let them point my every tear,
And let them mock and moan;
Another week, another year,
And I'll be with my own

Who slumber now by night and day
In fields of level brown;
Whose hearts within their breasts were clay
Before they laid them down.

* * * * *

SOLACE

There was a rose that faded young;
I saw its shattered beauty hung
 Upon a broken stem.
I heard them say, "What need to care
With roses budding everywhere?"
 I did not answer them.

There was a bird, brought down to die;
They said, "A hundred fill the sky—
 What reason to be sad?"
There was a girl, whose lover fled;
I did not wait, the while they said,
 "There's many another lad."

* * * * *

LITTLE WORDS

When you are gone, there is nor bloom nor leaf,
Nor singing sea at night, nor silver birds;
And I can only stare, and shape my grief
In little words.

I cannot conjure loveliness, to drown
The bitter woe that racks my cords apart.
The weary pen that sets my sorrow down
Feeds at my heart.

There is no mercy in the shifting year,
No beauty wraps me tenderly about.
I turn to little words—so you, my dear,
Can spell them out.

* ————— *

ORNITHOLOGY FOR BEGINNERS

The bird that feeds from off my palm
Is sleek, affectionate, and calm,
But double, to me, is worth the thrush
A-flickering in the elder bush.

* * * * *

TOMBSTONES IN THE STARLIGHT

I. THE MINOR POET

His little trills and chirpings were his best.
No music like the nightingale's was born
Within his throat; but he, too, laid his breast
Upon a thorn.

* * * * *

II. THE PRETTY LADY

She hated bleak and wintry things alone.
All that was warm and quick, she loved too well—
A light, a flame, a heart against her own;
It is forever bitter cold, in Hell.

* * * * *

III. THE VERY RICH MAN

He'd have the best, and that was none too good;
No barrier could hold, before his terms.
He lies below, correct in cypress wood,
And entertains the most exclusive worms,

* * * * *

IV. THE FISHERWOMAN

The man she had was kind and clean
And well enough for every day,
But, oh, dear friends, you should have seen
The one that got away!

* ————— *

V. THE CRUSADER

Arrived in Heaven, when his sands were run,
He seized a quill, and sat him down to tell
The local press that something should be done
About that noisy nuisance, Gabriel.

* * * * *

THE LITTLE OLD LADY IN
LAVENDER SILK

VI. THE ACTRESS

Her name, cut clear upon this marble cross,
Shines, as it shone when she was still on earth;
While tenderly the mild, agreeable moss
Obscures the figures of her date of birth.

* * * * *

THE LITTLE OLD LADY IN
LAVENDER SILK

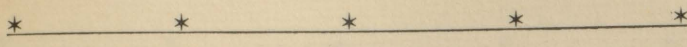
I was seventy-seven, come August,
I shall shortly be losing my bloom;
I've experienced zephyr and raw gust
And (symbolical) flood and simoom.

When you come to this time of abatement,
To this passing from summer to fall,
It is manners to issue a statement
As to what you got out of it all.

So I'll say, though reflection unnerves me
And pronouncements I dodge as I can,
That I think (if my memory serves me)
There was nothing more fun than a man!

In my youth, when the crescent was too wan
To embarrass with beams from above,
By the aid of some local Don Juan
I fell into the habit of love.

And I learned how to kiss and be merry—an
Education left better unsung.
My neglect of the waters Pierian
Was a scandal, when Grandma was young.



Though the shabby unbalanced the splendid,
And the bitter outmeasured the sweet,
I should certainly do as I then did,
Were I given the chance to repeat.

For contrition is hollow and wraithful,
And regret is no part of my plan,
And I think (if my memory's faithful)
There was nothing more fun than a man!

* ————— *

GARDEN-SPOT

God's acre was her garden-spot, she said;
She sat there often, of the summer days,
Little and slim and sweet, among the dead,
Her hair a fable in the leveled rays.

She turned the fading wreath, the rusted cross,
And knelt to coax about the wiry stem.
I see her gentle fingers on the moss
Now it is anguish to remember them.

And once I saw her weeping, when she rose
And walked a way and turned to look around—
The quick and envious tears of one that knows
She shall not lie in consecrated ground.

* ————— *

VERS DÉMODÉ

For one, the amaryllis and the rose;
 The poppy, sweet as never lilies are;
The ripen'd vine, that beckons as it blows;
 The dancing star.

For one, the trodden rosemary and rue;
 The bowl, dipt ever in the purple stream.
And, for the other one, a fairer due—
 Sleep, and no dream.

* * * * *

SONNET FOR THE END OF A
SEQUENCE

So take my vows and scatter them to sea;
Who swears the sweetest is no more than human.
And say no kinder words than these of me:
"Ever she longed for peace, but was a woman!
And thus they are, whose silly female dust
Needs little enough to clutter it and bind it,
Who meet a slanted gaze, and ever must
Go build themselves a soul to dwell behind it."

For now I am my own again, my friend!
This scar but points the whiteness of my breast;
This frenzy, like its betters, spins an end,
And now I am my own. And that is best.
Therefore, I am immeasurably grateful
To you, for proving shallow, false and hateful.

* ————— *

IN THE MEADOW

The buttercups that brushed my knee
Their golden dreams have whispered me,
But how am I to murmur back,
For gold is lovelier than black?

* * * * *

THE APPLE TREE

When first we saw the apple tree
The boughs were dark and straight,
But never grief to give had we,
Though Spring delayed so late.

When last I came away from there
The boughs were heavy hung,
But little grief had I to spare
For Summer, perished young.

* * * * *

ISEULT OF BRITTANY

So delicate my hands, and long,
They might have been my pride.
And there were those to make them song
Who for their touch had died.

Too frail to cup a heart within,
Too soft to hold the free—
How long these lovely hands have been
A bitterness to me!

* * * * *

“STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT—”

Star, that gives a gracious dole,
What am I to choose?
Oh, will it be a shriven soul,
Or little buckled shoes?

Shall I wish a wedding-ring,
Bright and thin and round,
Or plead you send me covering—
A newly spaded mound?

Gentle beam, shall I implore
Gold, or sailing-ships,
Or beg I hate forevermore
A pair of lying lips?

Swing you low or high away,
Burn you hot or dim;
My only wish I dare not say—
Lest you should grant me him.

* ————— *

THE SEA

Who lay against the sea, and fled,
Who lightly loved the wave,
Shall never know, when he is dead,
A cool and murmurous grave.

But in a shallow pit shall rest
For all eternity,
And bear the earth upon the breast
That once had worn the sea.

* * * * *

GUINEVERE AT HER FIRESIDE

A nobler king had never breath—
I say it now, and said it then.
Who weds with such is wed till death
And wedded stays in Heaven. Amen.

(And oh, the shirts of linen-lawn,
And all the armor, tagged and tied,
And church on Sundays, dusk and dawn,
And bed a thing to kneel beside!)

The bravest one stood tall above
The rest, and watched me as a light.
I heard and heard them talk of love;
I'd naught to do but think, at night.

The bravest man has littlest brains;
That chalky fool from Astolat
With all her dying and her pains!—
Thank God, I helped him over that.

* * * * *

I found him not unfair to see—
I like a man with peppered hair!
And thus it came about. Ah, me,
Tristram was busied elsewhere. . . .

*A nobler king had never breath—
I say it now, and said it then.
Who weds with such is wed till death
And wedded stays in Heaven. Amen.*

* * * * *

TRANSITION

Too long and quickly have I lived to vow
The woe that stretches me shall never wane,
Too often seen the end of endless pain
To swear that peace no more shall cool my brow.
I know, I know—again the shriveled bough
Will burgeon sweetly in the gentle rain,
And these hard lands be quivering with grain—
I tell you only: it is Winter now.

What if I know, before the Summer goes
Where dwelt this bitter frenzy shall be rest?
What is it now, that June shall surely bring
New promise, with the swallow and the rose?
My heart is water, that I first must breast
The terrible, slow loveliness of Spring.

* * * * *

LINES ON READING TOO MANY POETS

Roses, rooted warm in earth,
Bud in rhyme, another age;
Lilies know a ghostly birth
Strewn along a patterned page;
Golden lad and chimbley sweep
Die; and so their song shall keep.

Wind that in Arcadia starts
In and out a couplet plays;
And the drums of bitter hearts
Beat the measure of a phrase.
Sweets and woes but come to print
Quae cum ita sint.

BALLADE OF UNFORTUNATE
MAMMALS

Love is sharper than stones or sticks;
Lone as the sea, and deeper blue;
Loud in the night as a clock that ticks;
Longer-lived than the Wandering Jew.
Show me a love was done and through,
Tell me a kiss escaped its debt!
Son, to your death you'll pay your due—
Women and elephants never forget.

Ever a man, alas, would mix,
Ever a man, heigh-ho, must woo;
So he's left in the world-old fix,
Thus is furthered the sale of rue.
Son, your chances are thin and few—
Won't you ponder, before you're set?
Shoot if you must, but hold in view
Women and elephants never forget.

Down from Caesar past Joynson-Hicks
Echoes the warning, ever new:
Though they're trained to amusing tricks,
Gentler, they, than the pigeon's coo,

* ————— *

Careful, son, of the cursèd two—
 Either one is a dangerous pet;
Natural history proves it true—
 Women and elephants never forget.

L' ENVOI :

Prince, a precept I'd leave for you,
 Coined in Eden, existing yet:
Skirt the parlor, and shun the zoo—
 Women and elephants never forget.

* * * * *

FROM A LETTER FROM LESBIA

. . . So, praise the gods, at last he's away!
And let me tend you this advice, my dear:
Take any lover that you will, or may,
Except a poet. All of them are queer.

It's just the same—a quarrel or a kiss
Is but a tune to play upon his pipe.
He's always hymning that or wailing this;
Myself, I much prefer the business type.

That thing he wrote, the time the sparrow died—
(Oh, most unpleasant—gloomy, tedious words!)
I called it sweet, and made believe I cried;
The stupid fool! I've always hated birds. . . .

* * * * *

PURPOSELY UNGRAMMATICAL
LOVE SONG

There's many and many, and not so far,
Is willing to dry my tears away;
There's many to tell me what you are,
And never a lie to all they say.

It's little the good to hide my head,
It's never the use to bar my door;
There's many as counts the tears I shed,
There's mourning hearts for my heart is sore.

There's honester eyes than your blue eyes,
There's better a mile than such as you.
But when did I say that I was wise,
And when did I hope that you were true?

PRAYER FOR A NEW MOTHER

The things she knew, let her forget again—
The voices in the sky, the fear, the cold,
The gaping shepherds, and the queer old men
Piling their clumsy gifts of foreign gold.

Let her have laughter with her little one;
Teach her the endless, tuneless songs to sing;
Grant her her right to whisper to her son
The foolish names one dare not call a king.

Keep from her dreams the rumble of a crowd,
The smell of rough-cut wood, the trail of red,
The thick and chilly whiteness of the shroud
That wraps the strange new body of the dead.

Ah, let her go, kind Lord, where mothers go
And boast his pretty words and ways, and plan
The proud and happy years that they shall know
Together, when her son is grown a man.

* ————— *

MIDNIGHT

The stars are soft as flowers, and as near;
The hills are webs of shadow, slowly spun;
No separate leaf or single blade is here—
All blend to one.

No moonbeam cuts the air; a sapphire light
Rolls lazily, and slips again to rest.
There is no edgèd thing in all this night,
Save in my breast.

* * * * *

NINON DE L'ENCLOS,
ON HER LAST BIRTHDAY

So let me have the rouge again,
And comb my hair the curly way.
The poor young men, the dear young men—
They'll all be here by noon today.

And I shall wear the blue, I think—
They beg to touch its rippled lace;
Or do they love me best in pink,
So sweetly flattering the face?

And are you sure my eyes are bright,
And is it true my cheek is clear?
Young what's-his-name stayed half the night;
He vows to cut his throat, poor dear!

So bring my scarlet slippers, then,
And fetch the powder-puff to me.
The dear young men, the poor young men—
They think I'm only seventy!

* * * * *

ULTIMATUM

I'm wearied of wearying love, my friend,
Of worry and strain and doubt;
Before we begin, let us view the end,
And maybe I'll do without.
There's never the pang that was worth the tear,
And toss in the night I won't—
So either you do or you don't, my dear,
Either you do or you don't!

The table is ready, so lay your cards
And if they should augur pain,
I'll tender you ever my kind regards
And run for the fastest train.
I haven't the will to be spent and sad;
My heart's to be gay and true—
Then either you don't or you do, my lad,
Either you don't or you do!

* * * * *

OF A WOMAN, DEAD YOUNG

(J. H., 1905-1930)

If she had been beautiful, even,
Or wiser than women about her,
Or had moved with a certain defiance;
If she had had sons at her sides,
And she with her hands on their shoulders,
Sons, to make troubled the Gods—
But where was there wonder in her?
What had she, better or eviler,
Whose days were a pattering of peas
From the pod to the bowl in her lap?

That the pine tree is blasted by lightning,
And the boulder split raw from the mountain,
And the river dried short in its rushing—
That I can know, and be humble.
But that They who have trodden the stars
Should turn from Their echoing highway
To trample a daisy, unnoticed
In a field full of small, open flowers—
Where is Their triumph in that?
Where is Their pride, and Their vengeance?

* * * * *

THE WILLOW

On sweet young earth where the myrtle presses,
Long we lay, when the May was new;
The willow was winding the moon in her tresses,
The bud of the rose was told with dew.

And now on the brittle ground I'm lying,
Screaming to die with the dead year's dead;
The stem of the rose is black and drying,
The willow is tossing the wind from her head.

BALLADE OF A TALKED-OFF EAR

Daily I listen to wonder and woe,
Nightly I hearken to knave or to ace,
Telling me stories of lava and snow,
Delicate fables of ribbon and lace,
Tales of the quarry, the kill, the chase,
Longer than heaven and duller than hell—
Never you blame me, who cry my case:
“Poets alone should kiss and tell!”

Dumbly I hear what I never should know,
Gently I counsel of pride and of grace;
Into minutia^æ gayly they go,
Telling the name and the time and the place.
Cede them your silence and grant them space—
Who tenders an inch shall be raped of an ell!
Sympathy's ever the boaster's brace;
Poets alone should kiss and tell.

Why am I tithed what I never did owe?
Choked with vicarious saffron and mace?
Weary my lids, and my fingers are slow—
Gentlemen, damn you, you've halted my pace.

* ————— *

Only the lads of the cursèd race,
Only the knights of the desolate spell,
May point me the lines the blood-drops trace—
Poets alone should kiss and tell.

L' ENVOI :

Prince or commoner, tenor or bass,
Painter or plumber or never-do-well,
Do me a favor and shut your face—
Poets alone should kiss and tell.

* * * * *

SONNET ON AN ALPINE NIGHT

My hand, a little raised, might press a star;
Where I may look, the frosted peaks are spun,
So shaped before Olympus was begun,
Spanned each to each, now, by a silver bar.
Thus to face Beauty have I traveled far,
But now, as if around my heart were run
Hard, lacing fingers, so I stand undone.
Of all my tears, the bitterest these are.

Who humbly followed Beauty all her ways,
Begging the brambles that her robe had passed,
Crying her name in corridors of stone,
That day shall know his weariedest of days—
When Beauty, still and suppliant at last,
Does not suffice him, once they are alone.

* ————— *

REQUIESCAT

Tonight my love is sleeping cold
Where none may see and none shall pass.
The daisies quicken in the mould,
And richer fares the meadow grass.

The warding cypress pleads the skies,
The mound goes level in the rain.
My love all cold and silent lies—
Pray God it will not rise again!

* * * * *

SWEET VIOLETS

You are brief and frail and blue—
Little sisters, I am, too.
You are heaven's masterpieces—
Little loves, the likeness ceases.

* ————— *

PROLOGUE TO A SAGA

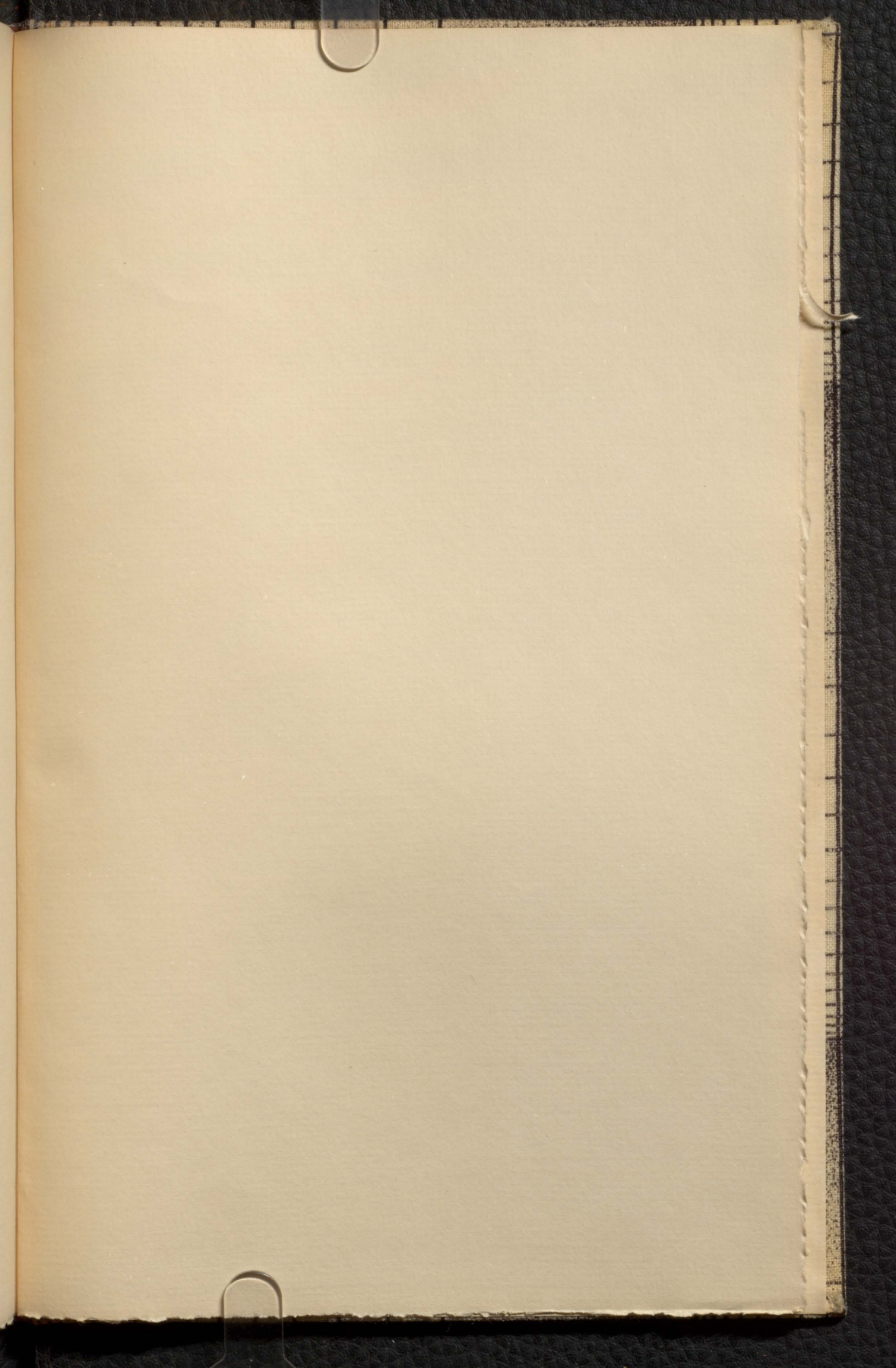
Maidens, gather not the yew,
Leave the glossy myrtle sleeping;
Any lad was born untrue,
Never a one is fit your weeping.

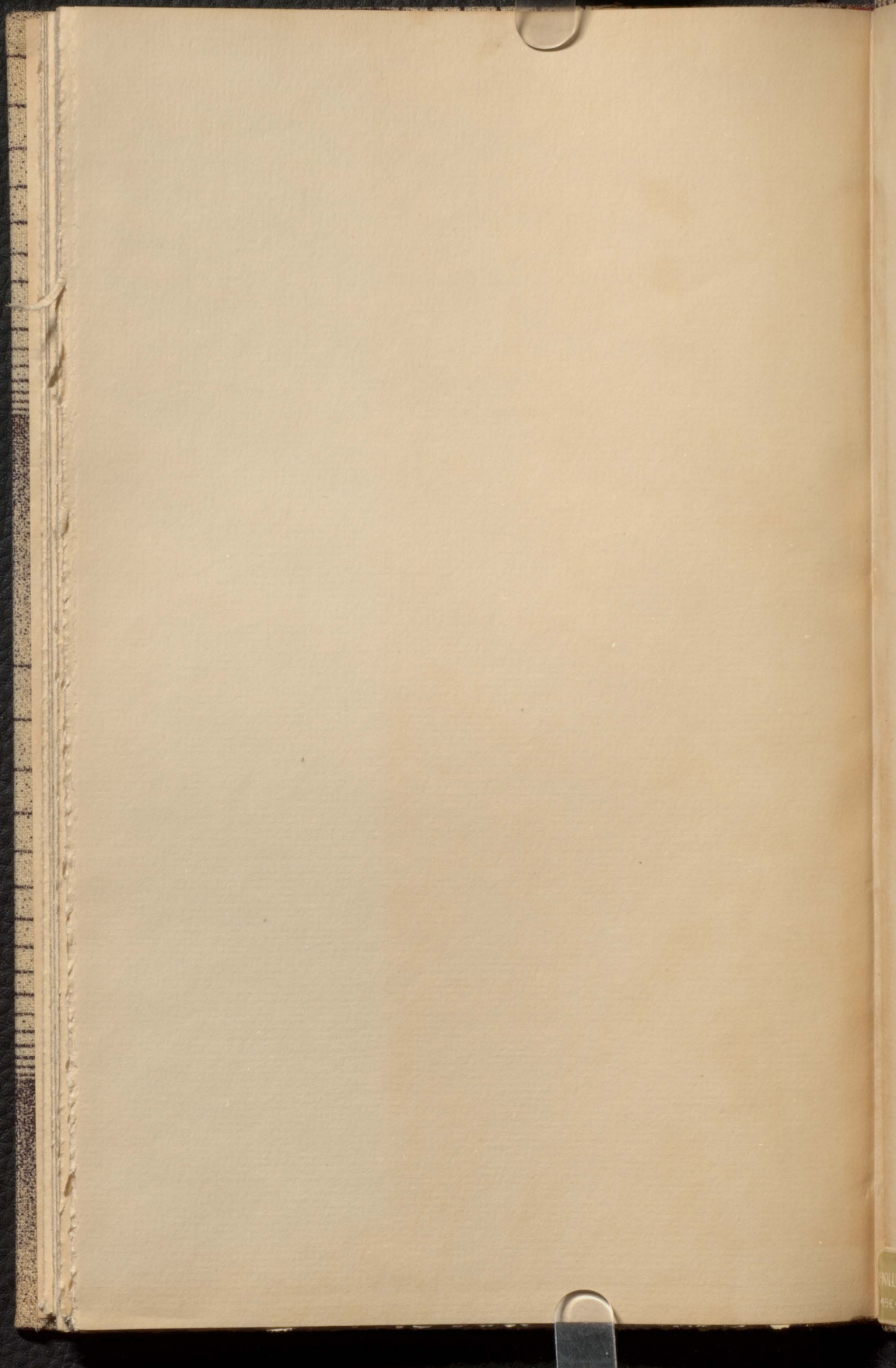
Pretty dears, your tumult cease;
Love's a fardel, burthening double.
Clear your hearts, and have you peace—
Gangway, girls: I'll show you trouble.

* * * * *

SUMMARY

Every love's the love before
In a duller dress.
That's the measure of my lore—
Here's my bitterness:
Would I knew a little more,
Or very much less!





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