

A BOOK OF
VERSE BY MORRIS
GILBERT

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1917



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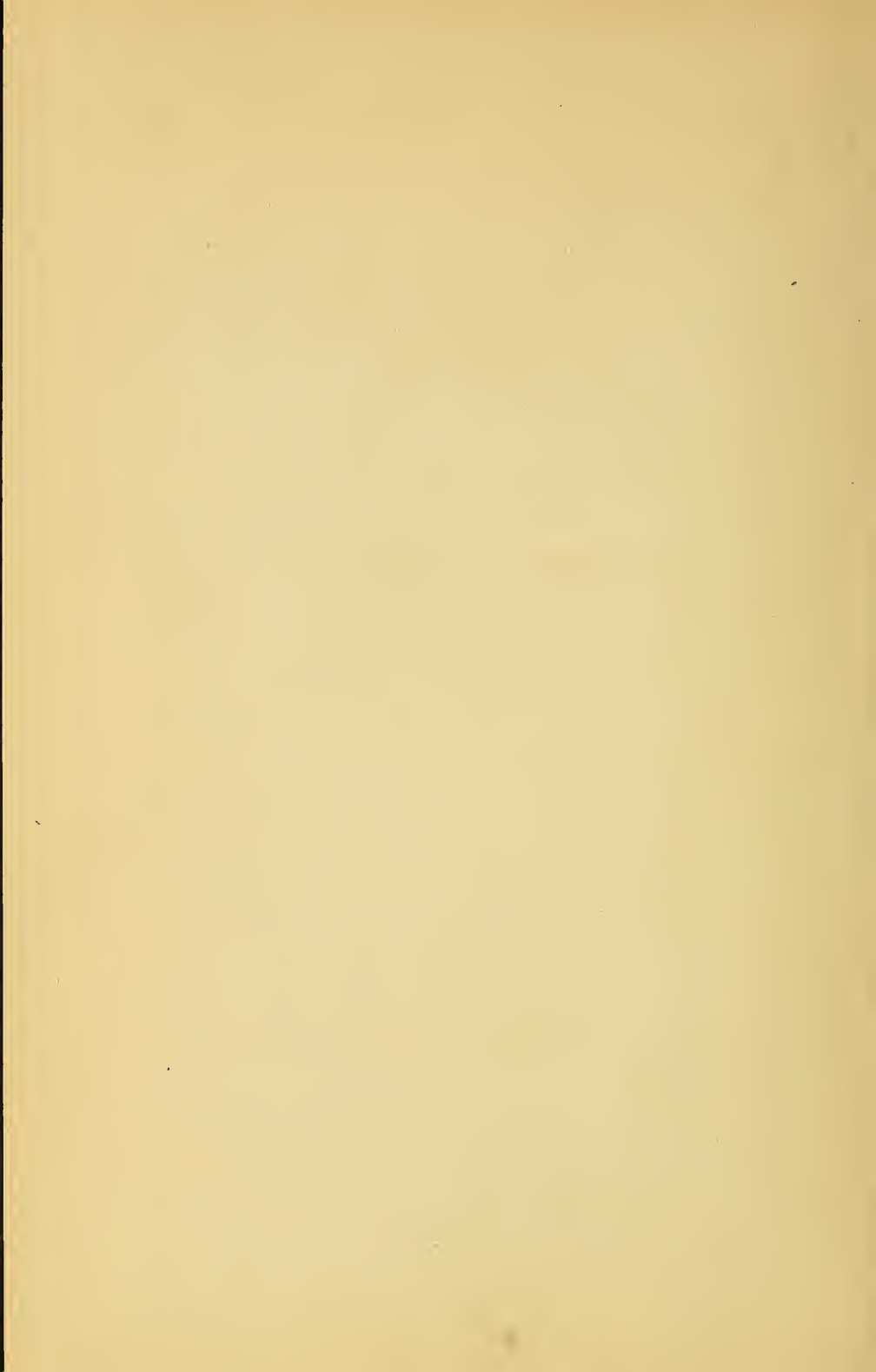


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MORRIS GILBERT

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NOTE

The verse in this book has been written during my undergraduate years at Union College.

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MORRIS GILBERT.

TO MOTHER AND FATHER

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A BOOK OF VERSE

TO A FRENCH AVIATOR, FALLEN IN BATTLE

You laughed and said, "A zut!" and in a trice
Lifted "Celeste" in circles twice or thrice
Above the hangar-roof, and then sped on
And up and shot away—and so were gone. . . .
And when they found you like a wasp beside
The carcass of the *Luftschiff* still you cried,
"A zut, mes braves!" and laughed—and then you died. . . .

It may be best you came to ground that way;
For who knows where your vivid careless play
Of spirit and bravado might have led?—
Some night you might have kept straight on instead,
And then at dawn, perhaps, with some surprise,
Might have beheld the roofs of Paradise
Perched like Montmartre upon a little hill,
Speckless and gabled, fresh, and very still.

And you would twist and duck and hover down
And circle 'round the walls above the town,
With Saints and Martyrs standing over-awed
To see you 'planing on the winds of God. . . .

Perhaps you might come down at twelve o'clock
To puff a caporal, and sip a bock!

SO FAR ——

So far, then, we find our way,
 (Nothing less availing)
Find it strait; but find it may
Home us at the end of day
Better off than we dared say
 At the dawn's assailing.

So much have we beaten out
 From such valiant trudging:
We, that chance may never flout,
And for scorning of all doubt,
Have a thing to think about,
 Nothing else begrudging.

Should the Zodiac start and turn,
 Heaving at its tether,
Moons and suns delirious churn,
The Galaxy its mooring spurn,
And sky be all a flamey quern—
 We would laugh together.

JOHN-A-DREAMS

I can make a nightingale
 Out of brown paper,
I can make a purple cloud
 From the kettle's vapor—
And light a penny candle
 To be a moon behind it
And let it shine o' nights
 Where I can find it.

Rumple-stilts-kin's rage
 Will crack the floor again;
The Third and Youngest Son
 Will come into his reign—
Oh, all for me the ragged elves
 Will dance their nimblest caper,
What with a penny candle
 And some brown paper.

EIGHT LINES FROM A SONNET

To think of all that eager wasted worth,
That quickness, lightness, gayety—that spark
Of whimsicality and eerie mirth,
And all that unplumbed fineness—in the dark
And never to be shined on so that fame
Might turn the vivid blossom, half foretold,
Into the glory of an oriflamme
To burn him forward 'neath its purple fold.

GERMANY

Germany?—Why, that's the land
That children seem to understand.
They know about the sunny hills
Crowned with chattering bustling mills,
Where a Miller's Son may seize his staff
And swing his pack up with a laugh,
And gayly go 'mid blessings hurled
To seek his fortune in the world. . . .

And children know just how the way
Winds onward all the livelong day,
Until at last the Miller's Son
(The last, the third and youngest one)
Gets himself lost, at night, alone,
Within a forest overgrown.
But there he'll find without a doubt
Some friend to seek adventure out—
Perhaps a fiddler debonnaire
A-prancing with a dancing bear,
Perhaps a soldier old and gray
Back from the wars, bereft of pay,
Perhaps a talking wolf or owl,
Perhaps a giant on a prowl,
Or dwarf, or tailor's 'prentice wise
With whom a youth could fraternize.

And probably towards break of day
They'll discover far away
A tiny spark of light—and then
They'll see it is a robber's den!

GERMANY

And so will plot and plan to go
(The children—ah, the children know!)
And scare that robber from the spot,
And eat his meal and make his cot
Their own to use like honest men—
(The robber won't come back again)

Next day the dauntless Miller's Son
Will start once more when breakfast's done
To roam the wide world up and down—
Perhaps to win a royal crown,
Perhaps to help his brothers when
They are attacked by evil men—
Always happy and fine and free
And shrewd as millers' sons must be,
Kindly and quick and penniless
And glad to share his merriness,
And not a bit surprised to find
A princess in a pumpkin-rind—

And that's what little children see
In Germany . . .

Ah, Germany!

PRUSSIANS DON'T BELIEVE IN DREAMS

A. D. 1916

Yesterday I went by chance
Down the by-road called "Romance,"
Past the wicked witch's grate
(Just outside the village gate);
But the oven-fire was dead
And I saw no gingerbread
Youths and maidens propped with care
Up against the wall—and there
Was never sign of cat or toad
Or broomstick with its eerie load,
Nothing but an empty thatch
That bats and mice would scorn to scratch.

Past the gate within the town
Red-tiled roofs were tumbling down,
While the town-clock, smoky, dour,
Struck no sweet fantastic hour
(Though it used to run askew
And skip a century or two
As it chose, and spin around
Backwards if it liked the sound
Of an "In that foreign clime . . ."
Or a "Once upon a time . . .").
Tufted grass grew up between
Cobblestones that once had seen
Fiddling gallows-birds, sad kings,
Golden swans, and stranger things;

Where once plodded merrily
 'Prentices, gone off to see
 The world, and with an artless ease
 Bring giants suppliant to their knees. . . .

Then I saw far down the way
 An old man, crippling, bent, and gray—
 "My name is Hans," said he, and smiled—
 "Hans in luck—The Sunday Child!" . . .
 Here was fortune come at last,
 And Hans spoke up of what was past:

"Times have changed since I was young,—
 The talking oak has lost its tongue,
 No more giants pass by here,
 I've seen no dwarfs this forty year;
 Youngest sons don't come to good
 These days as their grandfathers would—
 'Who is left?' you ask—let's see—
 Why Glück is left—and then there's me . . .

"But Glück is gouty, tired, and gray,
 Cinderella died today,
 Both the tailor's dancing elves
 Are statues left on dusty shelves;
 Snow White long has hobbled on
 Through scorning to oblivion;
 There's one queasy snivelling hag
 Living yet in rag and tag—
 Her name I don't remember well—
 But yes—it might be—*Rapunzel!*" . . .

WIND

Wind doesn't wander very far
But loafs along the world's curbstone,
Puffing great clouds from his cigar
And whistling songs in monotone.

He stares at the skirts of little ships
A-fluttering past him daintily,
And makes them nervous as each skips
Across the puddles of the sea.

SAPLING

I shall be happiest when I am old:
Green branches strain to every guttering breeze,
Each starting sweat turns hot too soon to cold,
Where growing is there's never any ease
But only febrile tremulous ecstasies—
I shall be glad when I am old.

DAWN

Day comes like a tiny child,
Grimy-fingered, quick, and wild,
Eager half to hide, and half
To greet you with a shrilling laugh,

And slip its hand inside your hand
And tug to make you understand
That round the corner just a bit
A Secret waits for you and it—

Perhaps a rippling yellow worm
With slimy feelers all a-squirm,
A robin with a broken wing,
Or else a dead mole's sepulchring . . .

Day comes like a tiny child,
Grimy-fingered, quick, and wild,
Brimming with a timid glee,
And full of candid mystery.

COMRADE

There's dancing in the smile of you,
And liltng of star-laughter,
And in your eyes all dreams are true,
And every dream is fair,
Springing, winging—then an instant after,
Dreams are bitter poignant fires that burn for being there.

We may not bend for Caribbee
A galleon's thousand sails,
We may not, in some swift dawn, see
Our islet in the Main,
Gleaming, dreaming—for every compass fails,
And there's no haven charted now for mariners from Spain.

THREE WISHES

Oh, if I saw a leprechaun and had three wishes,
I wouldn't ask for rubies or a golden chain,
I wouldn't ask for peacocks' tongues served on silver dishes—
I'd ask for him to steal me back my heart again.

That would be my first wish and if 'twere granted me,
I'd ask him next to make my heart all burnished new—
Oh, that would be my second, and my last wish would be
For him to take my heart once more and give it back to you.

IRISH KISSES

What are they like? asked Phelim Ogh . . .
Like wild-rose petals floatin' on dew,
Like spring rain fallin'
An' dissolvin' away on Lough Ree—
As fey as the Costa Bower, as heady as poteen,
Swifter than brickbats at Donnybrook,
An' as tantalizin' as the whir-r of a blackthorn.

The Good People made thim
Out of wisps of laughin'
An' straws of mortal delight—
Goold can't put thim on any man's mouth
But they're cheaper than porridge
For the gossoon wit' a laugh in his teeth
An' a way wit' him . . .
'Twas for lack av thim
Aristotle invented philosophy.

Sweeter than blarney they are, an' daintier than silk,
Softer than prayers goin' up to St. Bridig,
An' lighter than childers' hands
On a mother's breast.

They're as true as him that gets thim,
An' sure they don't spoil for savin' or spendin'
For there's more to be had av thim
Than shamrock on Barrow Banks . . .

Ask Tom Moore, said Phelim Ogh.

“WARS ARE FOR YOUTH TO WAGE”

Wars are for youth to wage; for youth alone
Can fling the unsullied ore of his tomorrow
Into the crucible that flames today;
Bringing his metal, splendent in the assay,
To give its heart for lesser gold to borrow,
And for the giving let the gift atone.

Wars are for youth to wage; not even Death
Can make of war a greater thing than youth—
So that when It comes walking in the dawn
Some lad will laugh, rejoicing to be gone
In witness to the youngest ageless truth
That honor is more beautiful than breath.

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG BEFORE VERDUN

A war-gaunt shape with bitter care
Leans to his task, and waits until,
Some twilight, 'neath the shrapnel flare
Release may work its dreary will. . . .
Who is it standing, massive, still,
Submissive to a madman's word?
*What Beethoven on Dead Man's Hill
Bows o'er a misty clavichord?*

As twilight creeps the shadows creep
To trenches where death never dies.
That youth who sleeps a deathly sleep
Looked up wide-eyed,—with Heine's eyes!
There, sorrowful, in rapt surmise
What wasted Goethe bends his head?
*What child hearts break where some Grimm lies,
Wondering that the thorn-rose bled?*

WILL

Shakespeare lived in London-town
And held men's horses at the Crown;
And wrote some plays that were to be
Beacons to immortality—
But still they conjured from the stalls
Contemporary curtain-calls.

He used to dream of many things—
Of caskets and inveigling rings,
Camelopard and crocodile,
And his own serpent of old Nile,
Battles and courts and carnivals,
And dead men walking 'neath old walls.

Nobody ever saw so well
What Shakespeare saw in men to tell,
Or knew how close men's laughter nears
The happy benison of tears,
Or scribbled down so royally
The clod's immortal destiny.

And though he's buried 'neath the stones
(Whence all forbear to dig his bones),
We each of us know perfectly
He would be prince of company,
Sweeter than Falstaff, great and gay,
If he were but alive today.

HENRY JAMES

He wore the habit of repose, and went
On fine outbound adventures of the mind,
And many a lovely tapestry designed
Out of appreciations reticent
That with the silver thread of spirit blent
The gold thread of emotion; and divined
In splendid humor and forbearance kind
The sweet illusiveness of life's event.

We think of him as one who was apart,
Yet loved the light swift play of amity;
A great sweet spirit in whose ready heart
Flourished the vivid bloom of delicacy—
Loving a gesture, loving honest art,
Loving man best, and man's contingency.

OBLIGATIONS

I

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

Stoic, ironic, subtle, keen,
An artisan whose tools are bright—
You vitalize your sombre scene
By hintings of the infinite.

II

A. E. HOUSMAN

“On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble”—so
Wind, sun, and moon, and men were glad
To bring their benisons of joy and woe
To nourish the brave heart of the Shropshire Lad.

III

JOHN MASEFIELD

“Here is the true swift flame,”
I felt when I saw you;
Then when the seventh sonnet came
I knew!

ACHIEVEMENT

It made him passive, silent; his identity
Was fast in the mordant dungeon of desire
Until, one night, a little whisper was the key
That drew the bolt, breathing to him, "Aspire!" . . .
The corridors were void and murky—wondering,
He groped his questing way, half-timid, fond—
Then came the gesture of great curtains sundering,
The proud ascending sweep,—and light beyond!

THE LECTURE ROOM

Now God forgive you, pedagogue,
An may He exorcise the fog
That's crept and sidled in and curled
Round the bright edges of this world! . . .
"The True, the Beautiful, the Good?"
Ah, yes, Sir: Quite, quite understood!

Outdoors, the creeper's tawny leaf
Taps on the pane, staccato, brief;
There, nimble poplars with great thrusts
Whip back the yelping autumn gusts;
There, lissome clouds play pitch and toss . . .
Here—*πάντων μέτρον ἄνθρωπος!*

Now this is just the kind of day
To scatter old wan dust away,
And this is just the kind of hour
To shrivel pedantry's lean flower,
And this is just the proper moment
To flee at dogma's musty foment—
"The True, the Good, the Beautiful?"
The rooti-tooti-tooti-ful!

Philosopher! There's no more fog—
The wind is whistling,—pedagogue!

R——

It's beyond you to help analyzing your emotions,
Which consequently soon lose their original vigor;
And the same devil of introspection
Denies you the self-assurance you should have,
And you dismay yourself rather than be ungenerous
Even to a mere acquaintance . . .
But you are as sensitive as sunlight
And as rare as ether,
And you flash upon us fresh and delicate and fine
Like a cool wind from Gr unewald.

THINGS

Myself, walking—

A thing of curious tissues, coördinations,
Actions, responses; moulded, definite, mechanic;
Rather strange, but commonplace enough
Among several millions like it.

A thing made up of stuff that other things
Call “matter”—

Totally apart from everything else,
Singular, insular, quite alone. . . .

I can go along over the sidewalk
And never take root anywhere,
But govern this queer form and move it about,
Move it about the world and be assertive in the world
But never quite of it, somehow. . . .

Then there's that other, odder part of me:
Not stuff like muscles, but a shiftier thing,
A thing my fingers cannot touch—
A thing, nevertheless, that makes me
Part of everything else—
(So that I can know that half an hour ago
Something that was myself—serene, accustomed,
Quite unquestioning—
Stood way off down the street
A half a mile from here).

And this other odder thing is full
Of stranger complex things called passions—
A thing called love, a thing called hate,
A stranger thing than any (when you think about it)

THINGS

Called ambition—
And little, undefined, odd things,
Moods and realizings and swift fresh happinesses. . . .
And through it all a thing called mind
Runs shuttling back and forth and says,
“Do this,” and “This is bad,” and “This is autumn.”

And everything seems working out in kind;
Other people talk about love and hate and ideas
And seem to mean the same thing I do
When I talk about them.
(Though why they should is quite beyond me—
“Is my green green to you?”)

And while I walk I pass a man I know—
An apothecary, swinging down to work.
And I know a little about him—
How he always eats in the Twentieth Century Lunch
About midnight with a number of friends
(I’ve often wondered what they have
Such button-holing conversations about) . . .
And I know that people owe him money,
And that he comes from Pittsfield.

Then a greyhound named Ansel comes by,
High and gaunt and spare of gesture
With shoulder-blades sliding as he runs.

Several dusty yellow leaves sidle to the pavement.

Now why should I be burrowing
Into that piddling thing, my consciousness,

THINGS

And worrying about it?
Though, as for that,
Why shouldn't I?
And what difference does it make
Whether I know an apothecary, and pat Ansel,
And watch a couple of leaves fall?
And besides, why should I be myself
And not an apothecary,
Or Ansel, or a wizened leaf?

(Quite so, why should I?)

BLACK-SMOKE

I dream of how I used to love
(A thousand years away)
A pompous mandarin's one child
Slim-eyed and quaint and gay—
I was a rich young merchant-prince
That trafficked in Cathay.

And down beside the river's brim
She'd sit and watch and hide
Until my lateen-sailed old junk
Would come down on the tide—
And then beneath a bamboo bridge
We'd sail off side by side. . . .

Just round the corner of the world
Is where the spice-lands lie,
In just the curling of a leaf
A century will die,
Love is lacquer on a ring
And chips off, by and by.

A WISH

I wish I'd never even looked
 Into another's eyes
Until I saw unveiled in yours
 The lights of Paradise.

Lovelessness were worth the pain
 With such an anodyne—
I wish I'd never kissed a girl
 Until your lips were mine.

SESTET

When death shall set you in a pallid sheath
And lay cold lips upon your breast to drain
Your fibres of their salt; when your sweet flesh
Is sunken to a livid residue,
When grim black earth the palms I loved shall stain,
Shall I not weep for the too mortal you? . . .

YOU

You shall be cloistered from the sun,
And never see the twilight run
Across the world, or know the dark—
So that no thing shall ever mark
Its mazed distressful need of you,
Scorning all visions but the new—

Jealously each leaf would bar
The adulation of each star,
And wind's lank fingers snatch and pull
The smouldering rose, your thurible;
And moonlight on the sea devise
A carpet up to Paradise
For you to walk; and every wave
Bend down, a glittering ebon slave,
To sweep for your swift passing by
Yearning floors of porphyry. . . .

You shall be cloistered from the sun,
And never see the twilight run
Across the world, or feel the air
Fumbling with your quiet hair.

APOSTROPHE

Little growing moon, tonight you are very young!
Just a kid, out in the dark,
And you've pulled the wings off a firefly.

Tomorrow night you'll be a stripling,
Off on a callow tippie
With those idle apprentices, the stars;
Shinning over the tree-fences
And peeking in spinsters' windows—
With the most innocent intentions in the world!

But soon, little growing moon—
(When you're a portly burgher,
Puffy-cheeked, rubicund, and inclined to apoplexy,
Dressed in russet, and very proud)—
Then! Ah, then, you'll be far too stolid and lofty,
And much too complacent
To notice
How absurdly happy *we* shall be . . . down here . . .
Four—or five—days from now
When you've grown to be a portly burgher,
Little growing moon!

DALLIANCE

There's a hidden, green-swept garden with a plot within its wall
Where a lichened Pan is luting to a fawn;
There's a fountain rim a-brimming in a beaded waterfall,
And an alabaster sun-dial on the lawn.

A slender moon comes out at night to dust the dew with
 silver—
Then like a swoon the scarlet sun will rise
Mid spray of dusky opal in a veil to hide its splendor
Till the little stars run back to Paradise.

For April is a garden we have fashioned in our dreams,
And Pan is at his magic not in vain,
And his winsome music whispers round the garden wall and
 seems
As witching as the gusts of springtime rain.

Beware? Shall we beware how we reckon April's gifts? . . .
Lo, the beauty that incarnadines the Spring
Soon passes like a phantom where the petals lie in drifts—
And the lute of Pan is such a fragile thing!

THE POET SINGS THE GAY MADNESS OF
FASHION

Sing no more the carnival,
Sing no more the tournament,
Venice is a pallid dream,
 Camelot is magic spent—
Thebes and Babylon and Spain,
Greece and Prester John's domain,
Let oblivion's sombre reign
 Curtain close their faded hue—
 Rather sing—The Avenue!

(Sheherazade tripping,
Godey-prints a-tripping,
Flappers all a-tripping,
Down the Avenue!)

Undulant like pulsing jewels
Before the eyes of Ariane,
Like embodied melodies
 Fluttering from the heart of Pan—
Svelte black angels, efflorescent,
Maids demure and gay and pleasant,
Haughty, frivolous, quiescent,
 Arch, bizarre, yea, worldly too,
 Strolling down the Avenue.

(Gaucherie a-strolling,
Watteau milkmaids strolling,
Pierrette a-strolling,
Down the Avenue!)

THE POET SINGS THE GAY MADNESS OF FASHION

Silks from Kashmir, veils from Fez,
Lace and lawn from out all nations,
Boots from misty Vishnu-land,

Miraculous mundane creations—
Alabaster and dawn-blushed faces,
Slender, angular, mad young graces,
Curving in the sweetest places—

Mohamet's Paradise comes true
At five upon the Avenue!

(Hallucinations liling,
Seraphim a-liling,
Felicity a-liling,
Down the Avenue!)

TO SEVERAL

You that I loved
Before I loved her:
You are kind enough not to flatter me
With reproaches;
And I am sagacious enough
Never to look behind . . .

If I did I might discover
That your baffling lovely manner
Was simply laziness—or stupidity . . .
And that *your* mouth was out of drawing . . .
And (worst of all) that *your* fey gauche spirit,
Your winsome soul, that so intrigued me,
Was simply a delicious
Angularity of elbow . . .

Perhaps I should never let this be printed,
Because I seem to re-write it
Every year.

ALL

A bauble of slow-breathing scent
That glows anon and darkling lingers,
Making its moment opulent—
A cigarette in slender fingers . . .

A little play of level eyes
A-glint with quick ephemeral yearning;
An instant—and an enterprise . . .
Then embers, dead and done with burning.

ODALISQUE

I wonder if she ever tired of smiling
Or grew a little weary of much gladness,
And listlessly drooped down and faded, whiling
The drowsy moments with a winsome sadness.

And if her purple mouth grew tired of singing
And lip on lip relaxed should lie quiescent,
How softly would the scented air come, bringing
Oblivion to caress that slender crescent.

And if, perhaps, a lover kissed her so,
His eyes might brim with generous pity, mild
As rain at dawn, for it would be as though
He had but kissed the mouth of a little child. . . .

CATS

Cats have no sense of humor, but like gray
Back-yard Iagos brood and fiercely shrink,
Stroking grim prickly whiskers as they think
About affairs, revenges, brawls, and prey. . . .

Cats to red gusty passions oft give way;
They haunt old tarnished thresholds and they slink
Along, intensely frustrate, on the brink
Of antic doom, like banshees lithe and fey. . . .

The only cat that ever smiled was he
That grinned in sunny Cheshire formerly. . . .

If cats should suddenly sprout up about
Six times as big as they are now, no doubt
The bold behemoth and the jaguar
Would be less awful then than cats, by far.

SOME DAY

(THE SCRIVENER TO HIS FELLOW)

Some day when we shall set about
To fête our hour in cosmic mood,
We'll rake the stars of heaven out
To be paprika for our food;

Our taste on comet-dust we'll whet
And halibut, and all such victual,
Dine at the Café Marionette,
Nor count the cost one jot or tittle.

Through darkest Fleet Street our composure
Will match our saunter's enterprise,
We'll be the absolute cynósure
Of all poor free-lance neighboring eyes.

Fawn-tinted gloves and swallow-tails
We'll don, and toppers out of London,
In fact we'll leave where nature fails
Nothing, to paint the lily, undone.

We'll condescend to editors,
Be supercilious at the play,
And swaggering call the critics bores
Over the vintage wine—some day!

WHEN I DIE

I want to be buried in a motor hearse,
And sail blandly a last time
Up Fifth Avenue
Some May-day dusk when the asphalt is all velvety
With cool Spring rain.

We'll go fast, stopping primly at the corners,
And shooting through three speeds again
In as many revolutions of the wheels.

There'll be one car behind my hearse,
Full of Hawaiian musicians
Making degenerate music
On three ukuleles.

And we'll stop every little while at stores
And buy a couple of books in expensive bindings—
Keats perhaps, and Chaucer—
And also tobacco in big proud tins,
And a pair of brown gaiters
And a silk shirt.

IMMORTALITY

Dusty now, of course, with age, and rather yellow-tinted,
Ornate like the carvings on the Waldorf-Astoria,
Quite absurd they all seem—those volumes that were printed
Early in the moments of the good Queen Victoria.

That's the way this tome will be, eighty years from now—
Musty to the touch and odd of print and queer of binding;
As regards the verse: Your servant hates to wonder how
Utterly depressing it will be in that far finding:

“Oh, I say, do look—this is perfectly delicious,”
(Can you hear the voices, eight long decades from today?)
“Here's some verse that really rhymes—how quaint!—how
too too precious!” . . .
And from some hand at that will fall, unseen, a leaf of bay!

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