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## The Ballad of the Brown Girl: An Old Tale Retold

Countee Cullen

Charles Cullen

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THE  
BALLAD OF  
THE BROWN GIRL

AN OLD BALLAD RETOLD

by

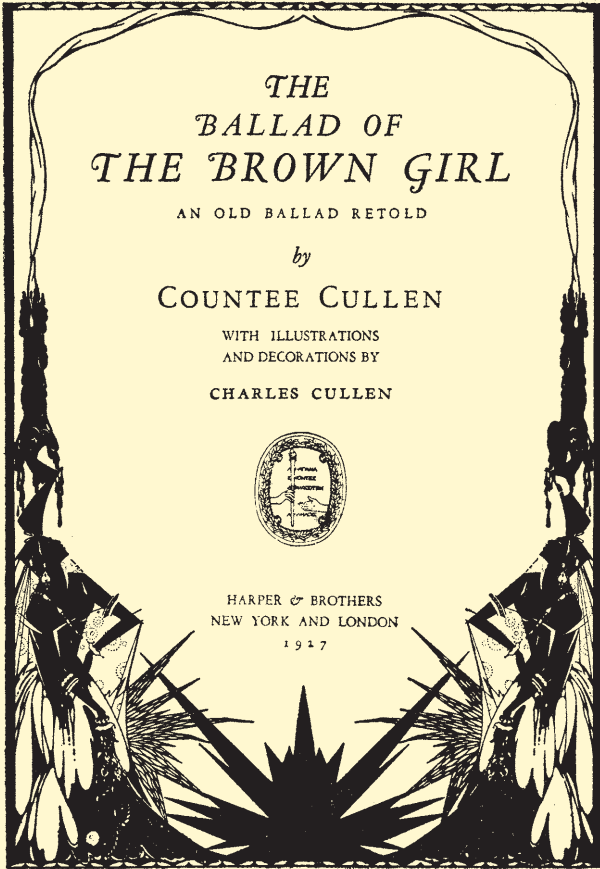
COUNTEE CULLEN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS  
AND DECORATIONS BY

CHARLES CULLEN



HARPER & BROTHERS  
NEW YORK AND LONDON  
1917





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THE BROWN GIRL*

AN OLD BALLAD  
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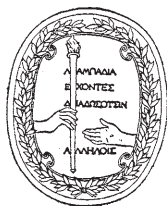
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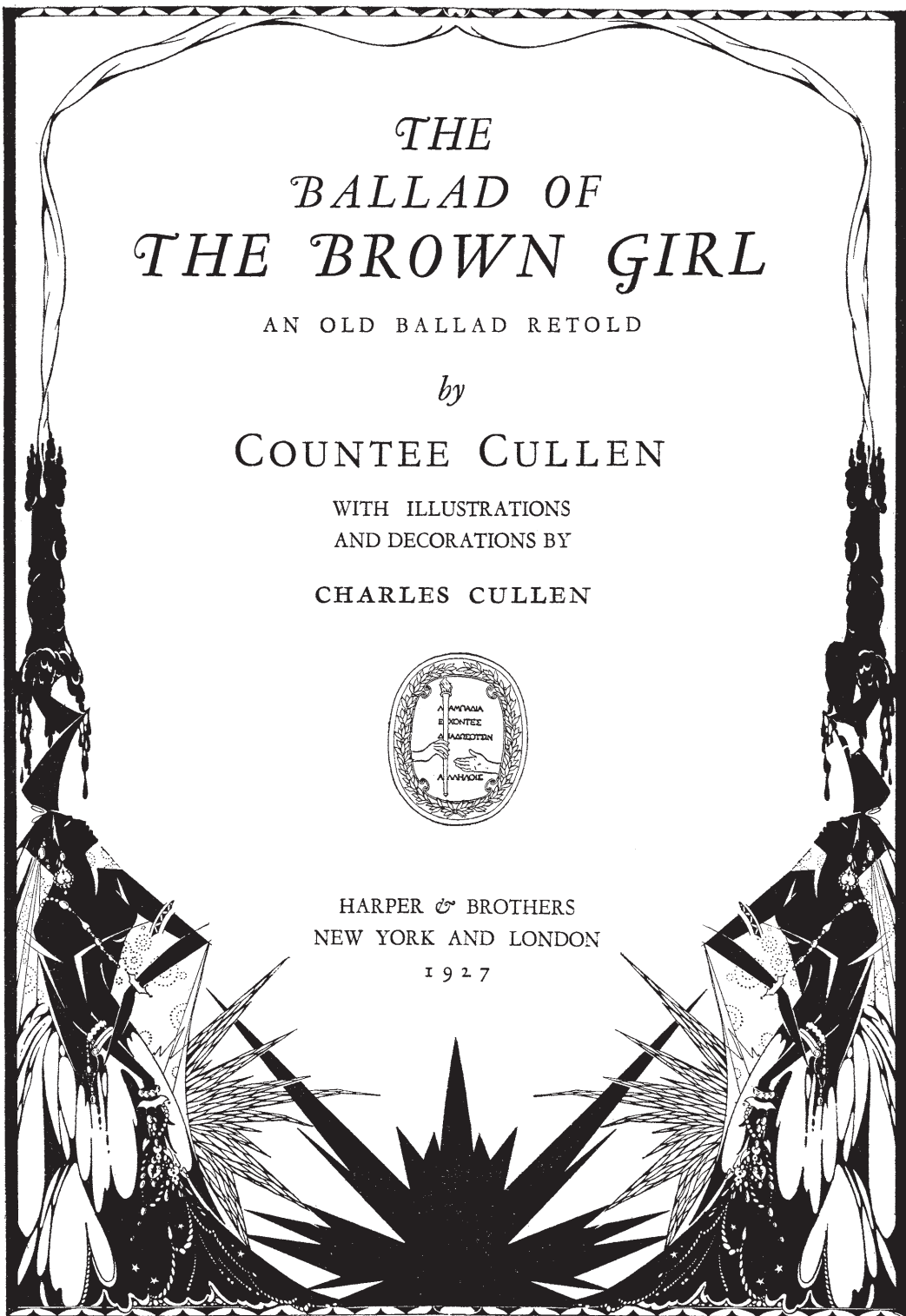
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THE BALLAD OF THE BROWN GIRL

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*Printed in the U. S. A.*

FIRST EDITION

E-B

*To* WITTER BYNNER





*THE  
BALLAD OF  
THE BROWN GIRL*





H, THIS is the tale the grandams tell  
In the land where the grass is blue,  
And some there are who say 'tis false,  
And some that hold it true.

. . . . .  
Lord Thomas on a summer's day  
Came to his mother's door;  
His eyes were ringed for want of sleep;  
His heart was troubled sore.

He knelt him at his mother's side;  
She stroked his curly head,  
"I've come to be advised of you;  
Advise me well," he said.

"For there are two who love me well—  
I wot it from each mouth—  
And one's Fair London, lily maid,  
And pride of all the south.



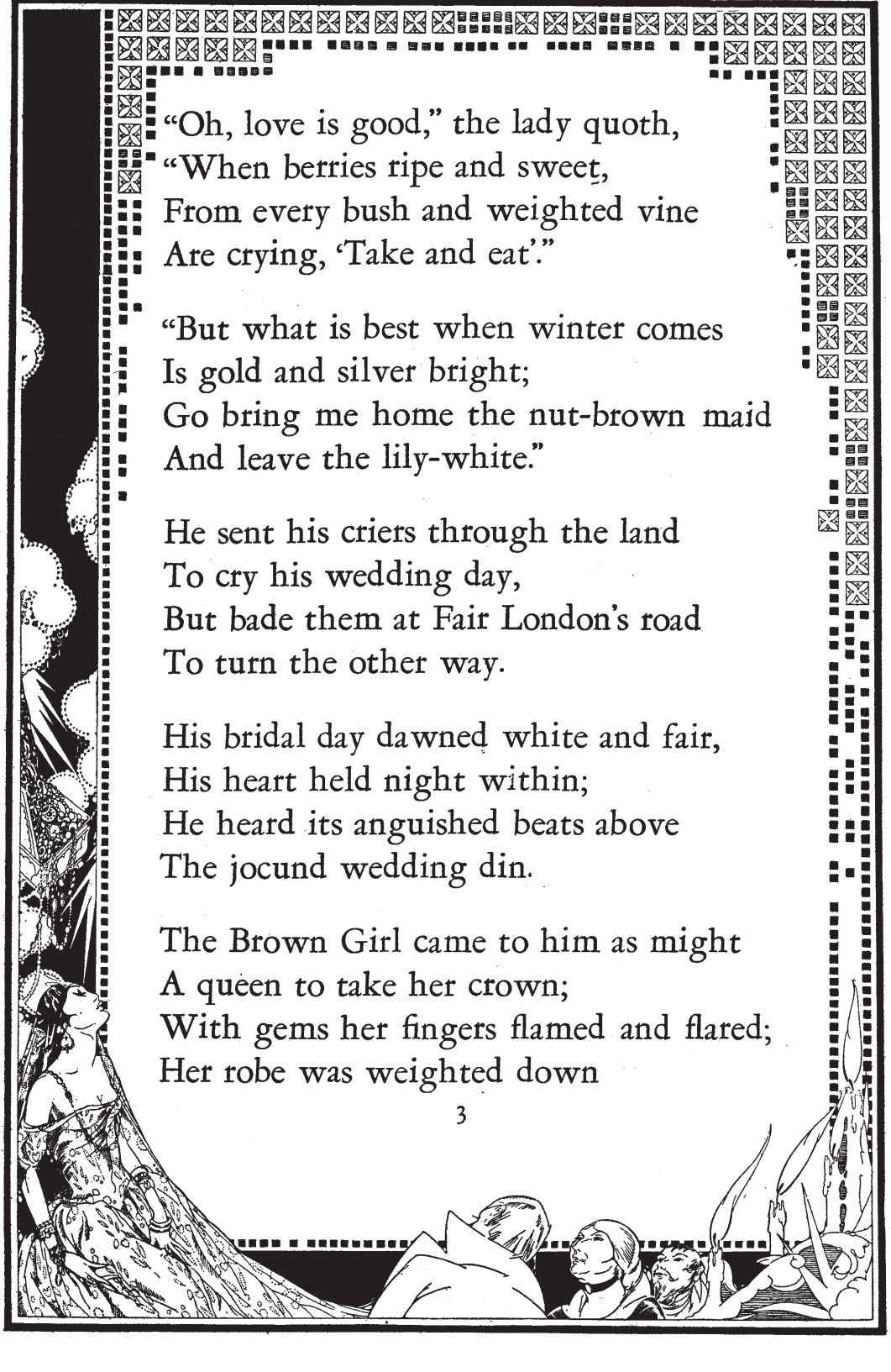
She is full shy and sweet as still  
Delight when nothing stirs;  
My soul can thrive on love of her,  
And all my heart is hers.”

His mother's slender fingers ploughed  
Dark furrows through his hair,  
“The other one who loves you well,  
Is she as sweet and fair?”

“She is the dark Brown Girl who knows  
No more-defining name,  
And bitter tongues have worn their tips  
In sneering at her shame.”

“But there are lands to go with her,  
And gold and silver stores.”  
His mother whispered in his ear,  
“And all her heart is yours.”

His mother loved the clink of gold,  
The odor and the shine  
Of larders bowed with venison  
And crystal globes of wine.



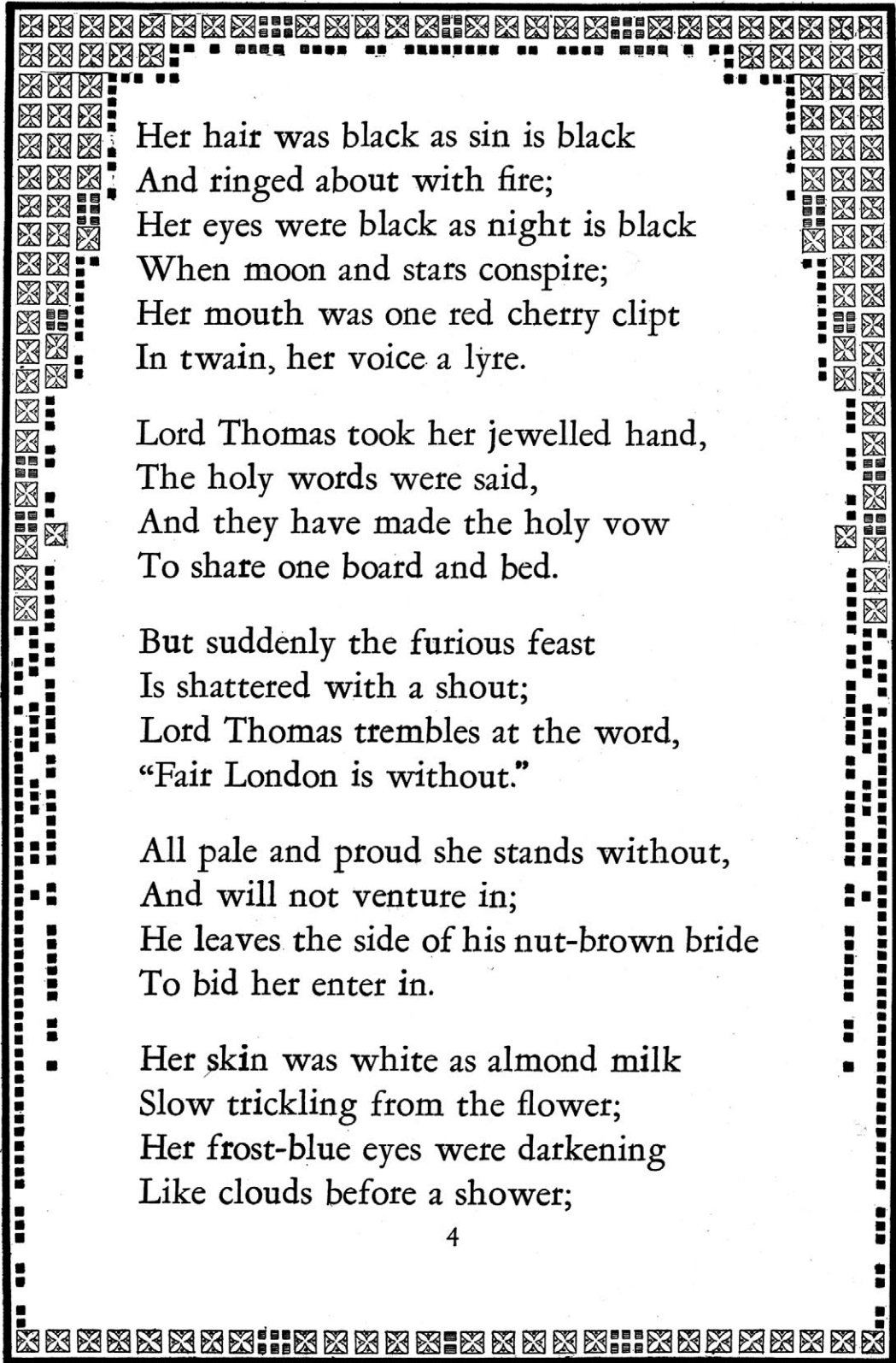
“Oh, love is good,” the lady quoth,  
“When berries ripe and sweet,  
From every bush and weighted vine  
Are crying, ‘Take and eat.’”

“But what is best when winter comes  
Is gold and silver bright;  
Go bring me home the nut-brown maid  
And leave the lily-white.”

He sent his criers through the land  
To cry his wedding day,  
But bade them at Fair London’s road  
To turn the other way.

His bridal day dawned white and fair,  
His heart held night within;  
He heard its anguished beats above  
The jocund wedding din.

The Brown Girl came to him as might  
A queen to take her crown;  
With gems her fingers flamed and flared;  
Her robe was weighted down



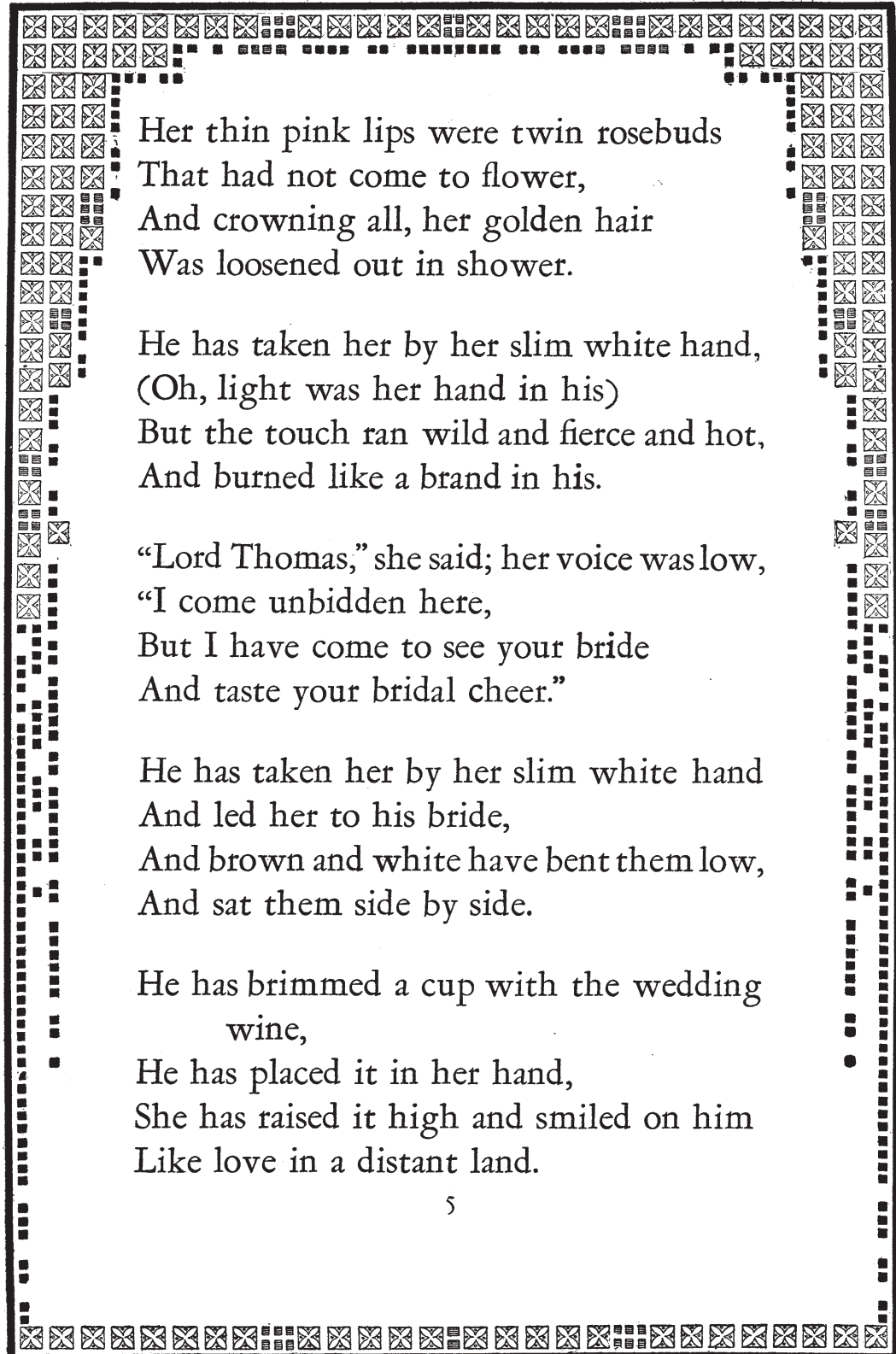
Her hair was black as sin is black  
And ringed about with fire;  
Her eyes were black as night is black  
When moon and stars conspire;  
Her mouth was one red cherry clipt  
In twain, her voice a lyre.

Lord Thomas took her jewelled hand,  
The holy words were said,  
And they have made the holy vow  
To share one board and bed.

But suddenly the furious feast  
Is shattered with a shout;  
Lord Thomas trembles at the word,  
"Fair London is without."

All pale and proud she stands without,  
And will not venture in;  
He leaves the side of his nut-brown bride  
To bid her enter in.

Her skin was white as almond milk  
Slow trickling from the flower;  
Her frost-blue eyes were darkening  
Like clouds before a shower;



Her thin pink lips were twin rosebuds  
That had not come to flower,  
And crowning all, her golden hair  
Was loosened out in shower.

He has taken her by her slim white hand,  
(Oh, light was her hand in his)  
But the touch ran wild and fierce and hot,  
And burned like a brand in his.

“Lord Thomas,” she said; her voice was low,  
“I come unbidden here,  
But I have come to see your bride  
And taste your bridal cheer.”

He has taken her by her slim white hand  
And led her to his bride,  
And brown and white have bent them low,  
And sat them side by side.

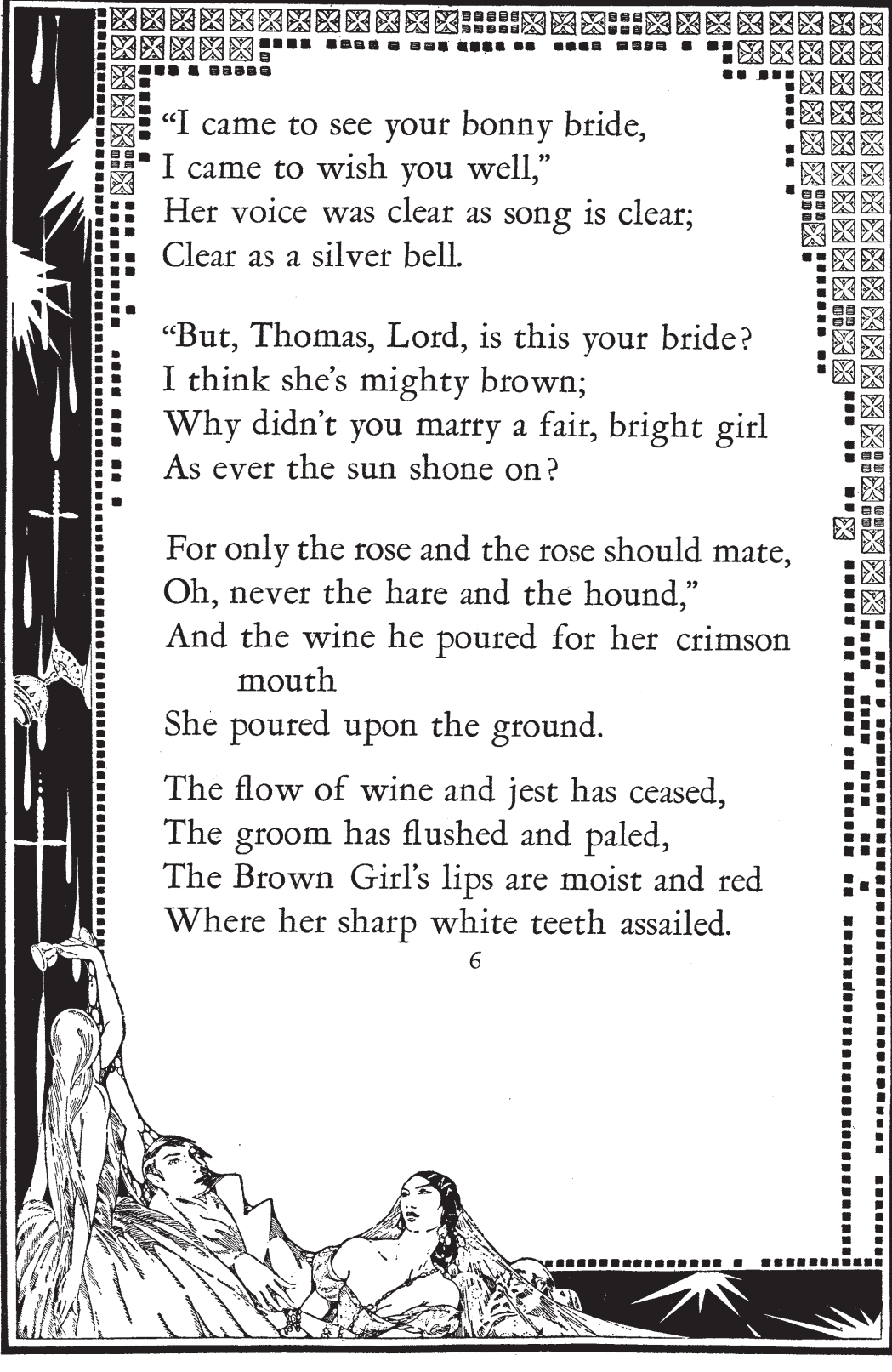
He has brimmed a cup with the wedding  
    wine,  
He has placed it in her hand,  
She has raised it high and smiled on him  
Like love in a distant land.







*He picked its strings and played a tune  
And sang it to the dead.*



“I came to see your bonny bride,  
I came to wish you well,”  
Her voice was clear as song is clear;  
Clear as a silver bell.

“But, Thomas, Lord, is this your bride?  
I think she’s mighty brown;  
Why didn’t you marry a fair, bright girl  
As ever the sun shone on?”

For only the rose and the rose should mate,  
Oh, never the hare and the hound,”  
And the wine he poured for her crimson  
mouth  
She poured upon the ground.

The flow of wine and jest has ceased,  
The groom has flushed and paled,  
The Brown Girl’s lips are moist and red  
Where her sharp white teeth assailed.

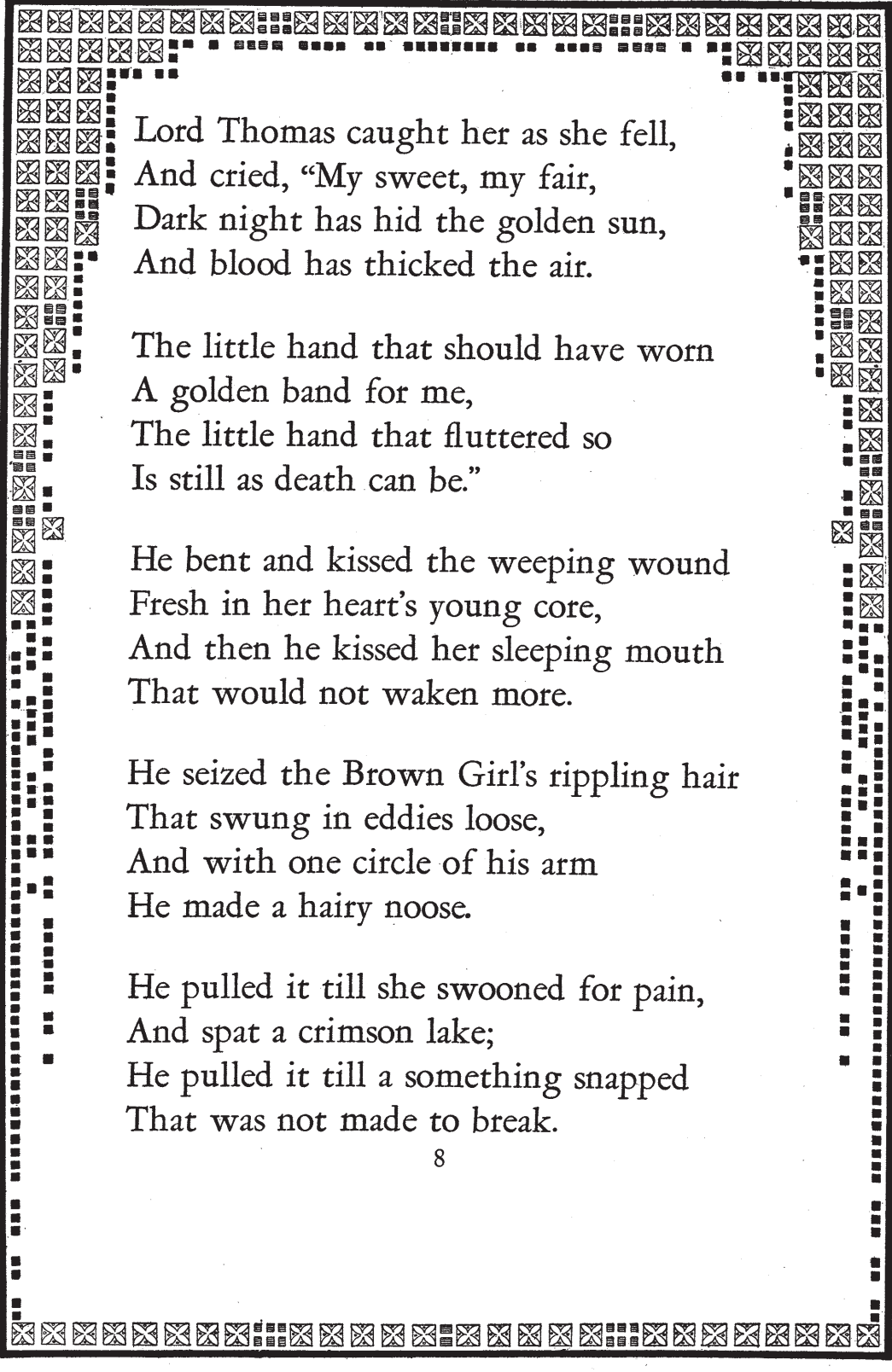
Dark wrath has climbed her nut-brown  
throat,  
And wrath in her wild blood sings,  
But she tramples her passions underfoot  
Because she comes of kings.

She has taken her stand by her rival's side,  
"Lord Thomas, you have heard,  
As I am yours and you are mine  
By ring and plighted word,  
Avenge me here on our bridal day."—  
Lord Thomas spoke no word.

The Brown Girl's locks were held in place  
By a dagger serpentine;  
Thin it was and long and sharp,  
And tempered well and fine.

And legend claimed that a dusky queen,  
In a dusky dream-lit land,  
Had loved in vain, and died of it,  
By her own slim twilight hand.

The Brown Girl's hair has kissed her waist,  
Her hand has closed on steel;  
Fair London's blood has joined the wine  
She sullied with her heel.



Lord Thomas caught her as she fell,  
And cried, "My sweet, my fair,  
Dark night has hid the golden sun,  
And blood has thicked the air.

The little hand that should have worn  
A golden band for me,  
The little hand that fluttered so  
Is still as death can be."

He bent and kissed the weeping wound  
Fresh in her heart's young core,  
And then he kissed her sleeping mouth  
That would not waken more.

He seized the Brown Girl's rippling hair  
That swung in eddies loose,  
And with one circle of his arm  
He made a hairy noose.

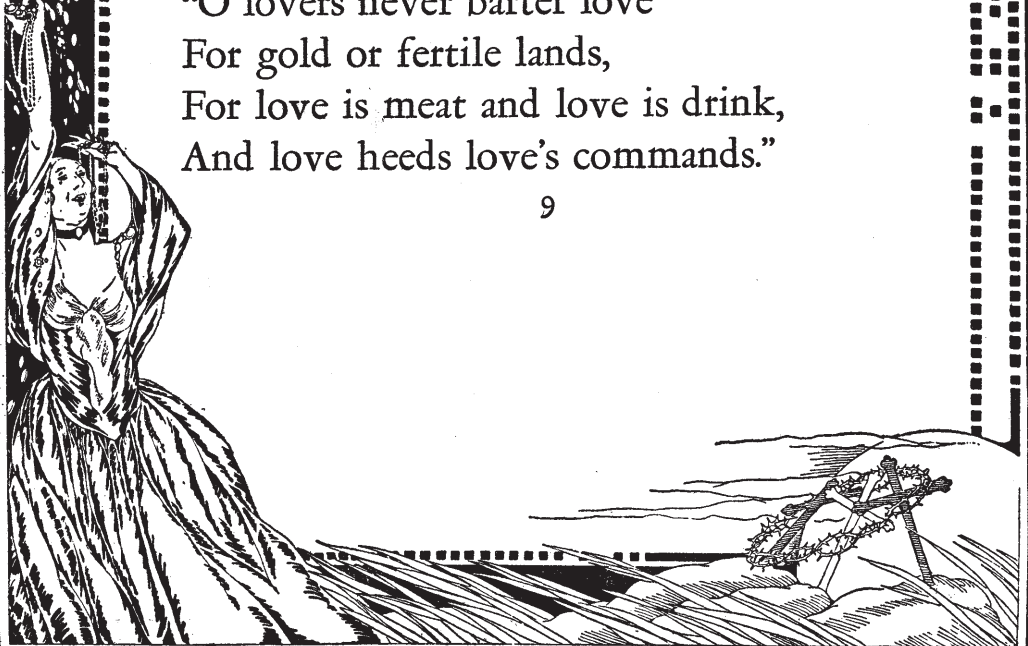
He pulled it till she swooned for pain,  
And spat a crimson lake;  
He pulled it till a something snapped  
That was not made to break.

And her he loved he brought and  
placed  
By her who was his bride,  
And brown and white like broken buds  
Kept vigil side by side.

And one was like a white, white rose  
Whose inmost heart has bled,  
And one was like a red, red rose  
Whose roots have witherèd.

Lord Thomas took a golden harp  
That hung above his head;  
He picked its strings and played a tune  
And sang it to the dead.

“O lovers never barter love  
For gold or fertile lands,  
For love is meat and love is drink,  
And love heeds love’s commands.”



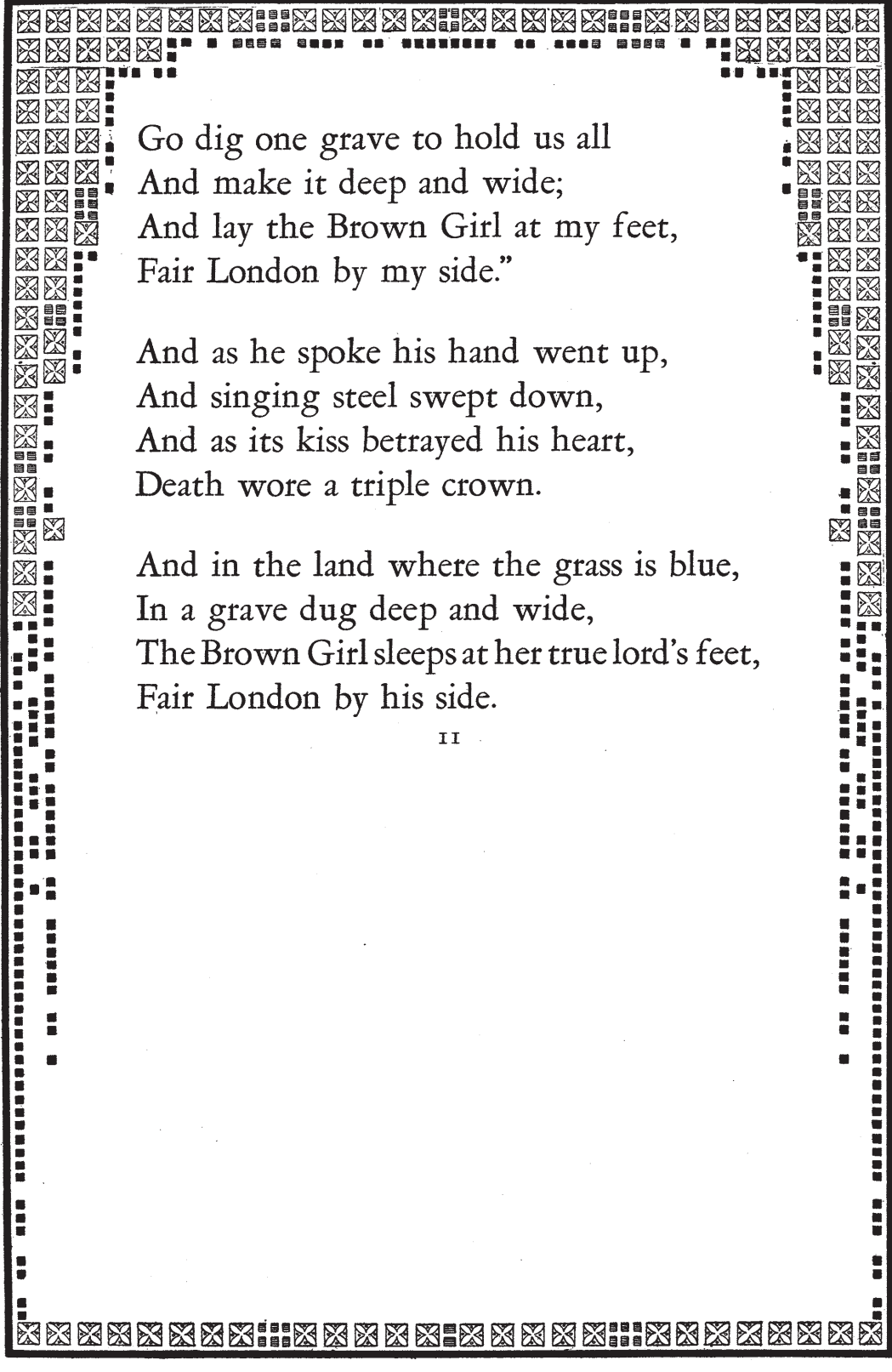
“And love is shelter from the rain,  
And scowling stormy skies;  
Who casts off love must break his heart,  
And rue it till he dies.”

And then he hugged himself and grinned,  
And laughed, “Ha, ha,” for glee;  
But those who watched knew he was mad,  
And shudderèd to see.

And some made shift to go to him,  
But there was in his eye  
What made each man to turn aside  
To let his neighbor by.

His mother in a satin gown  
Was fain to go to him,  
But his lips curled back like a gray wolf’s  
fang,  
When the huntsmen blow to him.

“No mother of mine, for gold’s the god  
Before whose feet you fall;  
Here be two dead who will be three,  
And you have slain us all.



Go dig one grave to hold us all  
And make it deep and wide;  
And lay the Brown Girl at my feet,  
Fair London by my side.”

And as he spoke his hand went up,  
And singing steel swept down,  
And as its kiss betrayed his heart,  
Death wore a triple crown.

And in the land where the grass is blue,  
In a grave dug deep and wide,  
The Brown Girl sleeps at her true lord's feet,  
Fair London by his side.



