

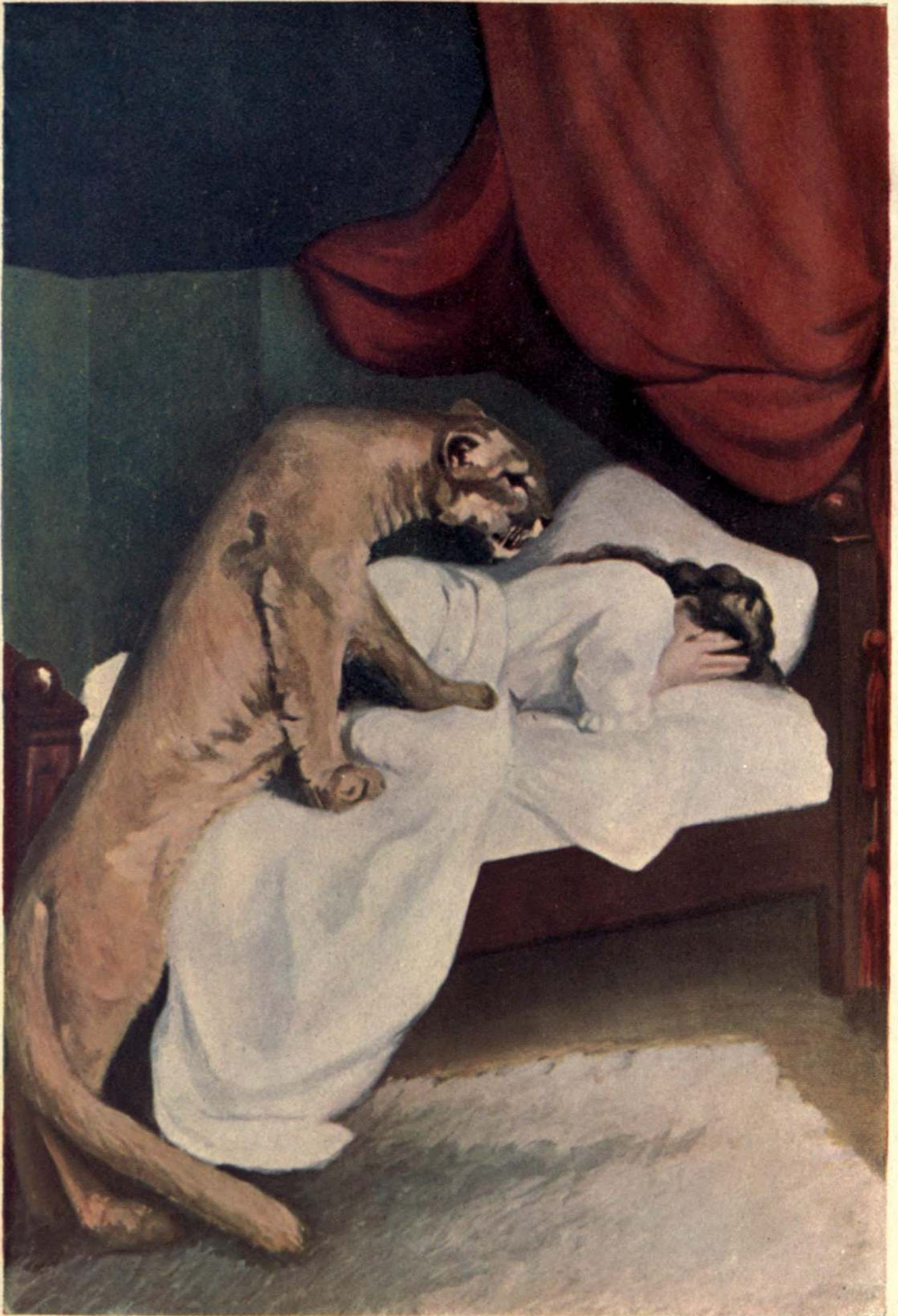


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THE PANTHER

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

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THE PANTHER

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

BY

ANNE WARNER

With Illustrations by

PAUL K. M. THOMAS



BOSTON
SMALL, MAYNARD & COMPANY
MCMVIII

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THE PANTHER

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

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HIS own eyes were gray,—the gray that we call iron because its shadows are black and hard. His life had been such as led to hard and black shadows or to a light that only lightens into steely reflections. If there had been anything to soften the iron and steel, it had been no more to either than rust,—the rust that is warmly red of hue, but deadly poison to one just come from playing with anything that cuts deep.

He was a large man, Titanic in form, with a Titan's strength not only of body, but of mind. A man whose will matched his eyes. A man whose empire included others, yet—unlike any king's—began within himself.



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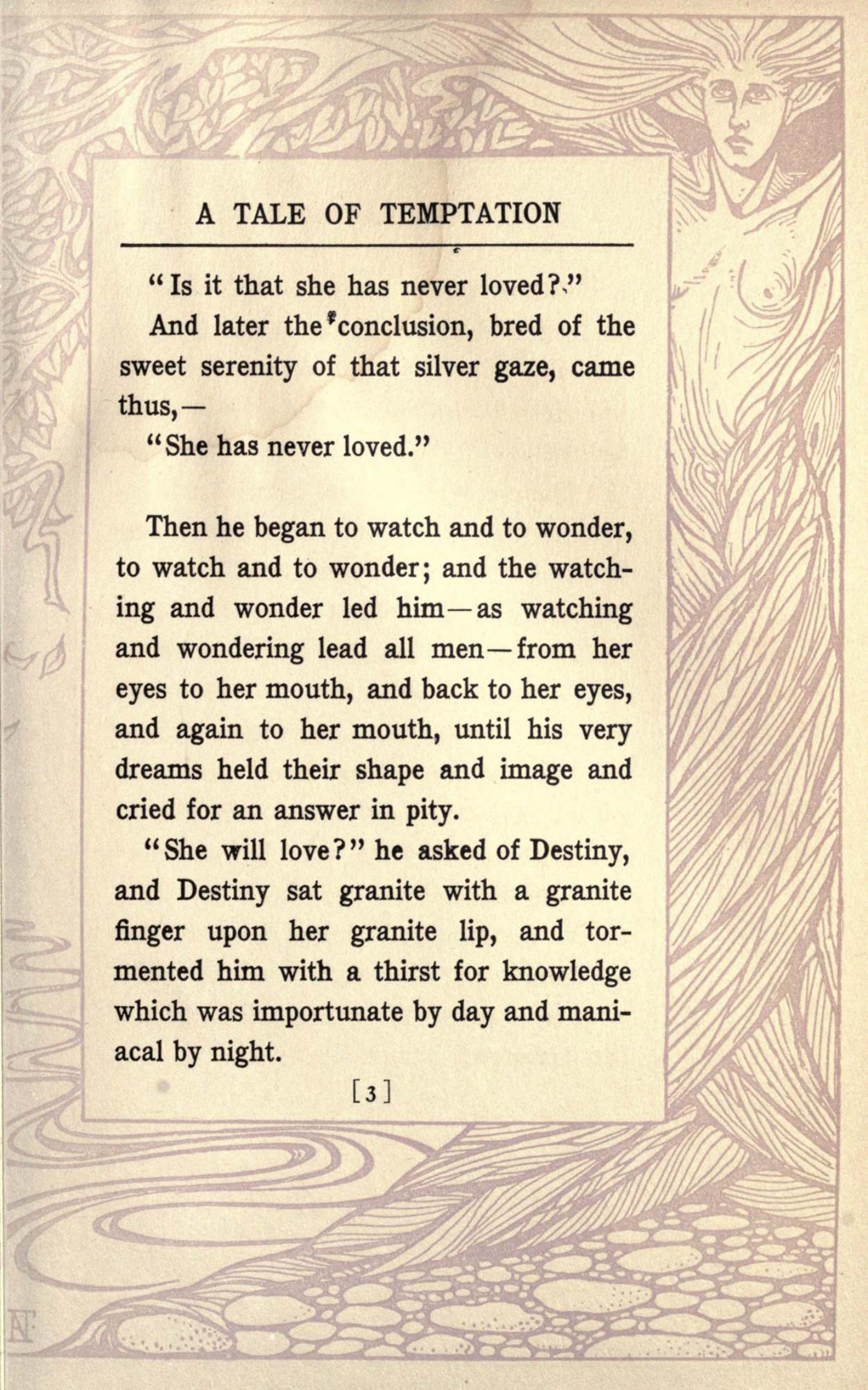
But those eyes of hers were of heaven,—so true and so blue, and firm, too, but not with the glitter of steel, rather with the eternal duration of the silver moonbeams.

“That is it!” he told himself quickly on the first wonderful night that ever he knew them,—“blue and silver,—heaven and moonlight: she has both in her eyes,—in her blue and silver eyes.”

It did not seem to him that she could be exactly human. She seemed elusive, fragile, as if the world had gone by on the other side and been a good Samaritan in so doing.

“Life has surely forgotten to teach her,” he thought, standing afar and contemplating.

Then out of his contemplation grew the question,—



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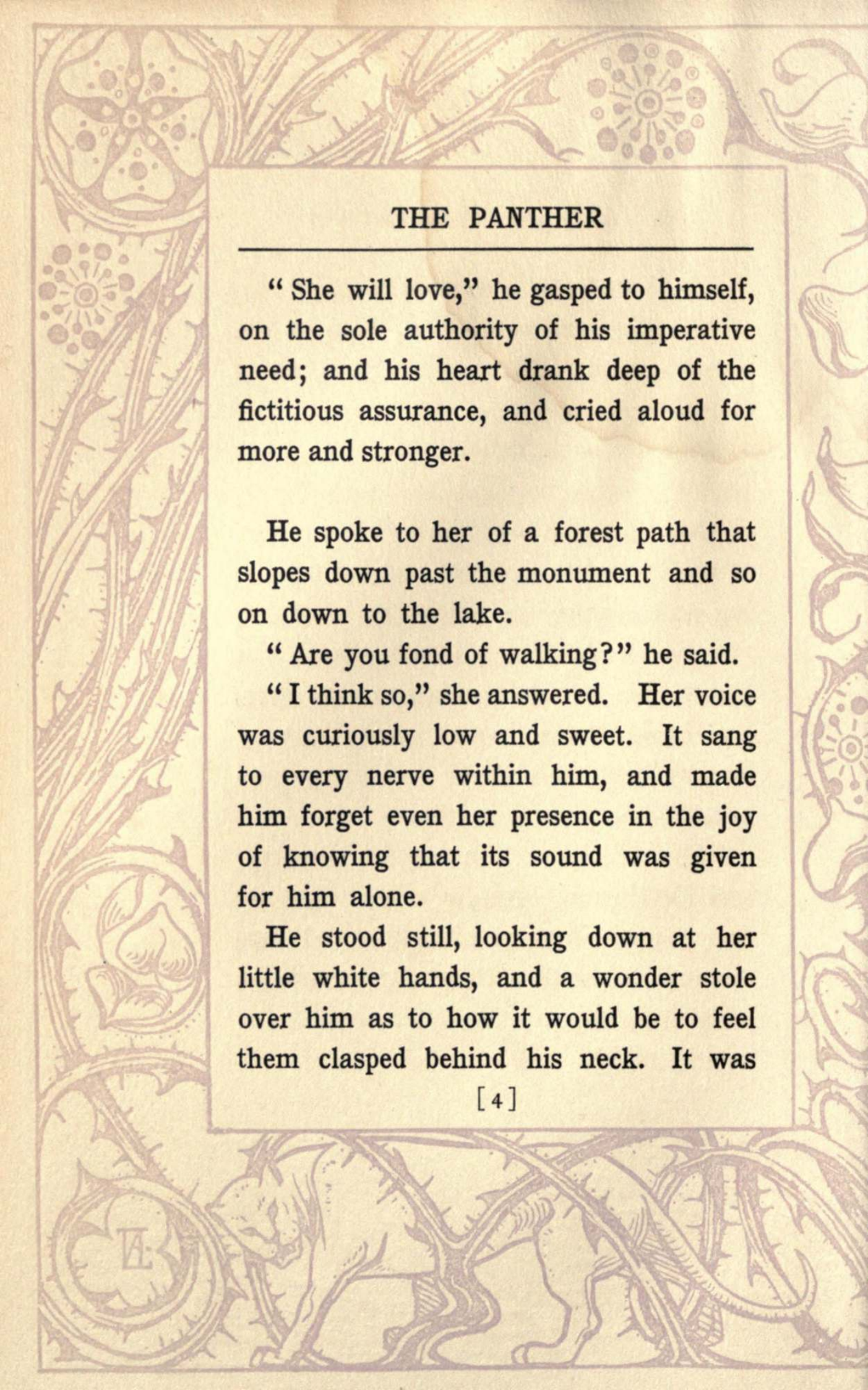
“Is it that she has never loved?”

And later the ^fconclusion, bred of the sweet serenity of that silver gaze, came thus,—

“She has never loved.”

Then he began to watch and to wonder, to watch and to wonder; and the watching and wonder led him—as watching and wondering lead all men—from her eyes to her mouth, and back to her eyes, and again to her mouth, until his very dreams held their shape and image and cried for an answer in pity.

“She will love?” he asked of Destiny, and Destiny sat granite with a granite finger upon her granite lip, and tormented him with a thirst for knowledge which was importunate by day and maniacal by night.



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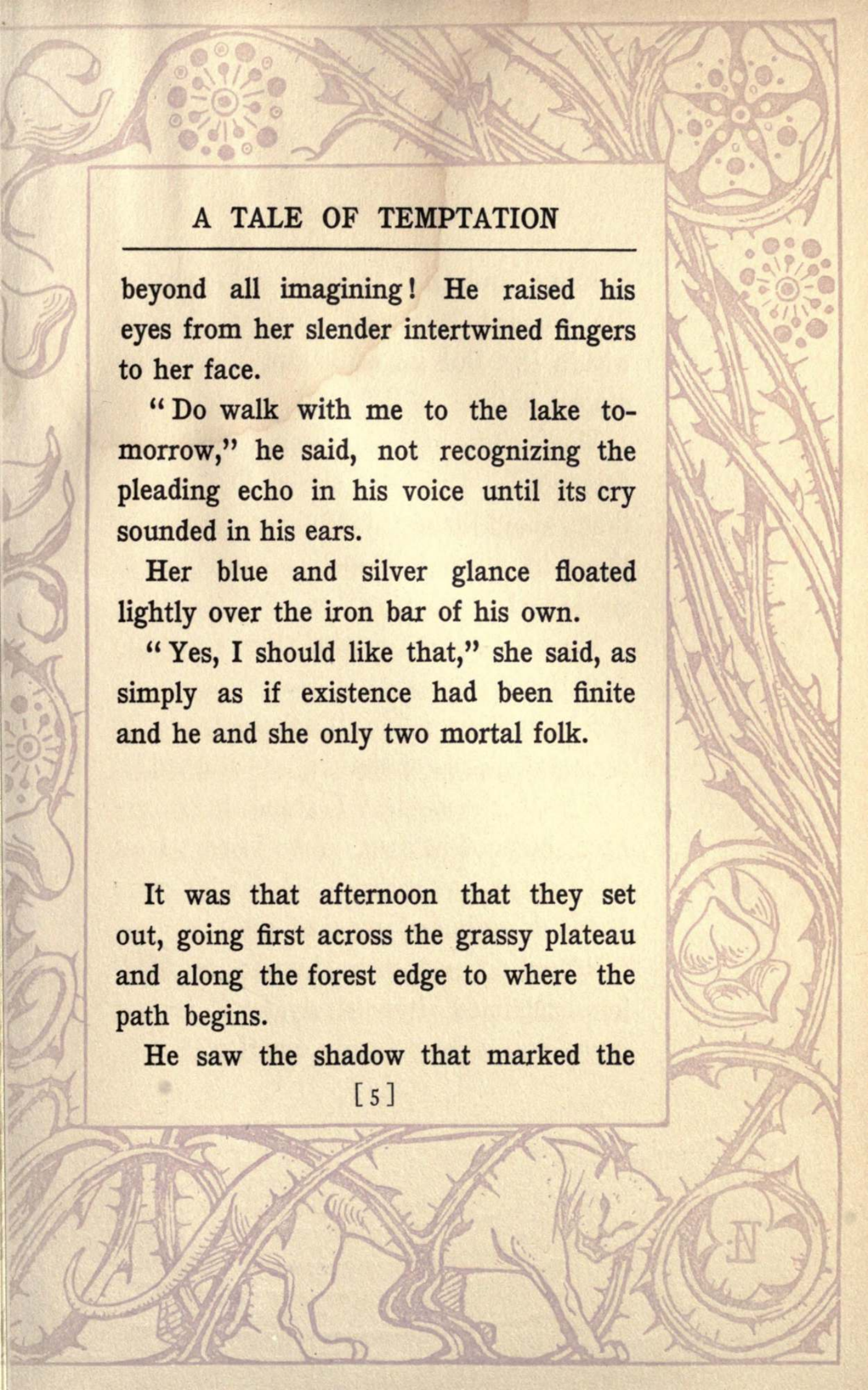
“She will love,” he gasped to himself, on the sole authority of his imperative need; and his heart drank deep of the fictitious assurance, and cried aloud for more and stronger.

He spoke to her of a forest path that slopes down past the monument and so on down to the lake.

“Are you fond of walking?” he said.

“I think so,” she answered. Her voice was curiously low and sweet. It sang to every nerve within him, and made him forget even her presence in the joy of knowing that its sound was given for him alone.

He stood still, looking down at her little white hands, and a wonder stole over him as to how it would be to feel them clasped behind his neck. It was



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beyond all imagining! He raised his eyes from her slender intertwined fingers to her face.

“Do walk with me to the lake tomorrow,” he said, not recognizing the pleading echo in his voice until its cry sounded in his ears.

Her blue and silver glance floated lightly over the iron bar of his own.

“Yes, I should like that,” she said, as simply as if existence had been finite and he and she only two mortal folk.

It was that afternoon that they set out, going first across the grassy plateau and along the forest edge to where the path begins.

He saw the shadow that marked the

The page is framed by a decorative border. On the left side, there is a vertical illustration of a woman's face with long, flowing hair, looking downwards. The rest of the border is filled with intricate, stylized floral and leaf patterns. At the bottom of the page, there are several concentric circles, resembling ripples in water, and a small, detailed illustration of a flower or leaf on the right side.

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opening, and tried to picture to himself the wooded way and they two alone within it. But he could not sketch the merest outline of the idea.

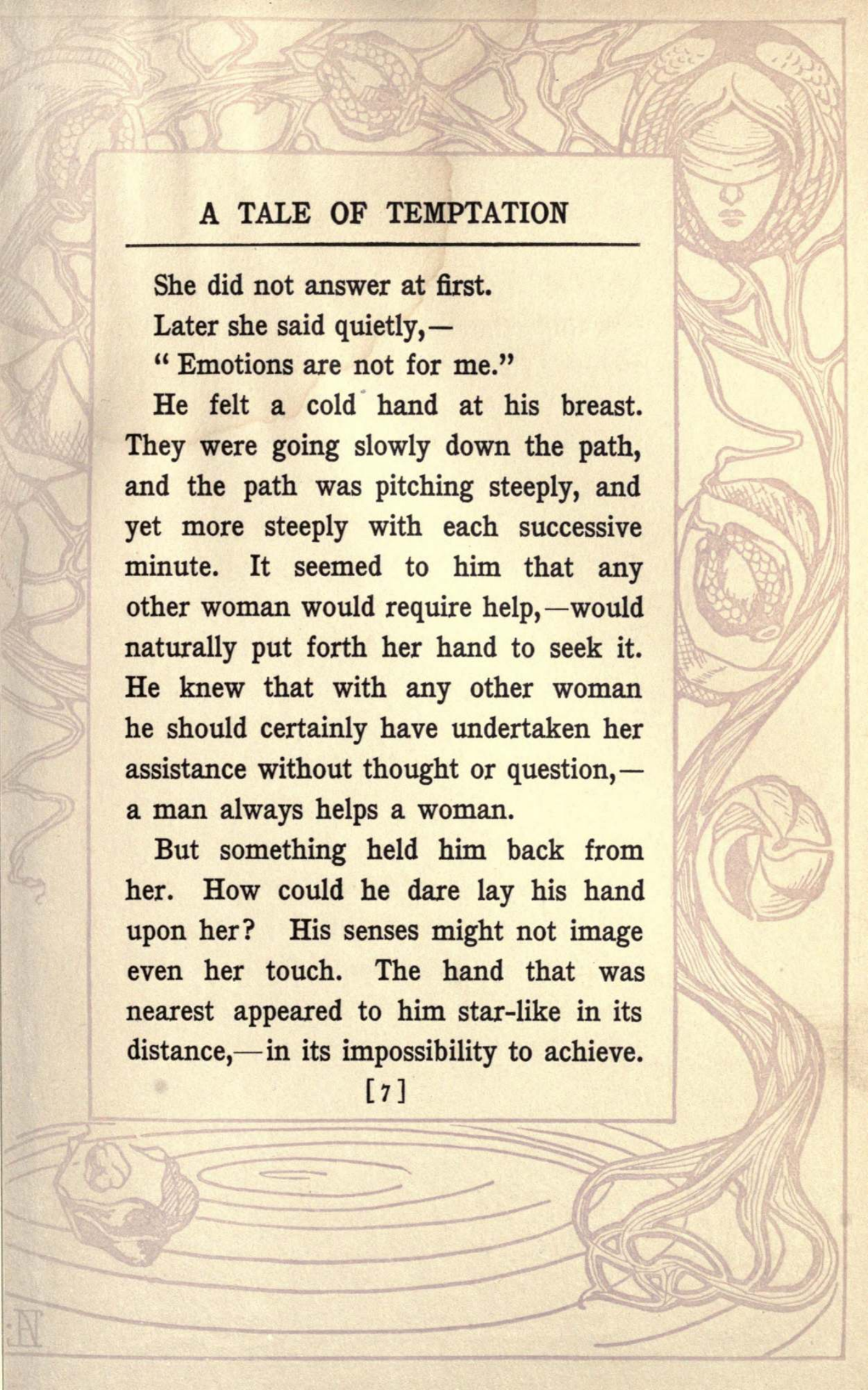
They came to the stone stair and descended. The trees closed in,—before them, about them, behind them,—enswept them in a mighty spell of interwoven shade and murmur.

They were alone—quite alone—for the first time.

“Does it awe you?” he asked,—“the primeval silence of Nature undisturbed?”

“No,” she said, “I stand in reverence, but not in awe. Awe is part fear. Fear came not among those who were at the dowering of my cradle.”

“You do not seem human to me,” he exclaimed impulsively. “I cannot fancy you a prey to any emotion.”



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She did not answer at first.

Later she said quietly,—

“Emotions are not for me.”

He felt a cold hand at his breast. They were going slowly down the path, and the path was pitching steeply, and yet more steeply with each successive minute. It seemed to him that any other woman would require help,—would naturally put forth her hand to seek it. He knew that with any other woman he should certainly have undertaken her assistance without thought or question,—a man always helps a woman.

But something held him back from her. How could he dare lay his hand upon her? His senses might not image even her touch. The hand that was nearest appeared to him star-like in its distance,—in its impossibility to achieve.

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Some strange impenetrable wall of densest non-understanding seemed to hedge her about. The bonds of earth were lacking, — the “woman” was not there. And he craved what was not. The Tree of Knowledge now, even if the Flaming Sword must follow after. He was flesh and blood. The madness that lured men to the Lorelei sapped at his forces. He looked down at her there beside him. Oh, how sweetly, purely beautiful she was! How calmly blue, how shimmeringly silver were her eyes!

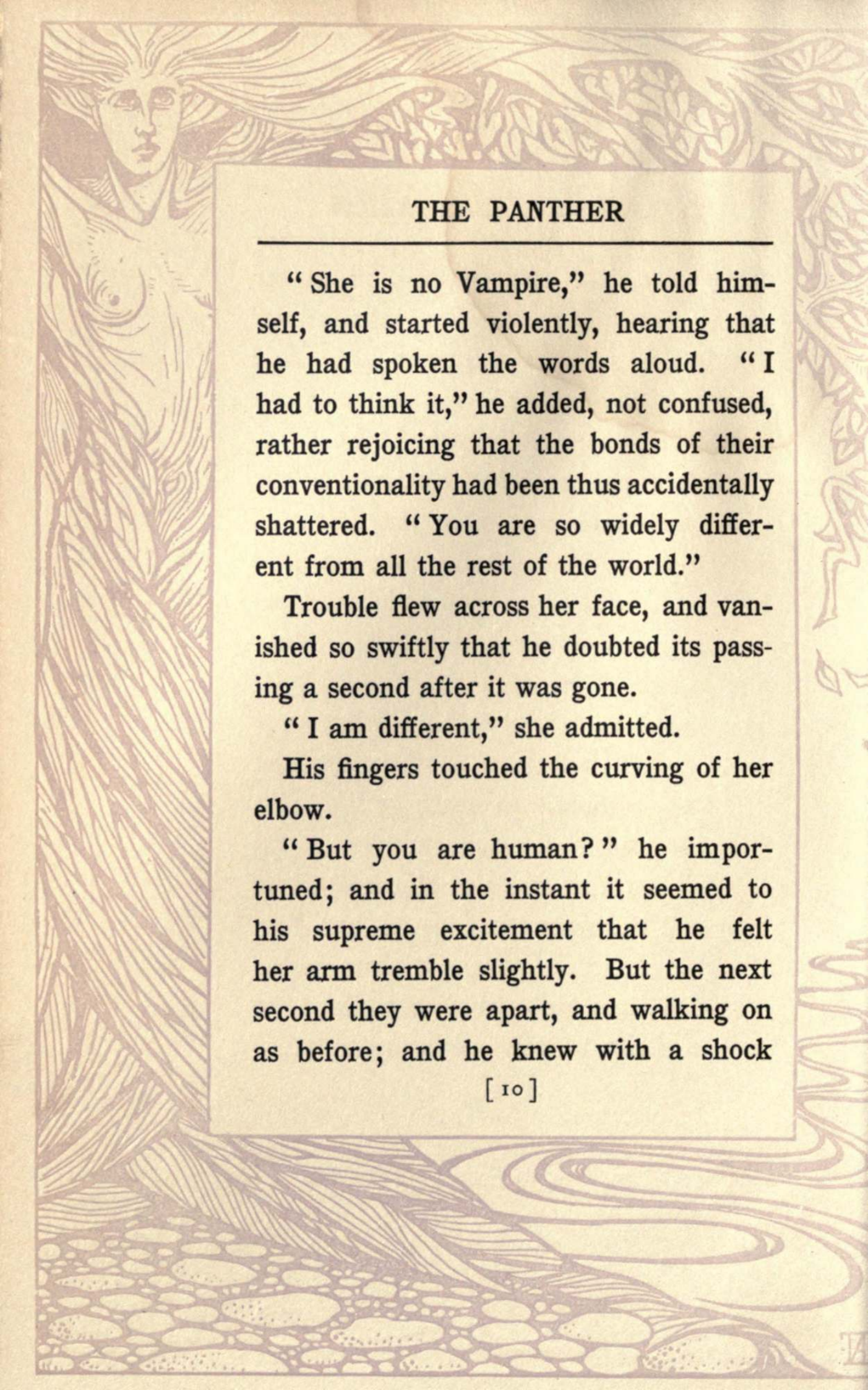
And if that blue might deepen into violet, that silver veil its splendor and sink in shadows there behind her lashes, and all the double change be wrought for him! By him! With him! . . .

It was still,—very still. Not a leaf stirred. It was not hot nor cold, nor

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damp nor dry. The path was never dusty, never slippery. She followed its downward incline steadily, steadily. And he walked beside her.

“Am I happy?” he asked himself,—
“am I happy at being alone with her thus and here? Is this joy? Is this content? Could I go on and on and feed on this, and be nourished by this, and call my craving satisfied? What ails her? What does she lack? Why does she lack it?” And the fancy stole over him of the tale of the Vampire and its hideous holding to death in life. He glanced at her in the sudden stress of his cradled fear, and met her blue and silver eyes and the sunny parting of her lips. His glance rested—where it often rested—on her lips; and, when they closed, he drew a single slightly quickened breath.



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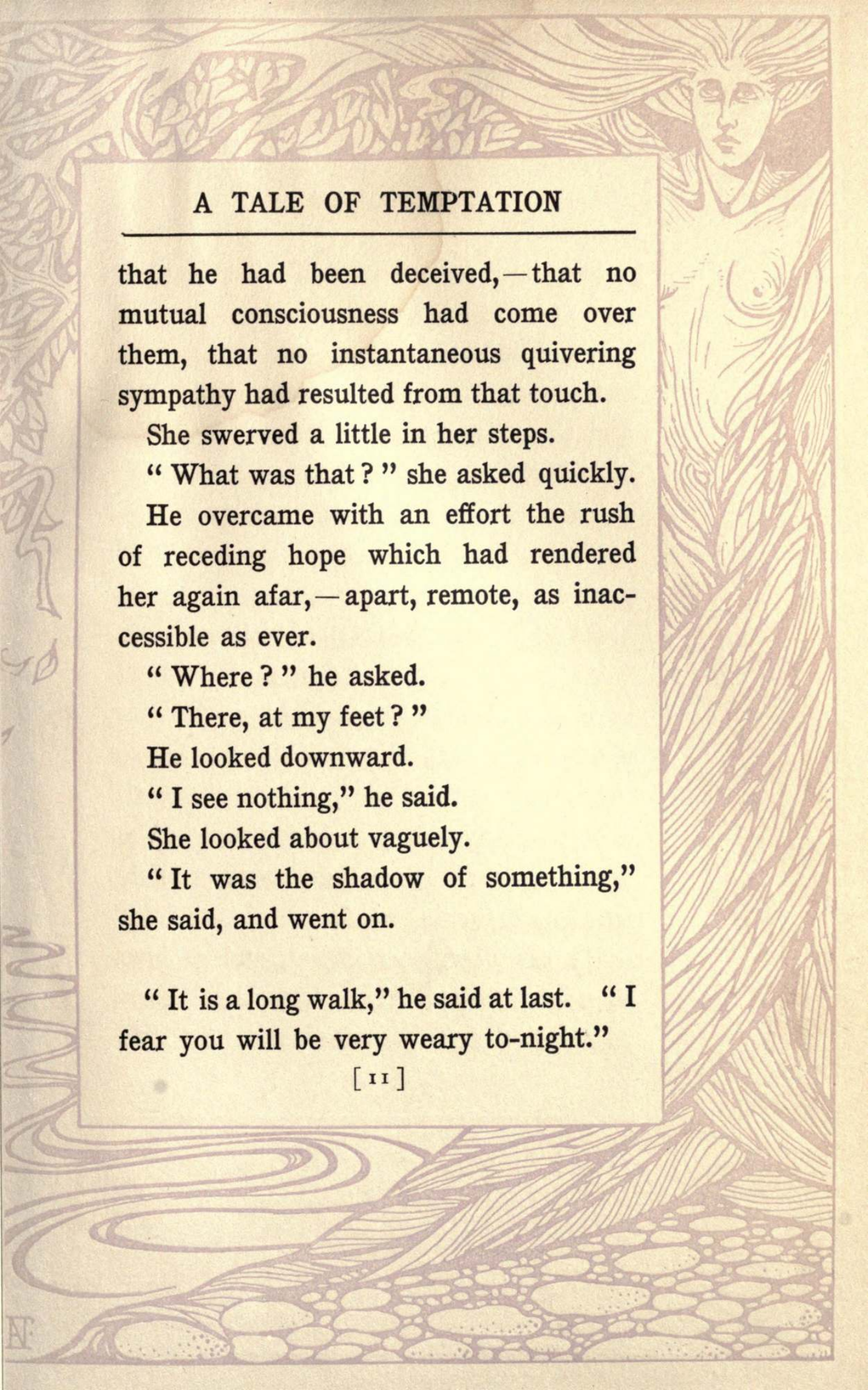
“She is no Vampire,” he told himself, and started violently, hearing that he had spoken the words aloud. “I had to think it,” he added, not confused, rather rejoicing that the bonds of their conventionality had been thus accidentally shattered. “You are so widely different from all the rest of the world.”

Trouble flew across her face, and vanished so swiftly that he doubted its passing a second after it was gone.

“I am different,” she admitted.

His fingers touched the curving of her elbow.

“But you are human?” he impertuned; and in the instant it seemed to his supreme excitement that he felt her arm tremble slightly. But the next second they were apart, and walking on as before; and he knew with a shock



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that he had been deceived,—that no mutual consciousness had come over them, that no instantaneous quivering sympathy had resulted from that touch.

She swerved a little in her steps.

“What was that?” she asked quickly.

He overcame with an effort the rush of receding hope which had rendered her again afar,—apart, remote, as inaccessible as ever.

“Where?” he asked.

“There, at my feet?”

He looked downward.

“I see nothing,” he said.

She looked about vaguely.

“It was the shadow of something,” she said, and went on.

“It is a long walk,” he said at last. “I fear you will be very weary to-night.”



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She made no answer.

“You are tired,” he said.

She made no answer again.

He put his hand beneath her arm, and the clasp rested there.

At last she said:—

“I must rest. Let us sit down.”

He looked at her. She was pale, and her pallor was fitfully roseate.

He felt a miserable stab of self-reproach.

“Here is a seat,” he said. “Rest here.” And then his pain gave place to pleasure because she looked so pale, so tired, so in need of succor. “Do sit down,” he pleaded; and she sank upon the tree-trunk that had been freshly felled as if for her need.

He sat down beside her, and a long silence followed. He drew her hand within his own. It was cold. He held

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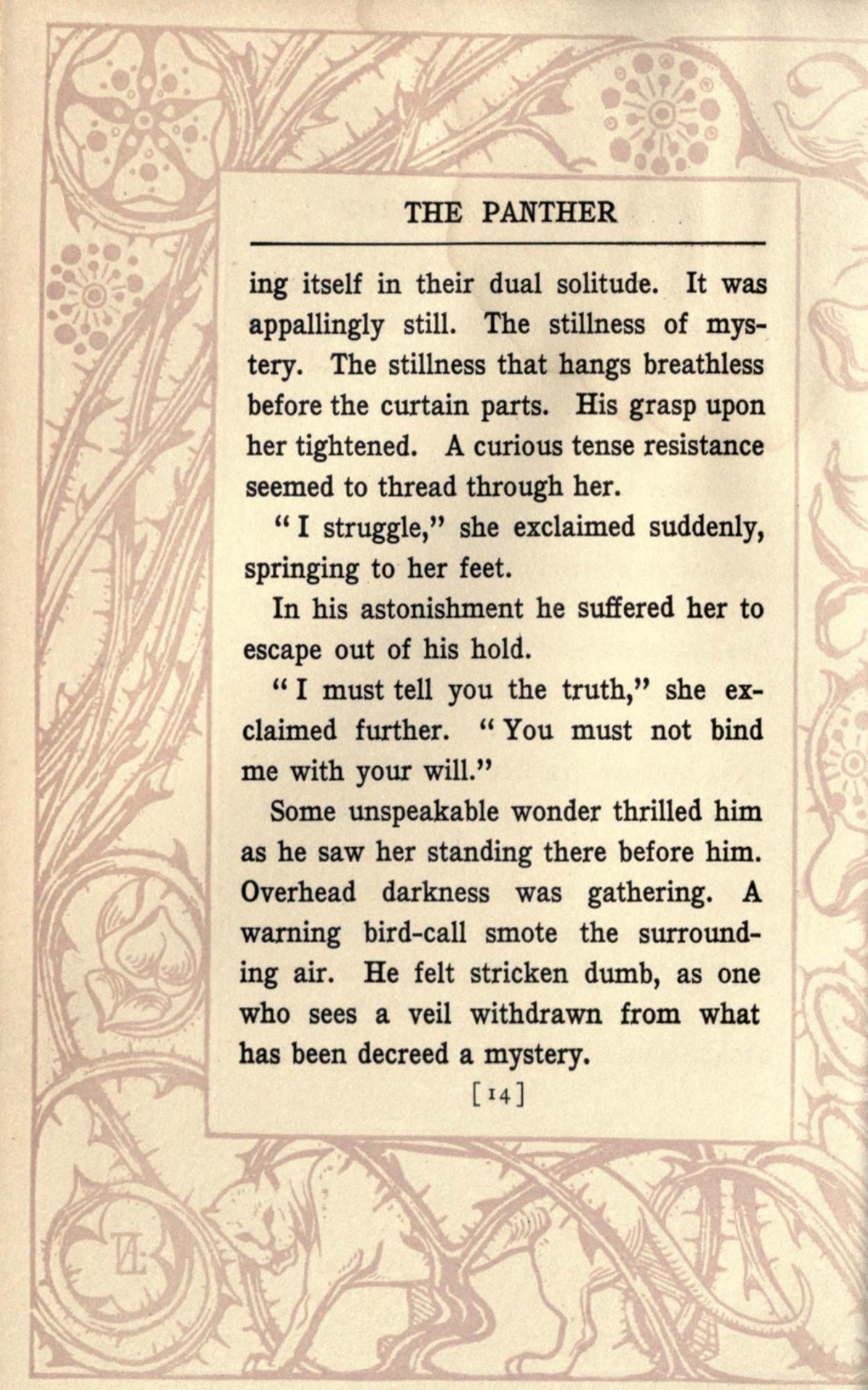
it gently, and felt the warmth return to it, yet he dared not the least pressure. He looked at her. She breathed painfully.

“Let us go back,” she said in a low voice.

He felt choked and mad. It was so still without themselves. The forest brooded its eternal calm. Stray sun-rays filtered across the rank and file of the tree branches. And she was there. And he was there.

He stared down at the ground, and a black shape slunk away quickly before his gaze. He looked to left and right. Nothing!—and yet he would have sworn to a glint of white teeth. The ghost of their menace laid his arm about her. His fingers tightened their hold on hers.

She averted her face. Again his heart choked him. He felt an opposition shap-



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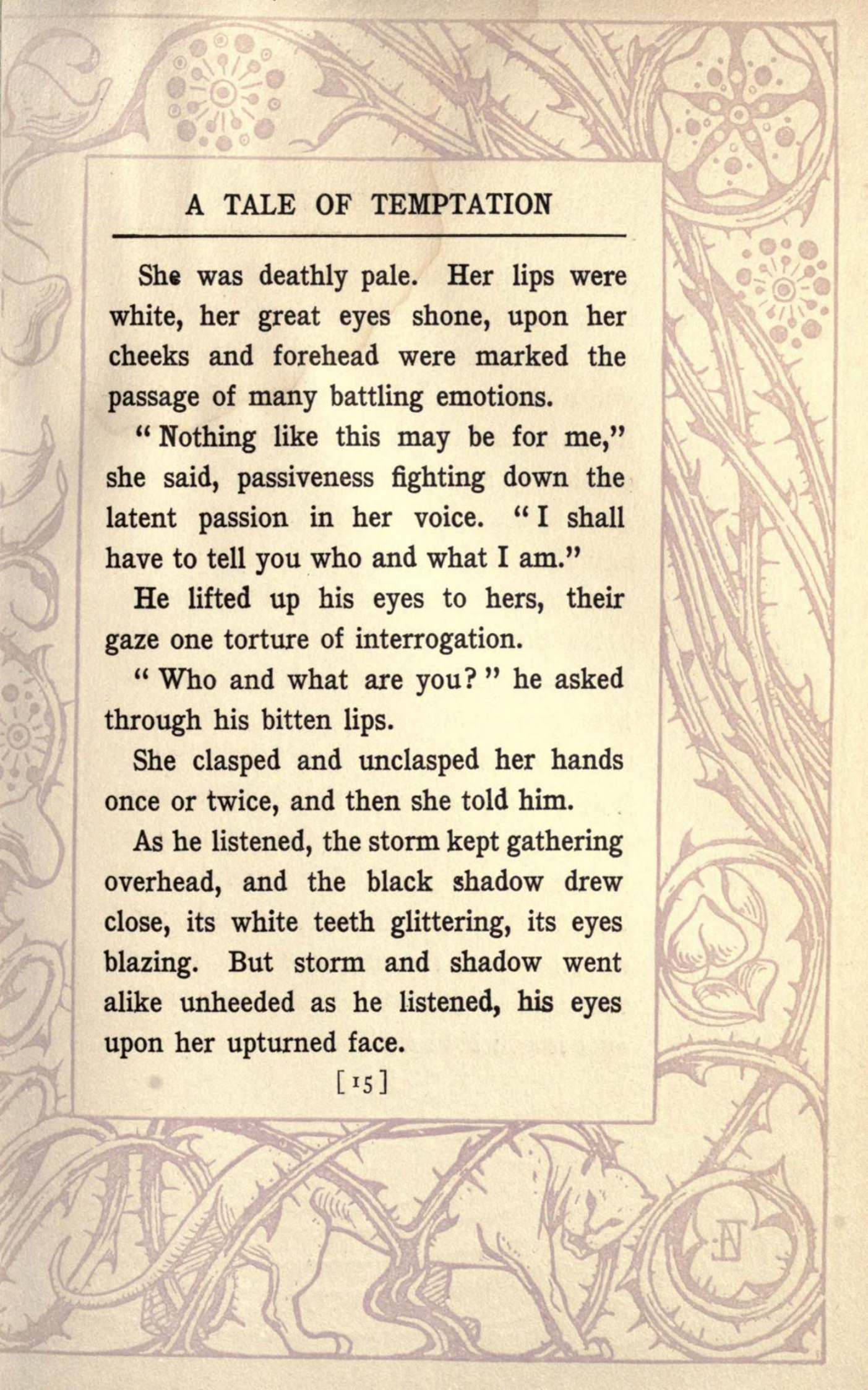
ing itself in their dual solitude. It was appallingly still. The stillness of mystery. The stillness that hangs breathless before the curtain parts. His grasp upon her tightened. A curious tense resistance seemed to thread through her.

“I struggle,” she exclaimed suddenly, springing to her feet.

In his astonishment he suffered her to escape out of his hold.

“I must tell you the truth,” she exclaimed further. “You must not bind me with your will.”

Some unspeakable wonder thrilled him as he saw her standing there before him. Overhead darkness was gathering. A warning bird-call smote the surrounding air. He felt stricken dumb, as one who sees a veil withdrawn from what has been decreed a mystery.

A decorative border with intricate floral and thorny motifs surrounds the text. The top features a sunburst-like flower and a large five-petaled flower. The right side is dominated by a large, detailed thorny branch. The bottom shows a thorny branch with a circular emblem containing the letter 'N'.

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She was deathly pale. Her lips were white, her great eyes shone, upon her cheeks and forehead were marked the passage of many battling emotions.

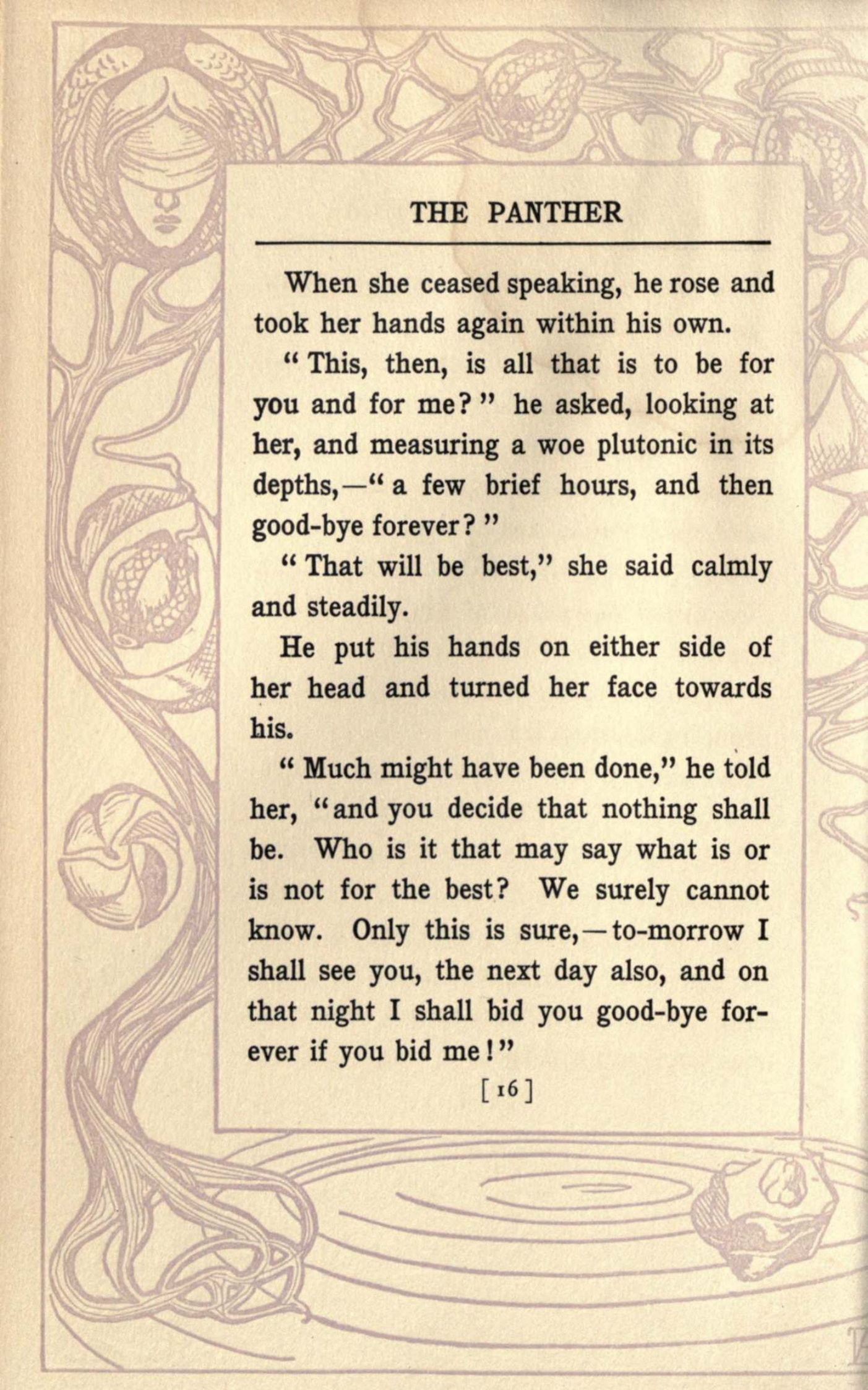
“Nothing like this may be for me,” she said, passiveness fighting down the latent passion in her voice. “I shall have to tell you who and what I am.”

He lifted up his eyes to hers, their gaze one torture of interrogation.

“Who and what are you?” he asked through his bitten lips.

She clasped and unclasped her hands once or twice, and then she told him.

As he listened, the storm kept gathering overhead, and the black shadow drew close, its white teeth glittering, its eyes blazing. But storm and shadow went alike unheeded as he listened, his eyes upon her upturned face.

The page is framed by a decorative border. On the left side, there is a vertical illustration of a woman's face with her eyes closed, surrounded by intricate, swirling lines and floral motifs. The top and right sides also feature similar decorative elements, including what appears to be a snake's head and other organic forms. The entire page is rendered in a monochromatic, sepia-toned style.

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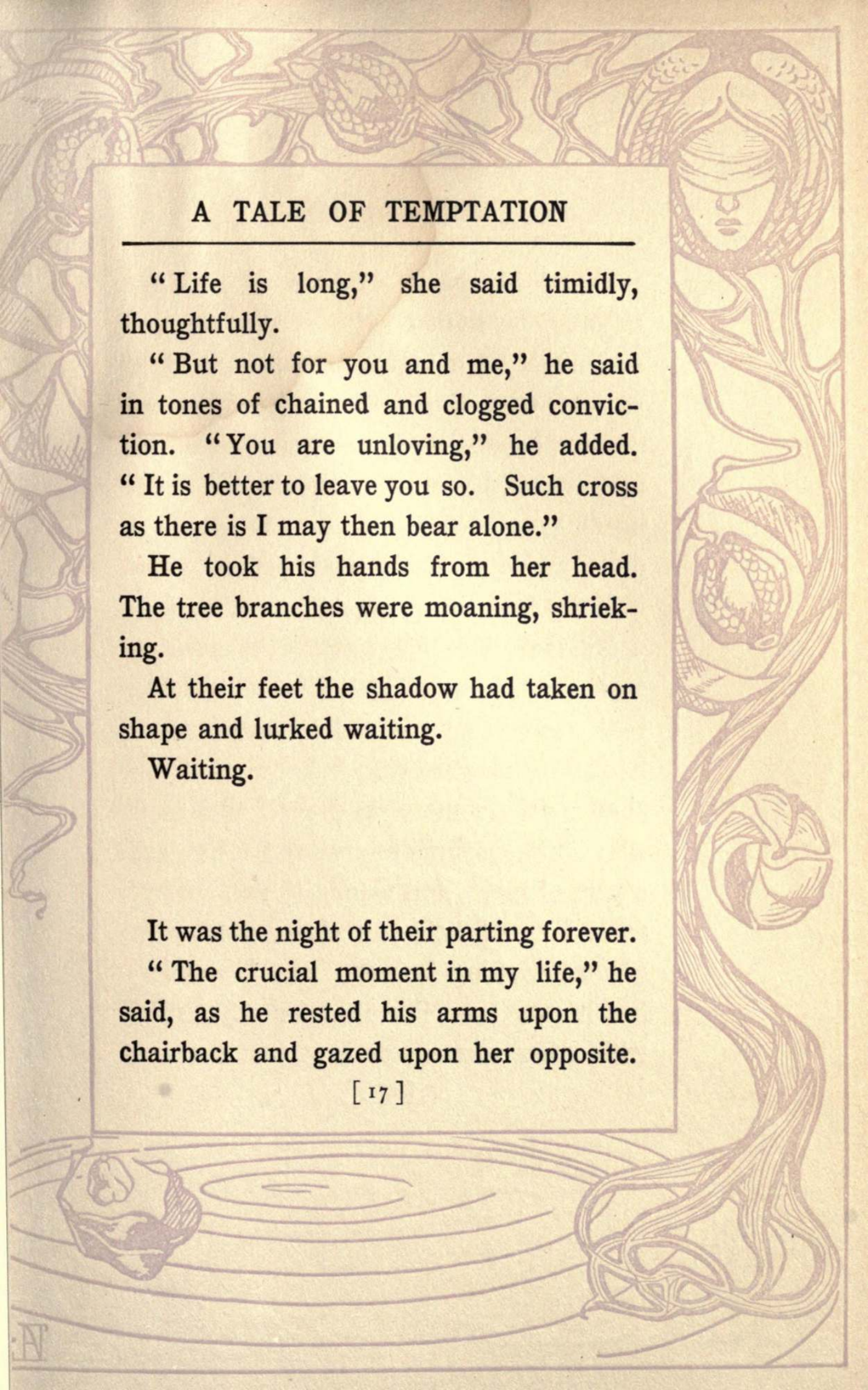
When she ceased speaking, he rose and took her hands again within his own.

“This, then, is all that is to be for you and for me?” he asked, looking at her, and measuring a woe plutonic in its depths,—“a few brief hours, and then good-bye forever?”

“That will be best,” she said calmly and steadily.

He put his hands on either side of her head and turned her face towards his.

“Much might have been done,” he told her, “and you decide that nothing shall be. Who is it that may say what is or is not for the best? We surely cannot know. Only this is sure,—to-morrow I shall see you, the next day also, and on that night I shall bid you good-bye forever if you bid me!”



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“Life is long,” she said timidly, thoughtfully.

“But not for you and me,” he said in tones of chained and clogged conviction. “You are unloving,” he added. “It is better to leave you so. Such cross as there is I may then bear alone.”

He took his hands from her head. The tree branches were moaning, shrieking.

At their feet the shadow had taken on shape and lurked waiting.

Waiting.

It was the night of their parting forever.

“The crucial moment in my life,” he said, as he rested his arms upon the chairback and gazed upon her opposite.

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“There is the selfishness of a base nature,” he went on, “and then the unselfishness of a higher nature, and then beyond that the existence that knows nothing beyond itself, being neither selfish nor unselfish, only complete in itself, needing no other. It is that which I must strive to grasp and realize, since it is the best that I am to know.”

He looked at his watch (the evening was far advanced). “Eleven o'clock: that means that the end is very near at hand. It is strange. I know that we shall meet no more, and yet I feel as if we should continue interwoven. You are a part of me. You belong to me. I feel as if I could hold you close, even with oceans swelling between us. I wonder, has it ever been like that for other men with other women, or is it just because

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my reason would crumble if no hope was left?"

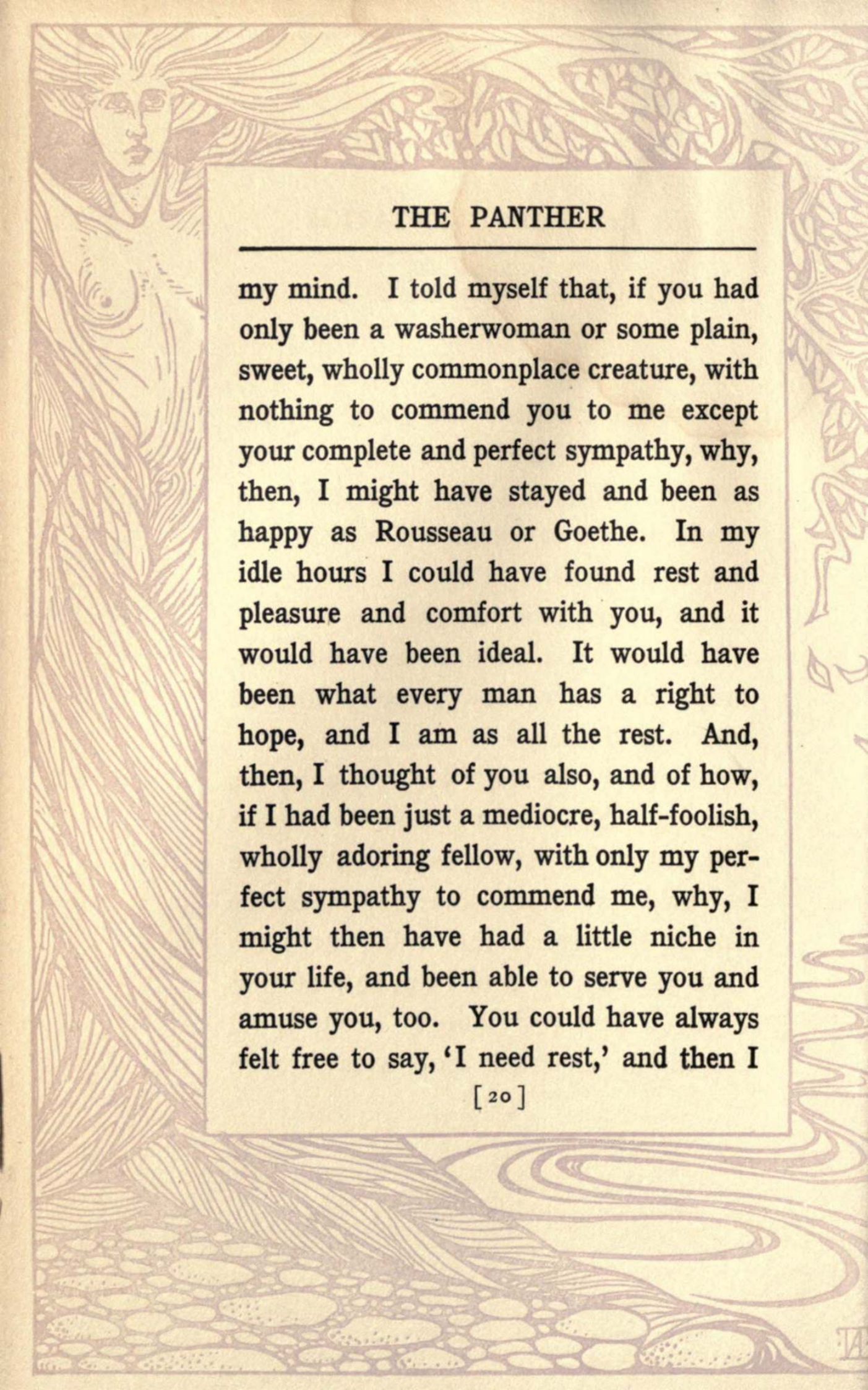
She was quiet.

"Do look a little less pale," he entreated: "one need have color in this hour. Besides, I cannot bear that you shall care. I said before, I will to bear this cross alone."

She did not look less pale.

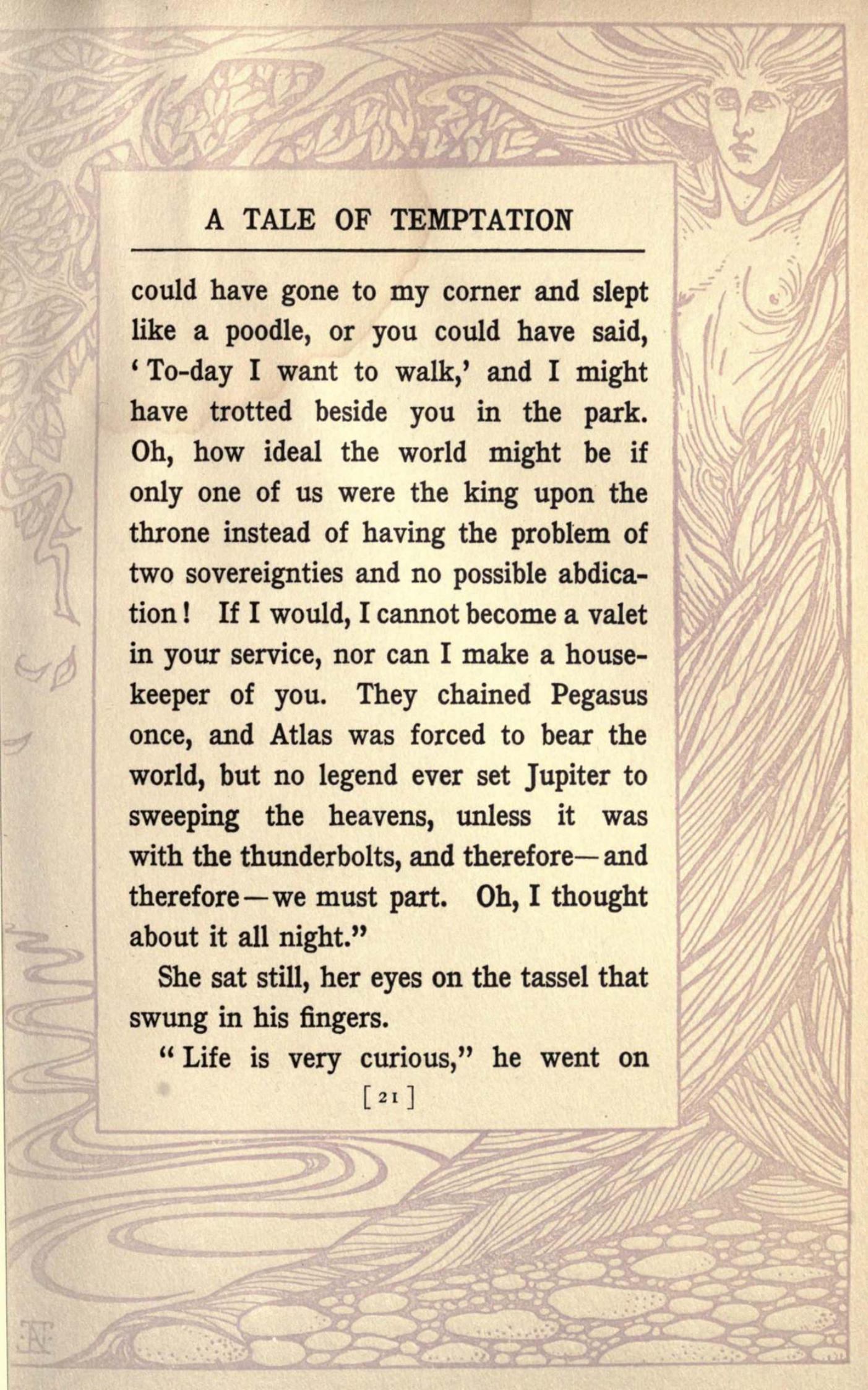
Outside it was raining, and the raindrops on the window sounded like an interlude of tears.

"Listen," he said, "the very skies are weeping. You never weep, do you?" She just slightly shook her head. "I am so glad." He leaned over and picked up one of the tassels that hung from the chair drapery. "And I am so glad that I go. I laid and thought about it all last night. Such odd ideas went through

The page is framed by a decorative border. On the left side, there is a vertical illustration of a woman's face and upper torso, with long, flowing hair and a serene expression. The rest of the border is filled with intricate, repeating floral and leaf patterns. The text is centered within a rectangular frame in the middle of the page.

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my mind. I told myself that, if you had only been a washerwoman or some plain, sweet, wholly commonplace creature, with nothing to commend you to me except your complete and perfect sympathy, why, then, I might have stayed and been as happy as Rousseau or Goethe. In my idle hours I could have found rest and pleasure and comfort with you, and it would have been ideal. It would have been what every man has a right to hope, and I am as all the rest. And, then, I thought of you also, and of how, if I had been just a mediocre, half-foolish, wholly adoring fellow, with only my perfect sympathy to commend me, why, I might then have had a little niche in your life, and been able to serve you and amuse you, too. You could have always felt free to say, 'I need rest,' and then I

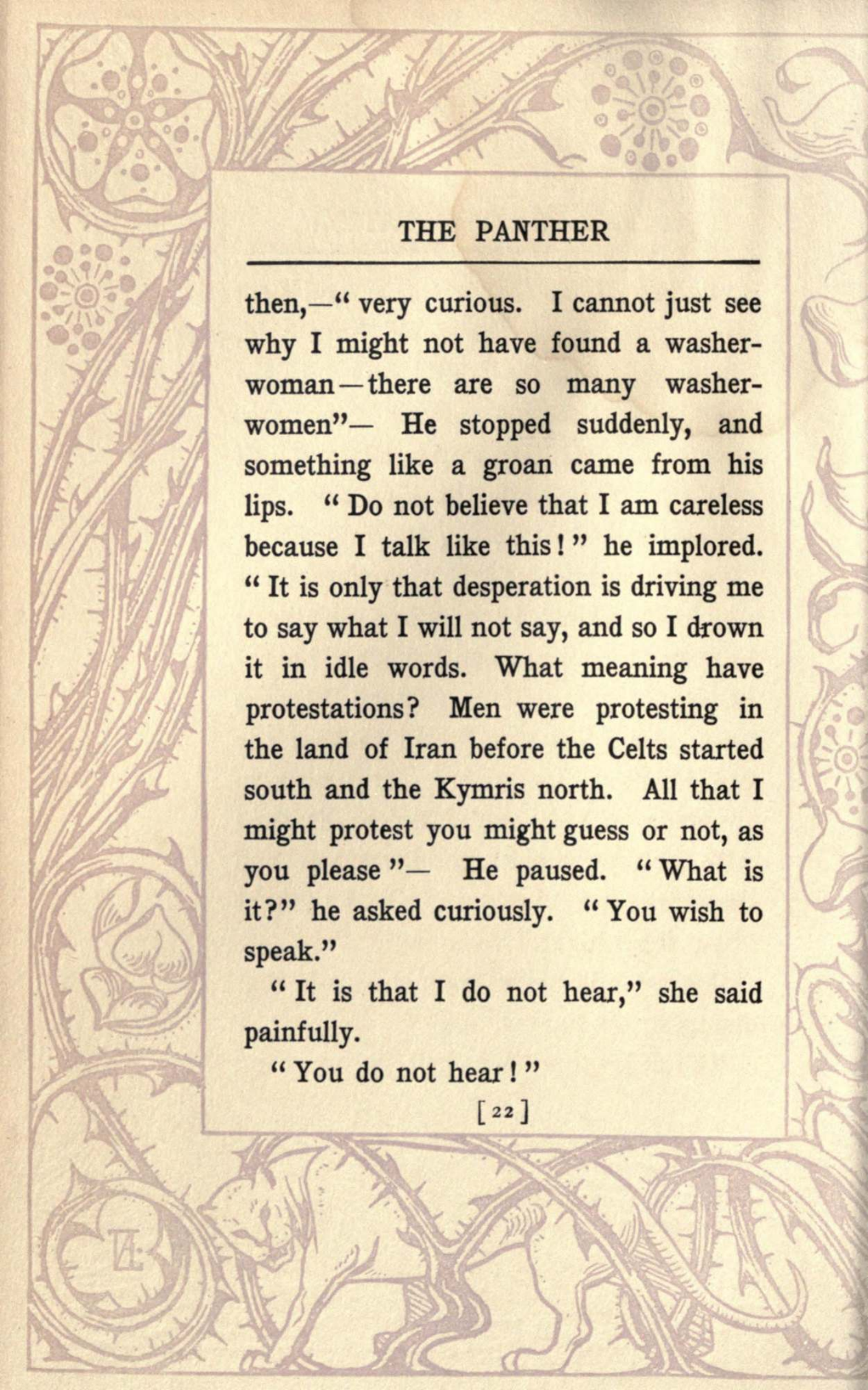


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could have gone to my corner and slept like a poodle, or you could have said, 'To-day I want to walk,' and I might have trotted beside you in the park. Oh, how ideal the world might be if only one of us were the king upon the throne instead of having the problem of two sovereignties and no possible abdication! If I would, I cannot become a valet in your service, nor can I make a house-keeper of you. They chained Pegasus once, and Atlas was forced to bear the world, but no legend ever set Jupiter to sweeping the heavens, unless it was with the thunderbolts, and therefore—and therefore—we must part. Oh, I thought about it all night."

She sat still, her eyes on the tassel that swung in his fingers.

"Life is very curious," he went on

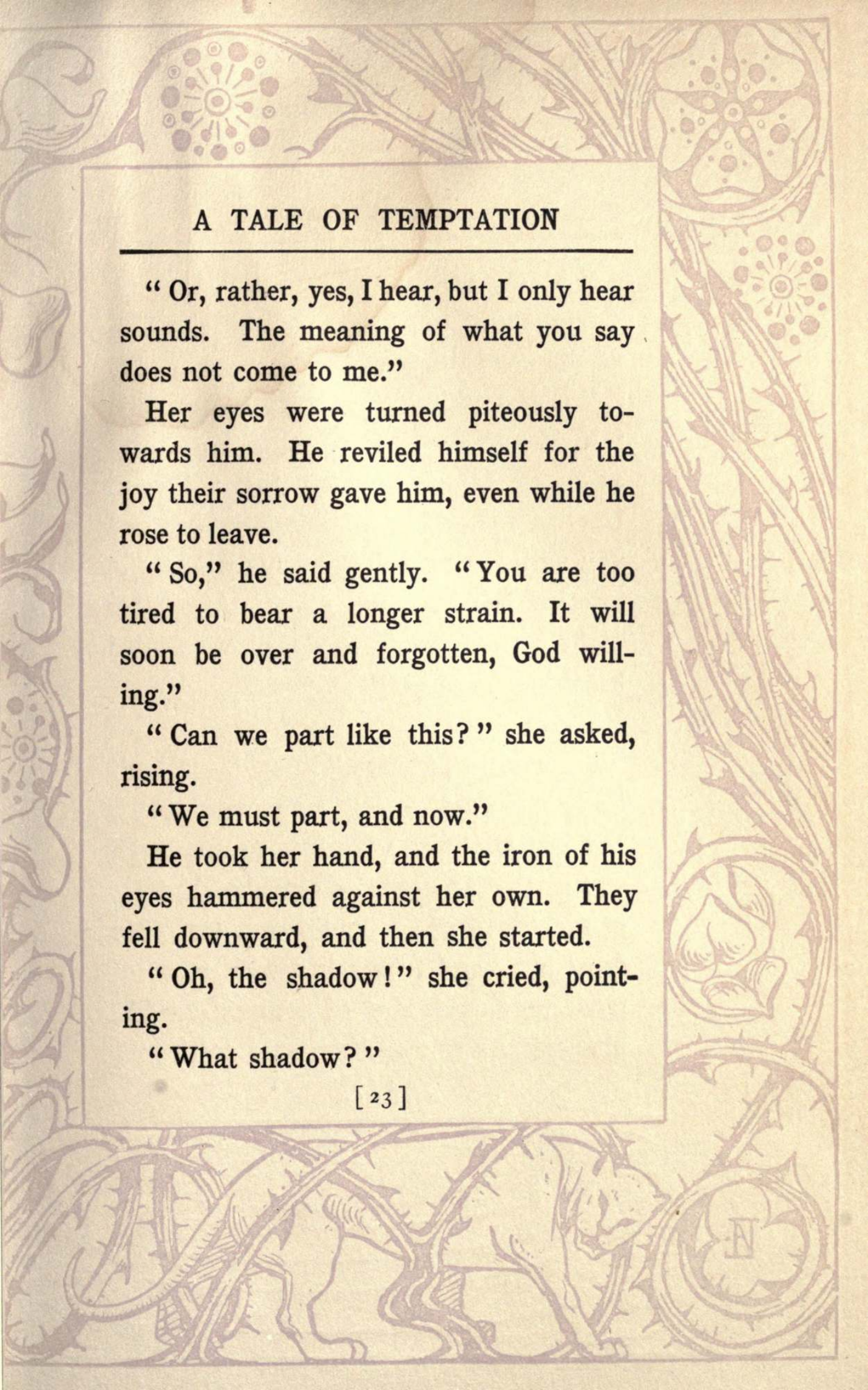


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then,—“very curious. I cannot just see why I might not have found a washer-woman—there are so many washer-women”— He stopped suddenly, and something like a groan came from his lips. “Do not believe that I am careless because I talk like this!” he implored. “It is only that desperation is driving me to say what I will not say, and so I drown it in idle words. What meaning have protestations? Men were protesting in the land of Iran before the Celts started south and the Kymris north. All that I might protest you might guess or not, as you please”— He paused. “What is it?” he asked curiously. “You wish to speak.”

“It is that I do not hear,” she said painfully.

“You do not hear!”



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“Or, rather, yes, I hear, but I only hear sounds. The meaning of what you say does not come to me.”

Her eyes were turned piteously towards him. He reviled himself for the joy their sorrow gave him, even while he rose to leave.

“So,” he said gently. “You are too tired to bear a longer strain. It will soon be over and forgotten, God willing.”

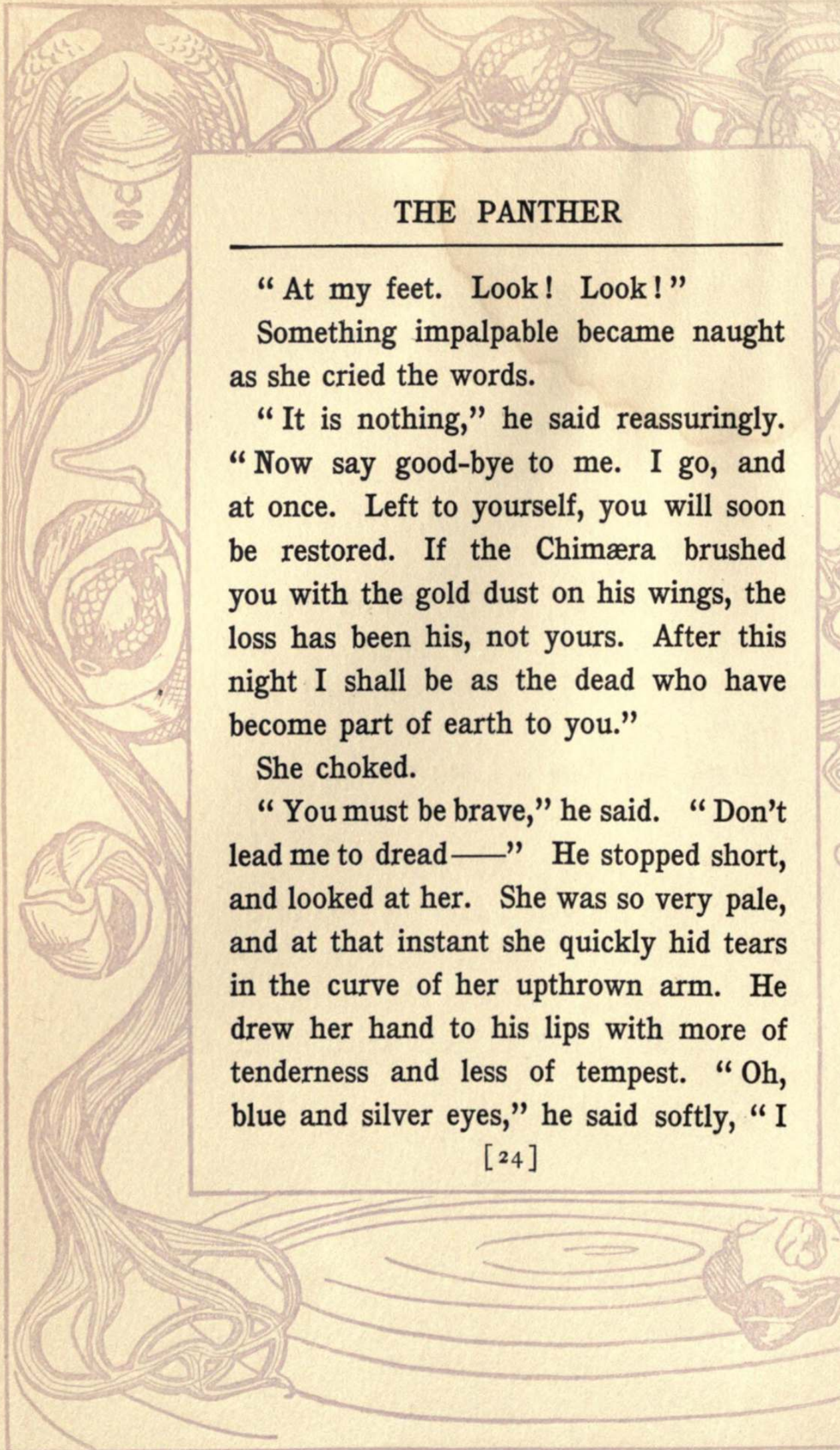
“Can we part like this?” she asked, rising.

“We must part, and now.”

He took her hand, and the iron of his eyes hammered against her own. They fell downward, and then she started.

“Oh, the shadow!” she cried, pointing.

“What shadow?”

A decorative border surrounds the text. On the left, a woman's face with closed eyes is depicted in a stylized, woodcut-like manner. The border is filled with intricate, swirling floral and vine patterns. At the bottom, there are concentric circles and a small, detailed illustration of a flower or fruit.

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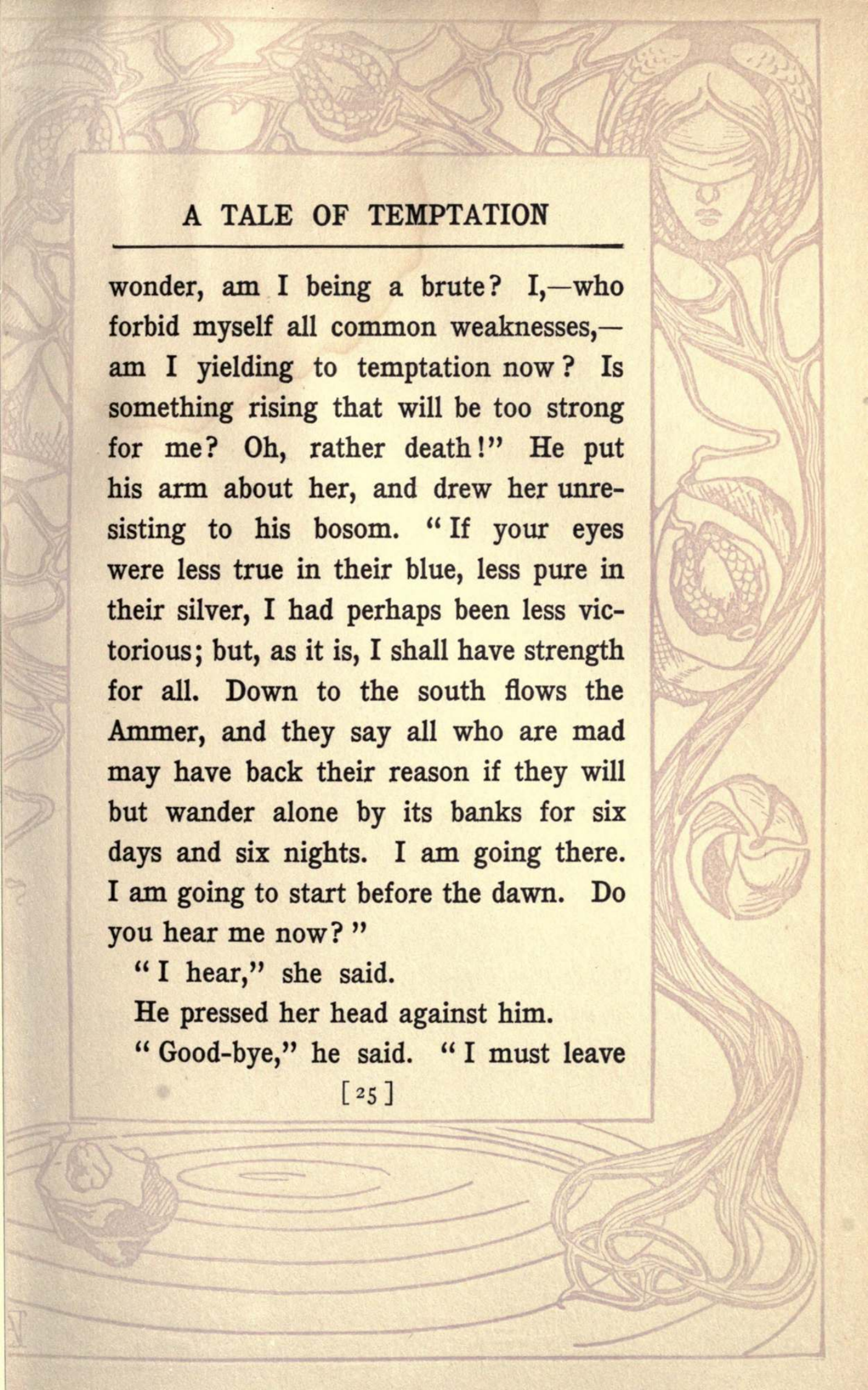
“At my feet. Look! Look!”

Something impalpable became naught as she cried the words.

“It is nothing,” he said reassuringly. “Now say good-bye to me. I go, and at once. Left to yourself, you will soon be restored. If the Chimæra brushed you with the gold dust on his wings, the loss has been his, not yours. After this night I shall be as the dead who have become part of earth to you.”

She choked.

“You must be brave,” he said. “Don’t lead me to dread——” He stopped short, and looked at her. She was so very pale, and at that instant she quickly hid tears in the curve of her upthrown arm. He drew her hand to his lips with more of tenderness and less of tempest. “Oh, blue and silver eyes,” he said softly, “I



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wonder, am I being a brute? I,—who forbid myself all common weaknesses,—am I yielding to temptation now? Is something rising that will be too strong for me? Oh, rather death!” He put his arm about her, and drew her unresisting to his bosom. “If your eyes were less true in their blue, less pure in their silver, I had perhaps been less victorious; but, as it is, I shall have strength for all. Down to the south flows the Ammer, and they say all who are mad may have back their reason if they will but wander alone by its banks for six days and six nights. I am going there. I am going to start before the dawn. Do you hear me now?”

“I hear,” she said.

He pressed her head against him.

“Good-bye,” he said. “I must leave

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you. Unkissed. Unpromised. Without hope. Good-bye."

She looked up at him, and he looked down at her.

"Good-bye," he said again, and his heart was sick with the longing to caress her and to wake the purple in the blue depths of her eyes. She drew a little away.

"Good-bye," she said. And then she shrieked aloud.

He started with the terror in her voice.

"In Heaven's name!" he exclaimed.

She seized his hand, and pushed him backwards, and pointed on the floor. And there he saw *It!* made clearly visible for the first time.

Only a kitten, a tiny, helpless ball of yellow fur, embryo claws no more than

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sand-pricks, golden pupils upraised and staring unwinking.

“What is that?” she screamed. “Oh, what is that?”

His eyes were on it.

A kitten, a veritable kitten. A soft round kitten. A feeble, helpless, hapless little mound of flesh and blood and bones.

They both looked down upon it, feeling a horror altogether incommensurate to its size and weakness.

And it returned their gaze with a steadiness that did not seem in keeping with its form. Its eyes stared upward without trace of fear, rather a something latent with power burned in the yellow pupils, and fresh horror stabbed them as they felt the look.

“Oh, what is it?” she cried again.



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“It is nothing,” he made answer with mighty effort.

“Don’t say it!” She shook from head to foot as she spoke. “You know as well as I that it is something. Something terrible! Something outside the realm of this world! Something against which”—

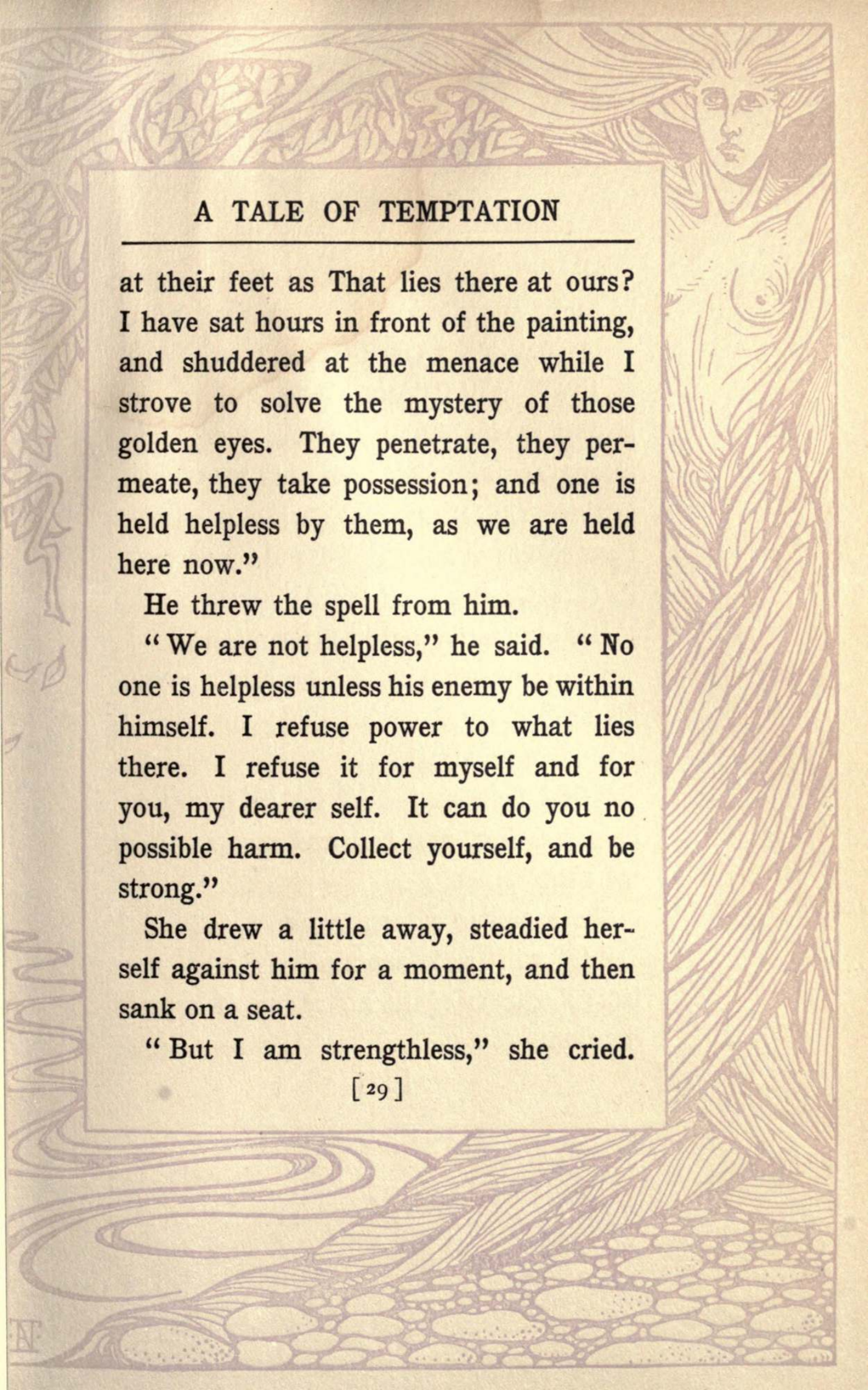
He stopped her speech.

“It is nothing,” he said firmly, and spurned it with his foot.

His foot passed harmlessly through its impalpability, and left it living, breathing, crouching there as before.

At that she flung herself into his arms, and hid her face against his heart.

“I know what it is,” she wailed. “I have seen those eyes before. You know the wonderful picture of Adam and Eve? You know what crouches between them



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at their feet as That lies there at ours? I have sat hours in front of the painting, and shuddered at the menace while I strove to solve the mystery of those golden eyes. They penetrate, they permeate, they take possession; and one is held helpless by them, as we are held here now."

He threw the spell from him.

"We are not helpless," he said. "No one is helpless unless his enemy be within himself. I refuse power to what lies there. I refuse it for myself and for you, my dearer self. It can do you no possible harm. Collect yourself, and be strong."

She drew a little away, steadied herself against him for a moment, and then sank on a seat.

"But I am strengthless," she cried.



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“All my being is fraught with fright. It racks every nerve of my body. What does such an apparition betoken? Will it live? Will it last? Why bid me be strong against such a one? I could be strong against what is of this world, but against That!—against such a creature! Fear comes over me. I dread its portent, its threat. Oh, what is it?”

His eyes narrowed to utter misery.

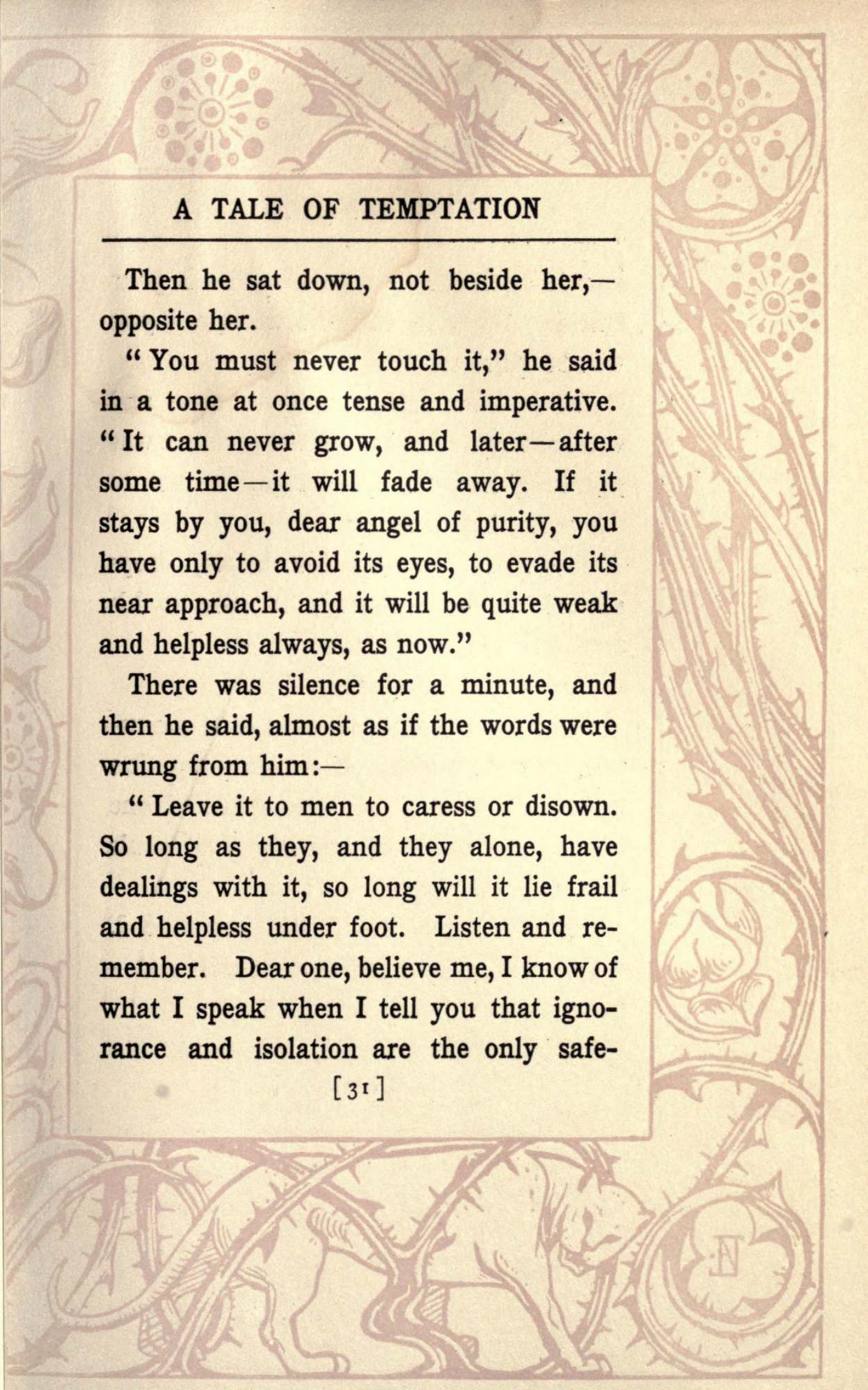
“You see what it is,” he said. “You divine.”

She shook afresh.

“God help us both,” he said. “God help you first and last and most. After we part.”

She began to scream again.

“It will not remain? It will not last?” she cried in an agony of apprehension.



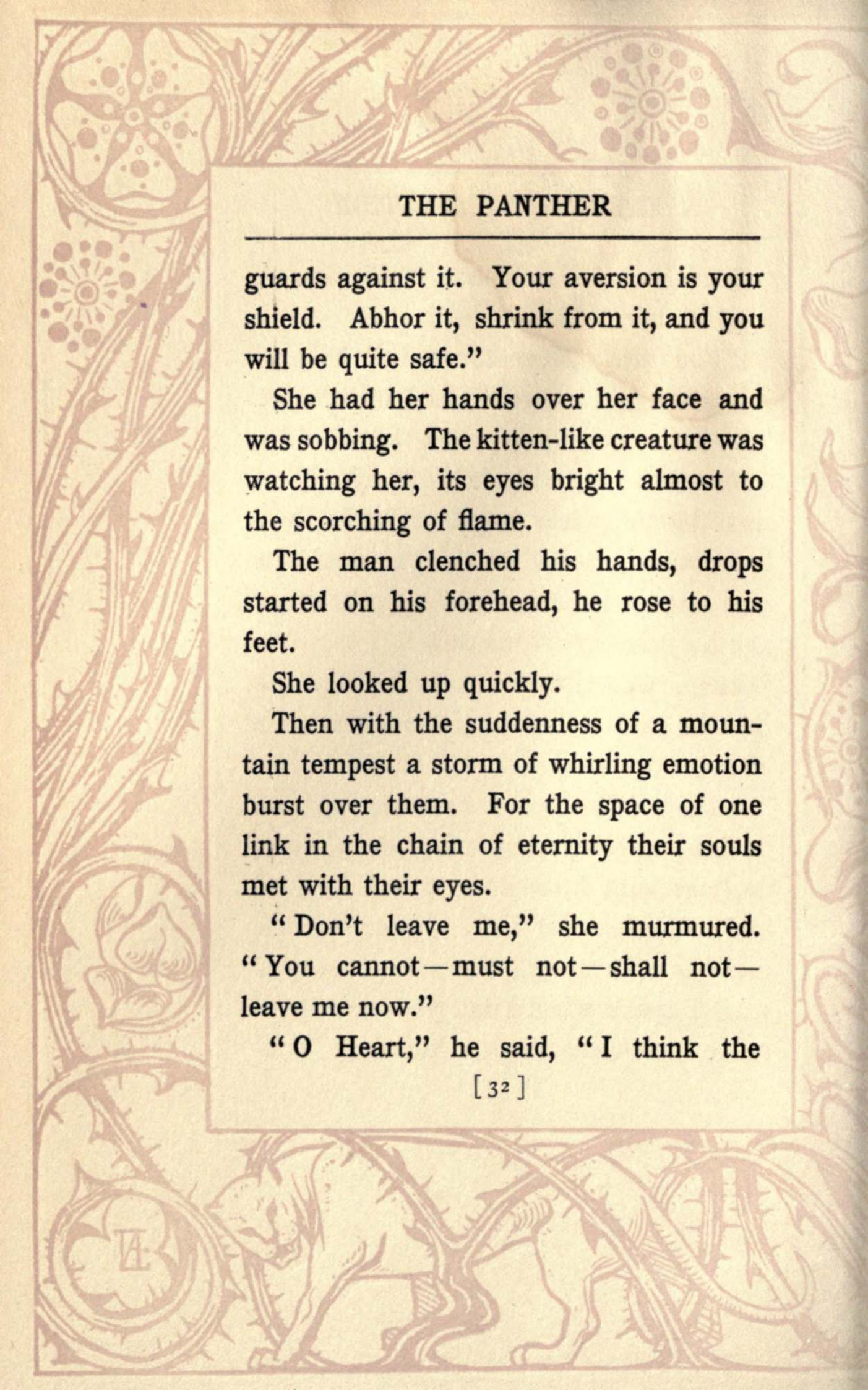
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Then he sat down, not beside her,—
opposite her.

“You must never touch it,” he said
in a tone at once tense and imperative.
“It can never grow, and later—after
some time—it will fade away. If it
stays by you, dear angel of purity, you
have only to avoid its eyes, to evade its
near approach, and it will be quite weak
and helpless always, as now.”

There was silence for a minute, and
then he said, almost as if the words were
wrung from him:—

“Leave it to men to caress or disown.
So long as they, and they alone, have
dealings with it, so long will it lie frail
and helpless under foot. Listen and re-
member. Dear one, believe me, I know of
what I speak when I tell you that igno-
rance and isolation are the only safe-



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guards against it. Your aversion is your shield. Abhor it, shrink from it, and you will be quite safe."

She had her hands over her face and was sobbing. The kitten-like creature was watching her, its eyes bright almost to the scorching of flame.

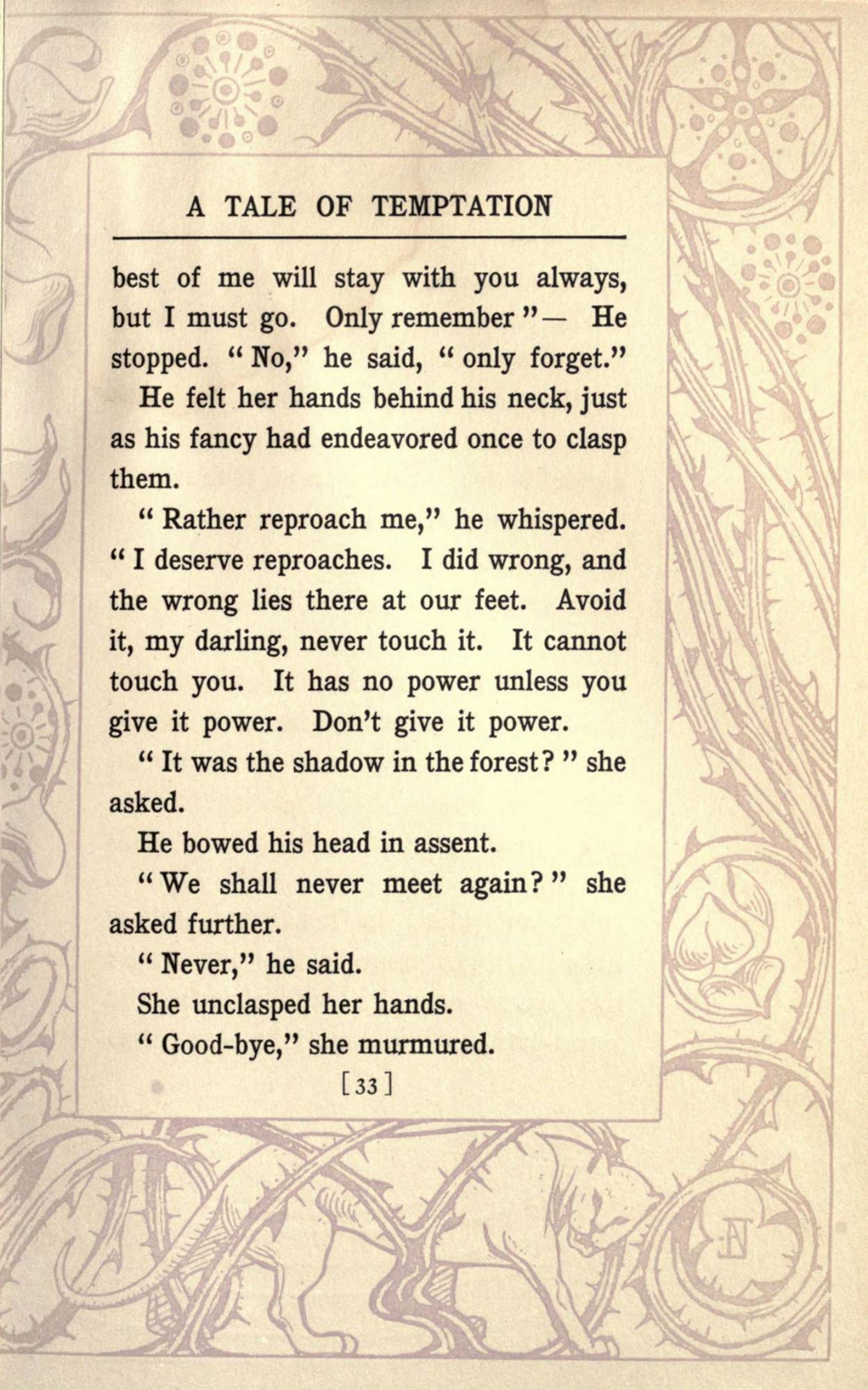
The man clenched his hands, drops started on his forehead, he rose to his feet.

She looked up quickly.

Then with the suddenness of a mountain tempest a storm of whirling emotion burst over them. For the space of one link in the chain of eternity their souls met with their eyes.

"Don't leave me," she murmured. "You cannot—must not—shall not—leave me now."

"O Heart," he said, "I think the



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

best of me will stay with you always, but I must go. Only remember"— He stopped. "No," he said, "only forget."

He felt her hands behind his neck, just as his fancy had endeavored once to clasp them.

"Rather reproach me," he whispered. "I deserve reproaches. I did wrong, and the wrong lies there at our feet. Avoid it, my darling, never touch it. It cannot touch you. It has no power unless you give it power. Don't give it power.

"It was the shadow in the forest?" she asked.

He bowed his head in assent.

"We shall never meet again?" she asked further.

"Never," he said.

She unclasped her hands.

"Good-bye," she murmured.



THE PANTHER

He went.

The city clocks were tolling midnight. She sank into a low seat, and looked at the baby-panther. It returned her gaze. Its eyes were starry-lustrous, and glowed with the reflection of their secret.

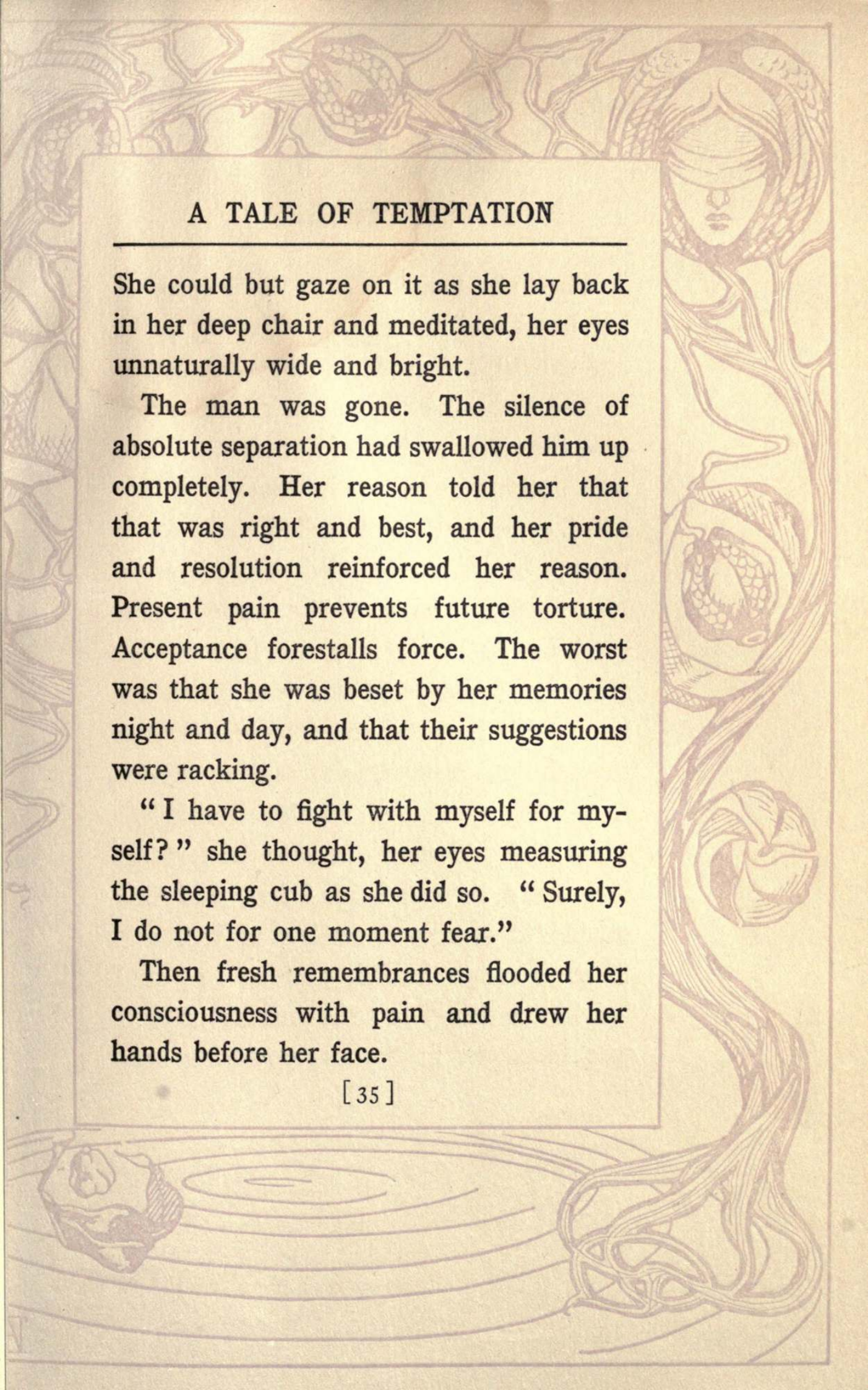
“I wish that he had kissed me,” she said at last.

It crept nearer, kittenlike, and sat down.

“God help me!” she cried, freshly terrified, and sprang up and left the room.

A period of time.

She sat alone in her room,—alone except for the creature that lay on its side in the moonlight and stretched its velvet-soft limbs in luxurious ease there.



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

She could but gaze on it as she lay back in her deep chair and meditated, her eyes unnaturally wide and bright.

The man was gone. The silence of absolute separation had swallowed him up completely. Her reason told her that that was right and best, and her pride and resolution reinforced her reason. Present pain prevents future torture. Acceptance forestalls force. The worst was that she was beset by her memories night and day, and that their suggestions were racking.

“I have to fight with myself for myself?” she thought, her eyes measuring the sleeping cub as she did so. “Surely, I do not for one moment fear.”

Then fresh remembrances flooded her consciousness with pain and drew her hands before her face.

THE PANTHER

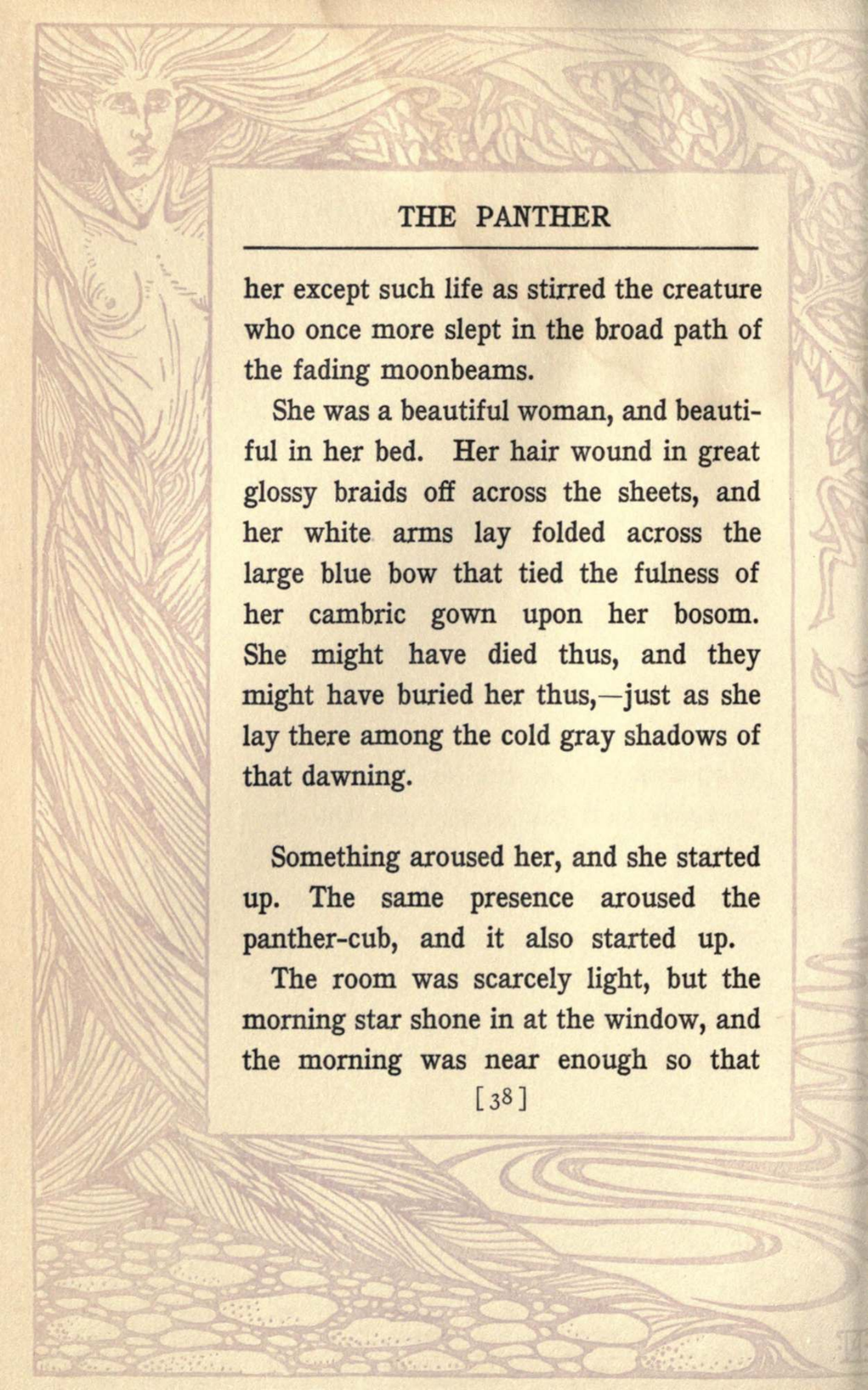
When she looked again, the beating of her heart had aroused the sleeping thing and caused it to draw nearer. It sat close to her feet, and its golden glance overshot the silver sorrow of her own. There was nothing repelling in the round uplifted eyes, and she sounded them for a minute before she recalled their message. It reared its body softly against her, catching its claws into the lace of her skirt for support, and strove to touch her hand with its little red tongue. But at that she recollected, and, tearing herself from the sympathy of the Forbidden, sprang up and went out onto the terrace. She heard its fall behind her, and was unable to repress a feeling of reproach at such rough handling of so tiny and helpless a thing, but the minute after it was forgotten in the overpowering sen-

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

sation of his personality that stole over her ever and again, and now foamed up strongly, throwing her own thoughts hither and yon on the crests of the surf of past souvenirs.

Casting herself against the marble rail, she leaned there until a faint pale twilight called the shadows of night to their daily rest.

She went in then, and sought her bed. It was narrow and white, and turned open for her entrance. So narrow and white and open is the last resting-place, so softly and luxuriously are the dead housed, and also so lonely in their desolation do they lay them down. Just as stilly and as lonely as the dead go to their rest, so she went to hers. In among the peace and quiet of utter solitude she sought oblivion. Nothing of life was near



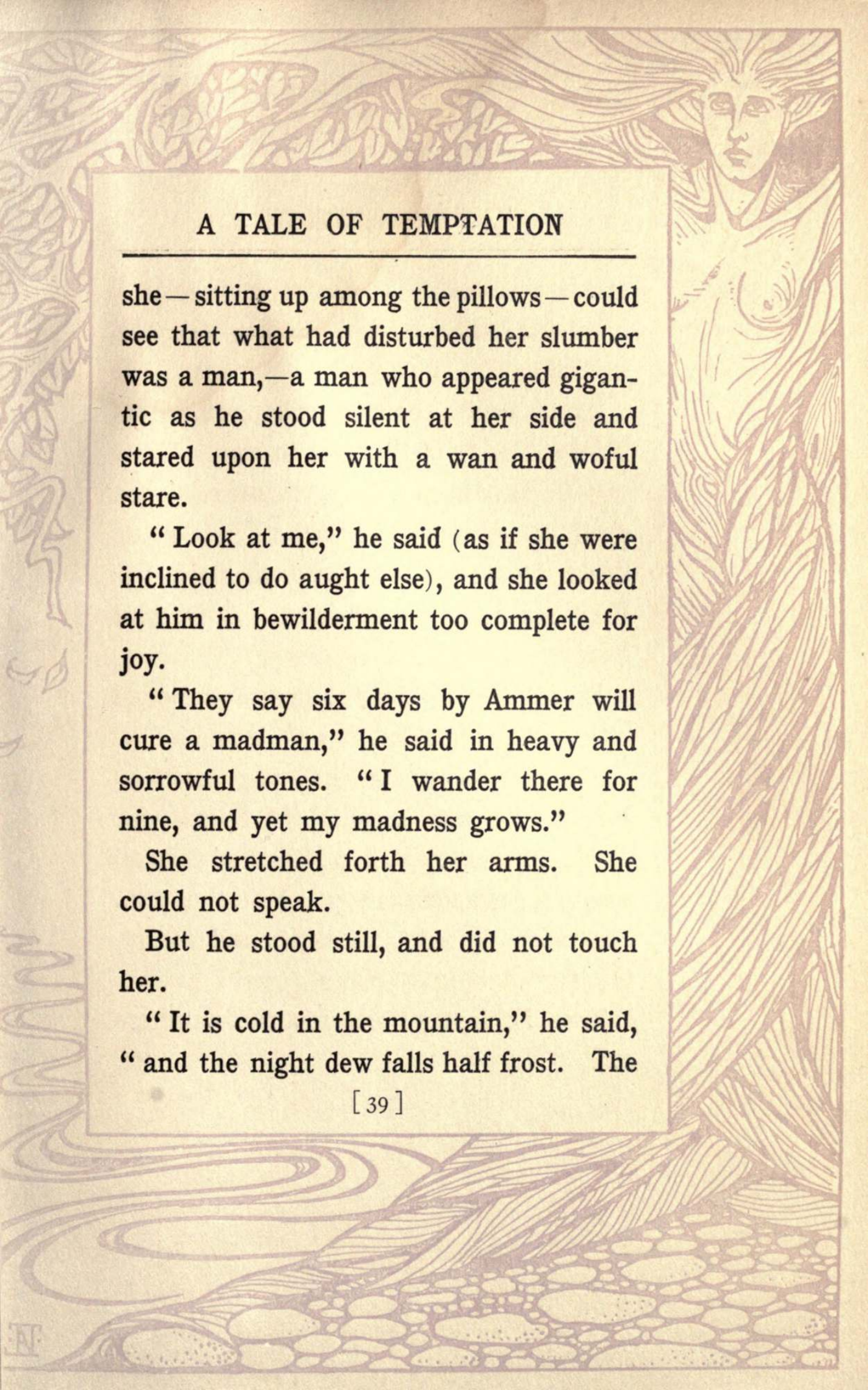
THE PANTHER

her except such life as stirred the creature who once more slept in the broad path of the fading moonbeams.

She was a beautiful woman, and beautiful in her bed. Her hair wound in great glossy braids off across the sheets, and her white arms lay folded across the large blue bow that tied the fulness of her cambric gown upon her bosom. She might have died thus, and they might have buried her thus,—just as she lay there among the cold gray shadows of that dawning.

Something aroused her, and she started up. The same presence aroused the panther-cub, and it also started up.

The room was scarcely light, but the morning star shone in at the window, and the morning was near enough so that



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

she—sitting up among the pillows—could see that what had disturbed her slumber was a man,—a man who appeared gigantic as he stood silent at her side and stared upon her with a wan and woful stare.

“Look at me,” he said (as if she were inclined to do aught else), and she looked at him in bewilderment too complete for joy.

“They say six days by Ammer will cure a madman,” he said in heavy and sorrowful tones. “I wander there for nine, and yet my madness grows.”

She stretched forth her arms. She could not speak.

But he stood still, and did not touch her.

“It is cold in the mountain,” he said, “and the night dew falls half frost. The



THE PANTHER

moon was there, as she is here; and I cried out to her. She veiled her face, and went."

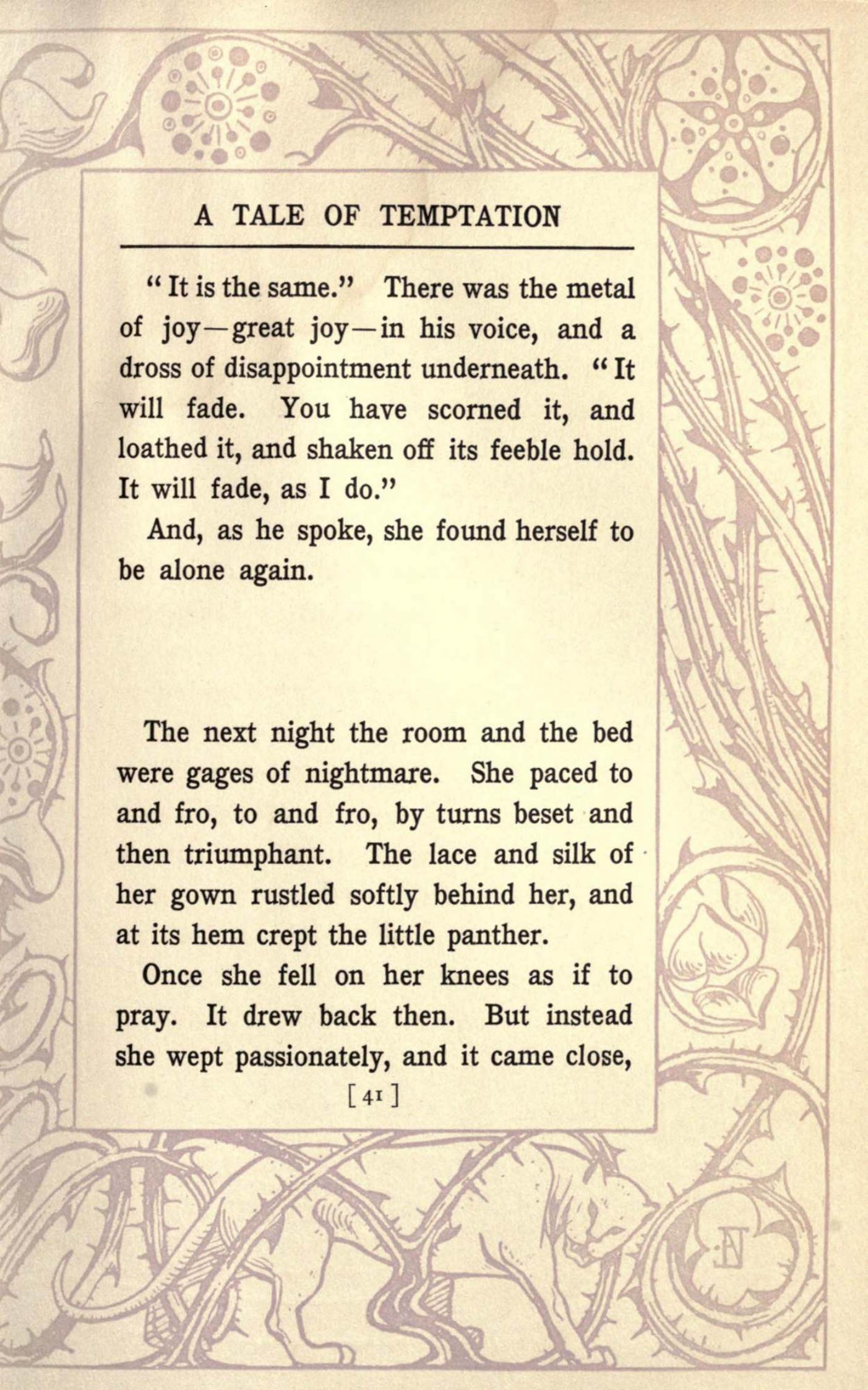
There was a hollow resonance in his voice. The woman began to weep.

"We have been strong," he said. "We shall go on being strong. I am going down by the Alpsee and through the Fernpass into Switzerland. After that I know not."

He sat down upon the bed, and looked at her with attention.

"I did not know that you were so lovely," he said slowly. "I knew your eyes and your face, but I fancied that all women slept with their hair in a toss. And your throat is so white and round, too."

Then he looked towards the panther-cub.

A decorative border surrounds the text, featuring stylized floral motifs, thorny vines, and circular patterns with sunburst designs.

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

“It is the same.” There was the metal of joy—great joy—in his voice, and a dross of disappointment underneath. “It will fade. You have scorned it, and loathed it, and shaken off its feeble hold. It will fade, as I do.”

And, as he spoke, she found herself to be alone again.

The next night the room and the bed were gages of nightmare. She paced to and fro, to and fro, by turns beset and then triumphant. The lace and silk of her gown rustled softly behind her, and at its hem crept the little panther.

Once she fell on her knees as if to pray. It drew back then. But instead she wept passionately, and it came close,

The page is framed by a decorative border. On the left side, there is a vertical illustration of a woman's face with her eyes closed, surrounded by intricate floral and vine-like patterns. The top and right sides also feature similar decorative elements. At the bottom, there are concentric circles and a small floral motif.

THE PANTHER

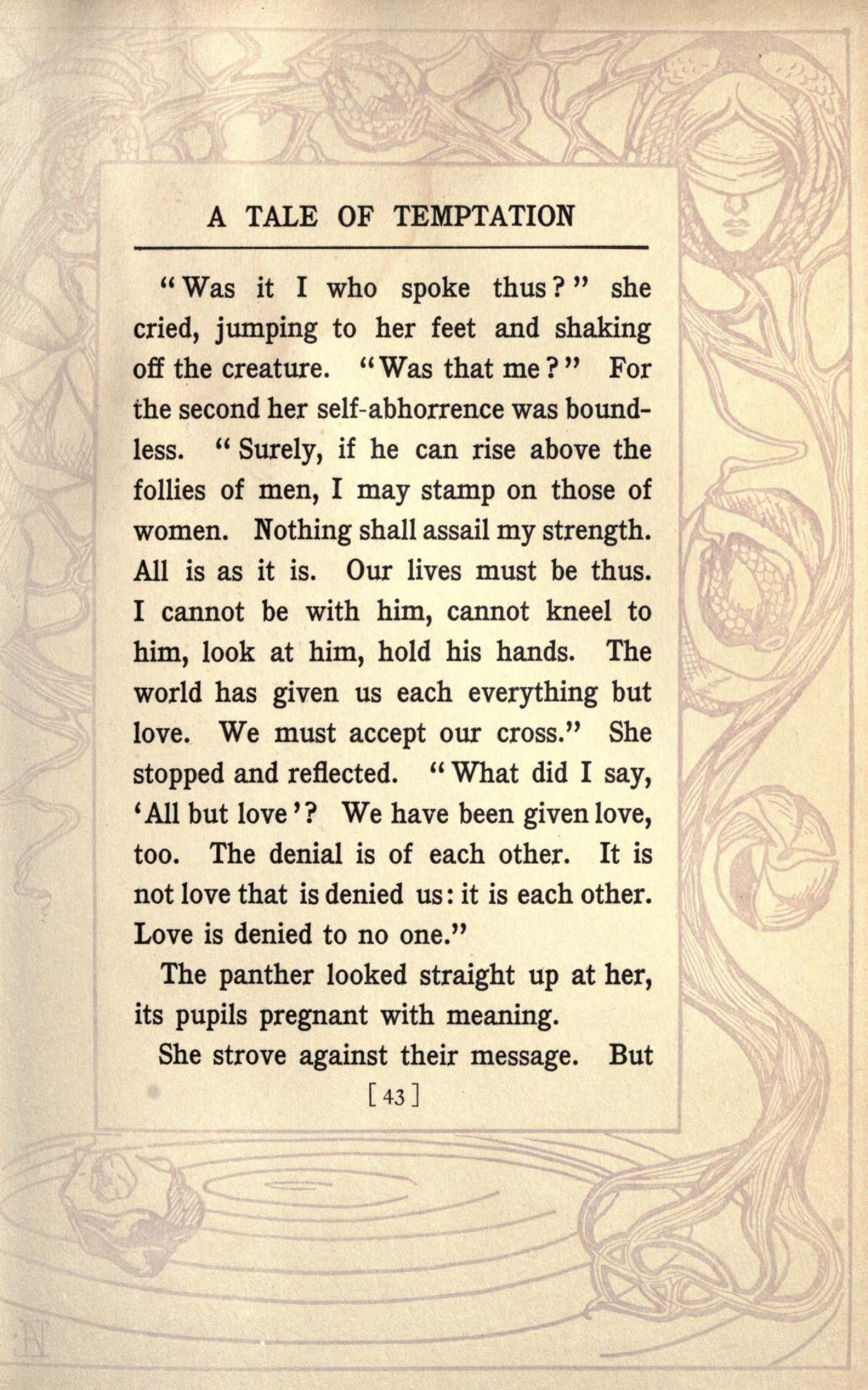
close, close, cowered in the folds of her gown, and lay there panting, but not touching her.

After a while she looked upwards, rested her chin on her crossed arms, and reflected, unconscious that it was so close and watching her.

“To be young and part of youth eternal, and I shall never be young but once! To be beautiful and to realize that beauty is fleeting, and I cannot be so again. And then to come to the very border-land of Paradise, and view its promise, and have to decide in cold blood to retrace my steps and unlearn my sight.”

She paused, and, looking down, saw the cub curled up on the lace flounce of her skirt. A tremendous revulsion of spirit arose with the sight.



The page features a decorative background with a woman's face in the upper right, a large floral motif in the center, and a circular pattern at the bottom. The text is enclosed in a rectangular frame.

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

“Was it I who spoke thus?” she cried, jumping to her feet and shaking off the creature. “Was that me?” For the second her self-aborrence was boundless. “Surely, if he can rise above the follies of men, I may stamp on those of women. Nothing shall assail my strength. All is as it is. Our lives must be thus. I cannot be with him, cannot kneel to him, look at him, hold his hands. The world has given us each everything but love. We must accept our cross.” She stopped and reflected. “What did I say, ‘All but love’? We have been given love, too. The denial is of each other. It is not love that is denied us: it is each other. Love is denied to no one.”

The panther looked straight up at her, its pupils pregnant with meaning.

She strove against their message. But

THE PANTHER

after a while she said slowly, in contradiction of her later words:—

“ Nature gives every bird and beast—aye, even each tree and flower—a mate. Then why were we denied? ”

Her self-reproaches were drowned in reproach at being stripped and bound helpless on the wheel of Fate. Rebellion rose, and choked her for a second time.

The panther, watchful, alert, regarded her steadfastly as she rose and beat ceaselessly to and fro, to and fro, behind her bars.

A period of time.

To the ones who drag out life chained within the prison of their own dead hopes or existing despair, what days sink coiling

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

down upon what nights in that eternal ringing of eternity!

A feeling grows of timelessness,—sorrow's antithesis to time. And even the living symbol of a shapeless fear becomes a possible companion, if it shares the weight of companion shackles.

The panther shared her solitude, partook its limitations, and was quiet and unobtrusive,—two great kindnesses in a fellow-slave.

Then, too, in its eyes shone understanding. She knew that *It* knew. After rebellion comes the bowed head, and later acceptance. She rebelled. She passionately protested. And then, at last, she was glad that there lived Something that knew.

One evening she sat in a low seat, threading her fingers through the warm



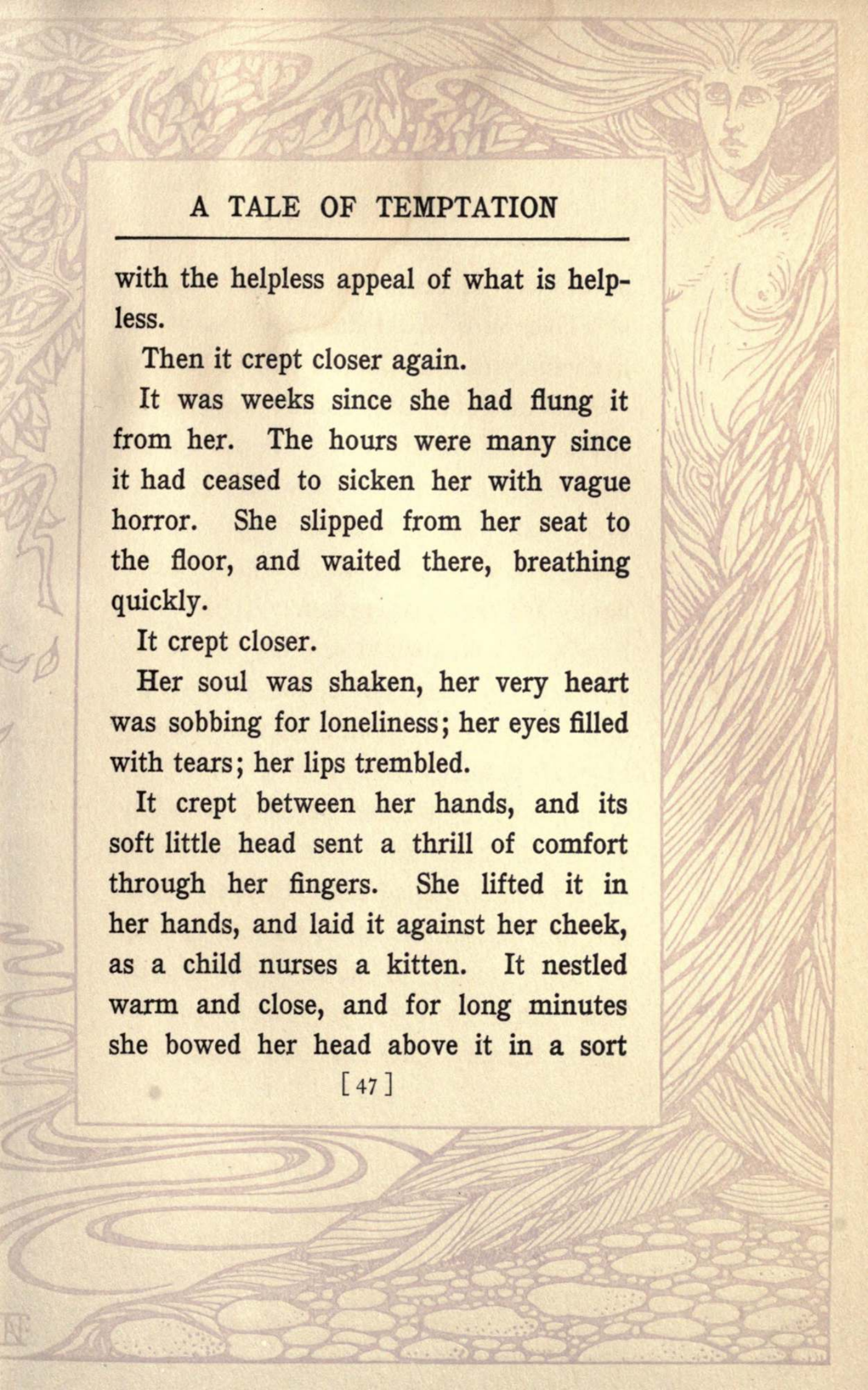
THE PANTHER

masses of her loosened hair, and looking down at That which never failed to give her back each look as steadily as a reflection might. "I am accursed," she exclaimed suddenly. "I am accursed, and so is he. As the mirage in the desert, so happiness showed itself to us."

Her fingers writhed and twisted among the warm waves of hair. The very warmth was a mockery. What joy is enjoyment undivided and alone?

The little panther came padding closer. Its yellow eyes were wide and bright and sympathetic. She felt her pain solaced by their glow. She leaned forward, and clasped her hands about her knees. Her hair fell backward and to right and left, and the kitten-like creature crept yet closer.

It raised its head, and regarded her



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

with the helpless appeal of what is helpless.

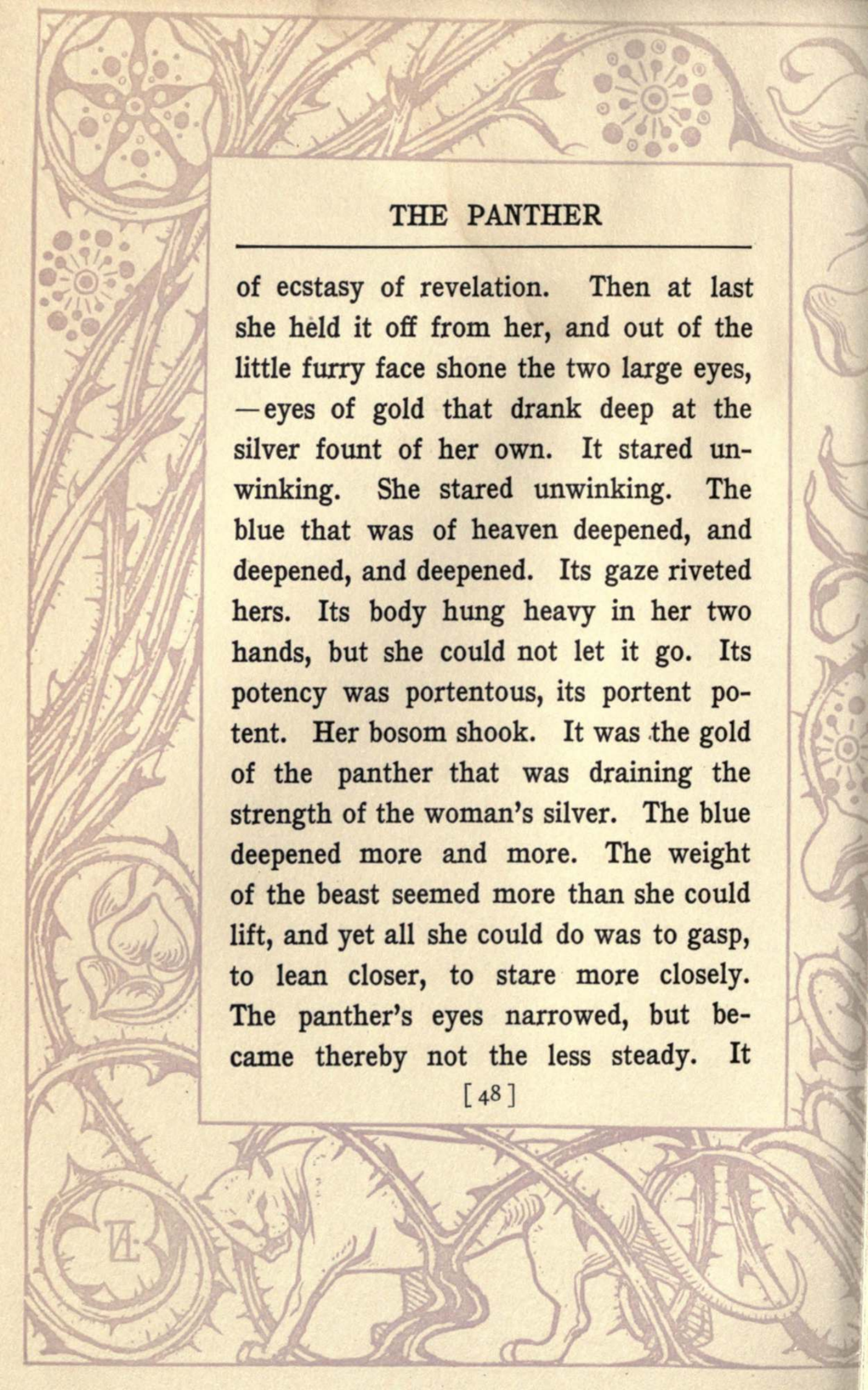
Then it crept closer again.

It was weeks since she had flung it from her. The hours were many since it had ceased to sicken her with vague horror. She slipped from her seat to the floor, and waited there, breathing quickly.

It crept closer.

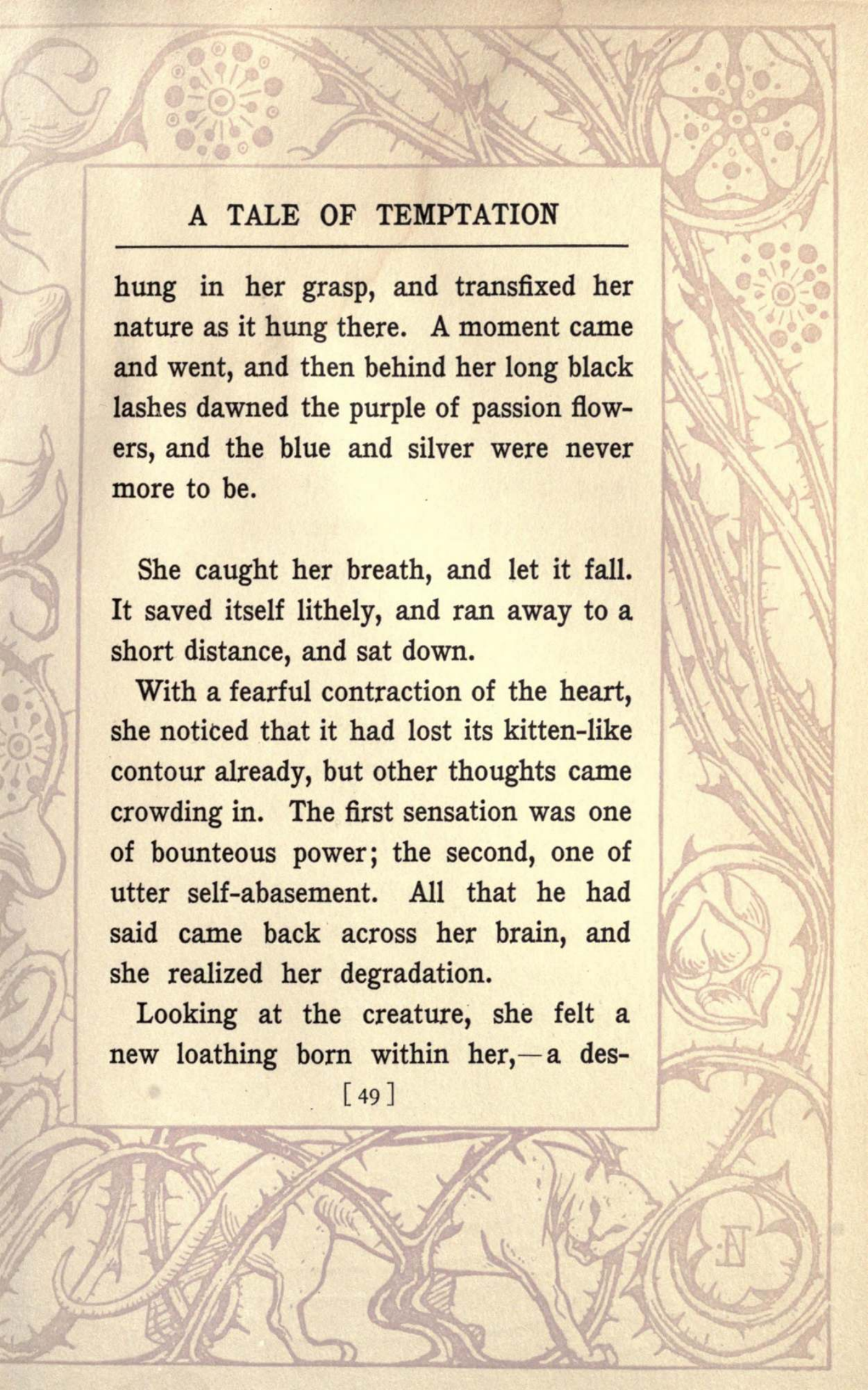
Her soul was shaken, her very heart was sobbing for loneliness; her eyes filled with tears; her lips trembled.

It crept between her hands, and its soft little head sent a thrill of comfort through her fingers. She lifted it in her hands, and laid it against her cheek, as a child nurses a kitten. It nestled warm and close, and for long minutes she bowed her head above it in a sort

The page is framed by a decorative border of stylized, thorny vines and circular floral motifs. The text is contained within a rectangular frame in the center.

THE PANTHER

of ecstasy of revelation. Then at last she held it off from her, and out of the little furry face shone the two large eyes, —eyes of gold that drank deep at the silver fount of her own. It stared unwinking. She stared unwinking. The blue that was of heaven deepened, and deepened, and deepened. Its gaze riveted hers. Its body hung heavy in her two hands, but she could not let it go. Its potency was portentous, its portent potent. Her bosom shook. It was the gold of the panther that was draining the strength of the woman's silver. The blue deepened more and more. The weight of the beast seemed more than she could lift, and yet all she could do was to gasp, to lean closer, to stare more closely. The panther's eyes narrowed, but became thereby not the less steady. It

A decorative border surrounds the text, featuring intricate floral and thorny patterns. At the top, there are circular motifs with radiating lines. On the right side, there are vertical, thorny stems. At the bottom, a large, stylized animal, possibly a panther or leopard, is depicted in a crouching position, surrounded by more thorny branches. The entire page has a light, aged paper tone.

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

hung in her grasp, and transfixed her nature as it hung there. A moment came and went, and then behind her long black lashes dawned the purple of passion flowers, and the blue and silver were never more to be.

She caught her breath, and let it fall. It saved itself lithely, and ran away to a short distance, and sat down.

With a fearful contraction of the heart, she noticed that it had lost its kitten-like contour already, but other thoughts came crowding in. The first sensation was one of bounteous power; the second, one of utter self-abasement. All that he had said came back across her brain, and she realized her degradation.

Looking at the creature, she felt a new loathing born within her,—a des-

The page is framed by a decorative border. On the left side, there is a vertical illustration of a woman's face with long, flowing hair, looking downwards. The rest of the border is filled with intricate, stylized floral and leaf patterns. At the bottom of the page, there are several concentric circles, suggesting ripples in water, and a small, detailed illustration of a flower or shell on the right side.

THE PANTHER

perate resolution born of a desperate need.

“Never again!” she promised herself.

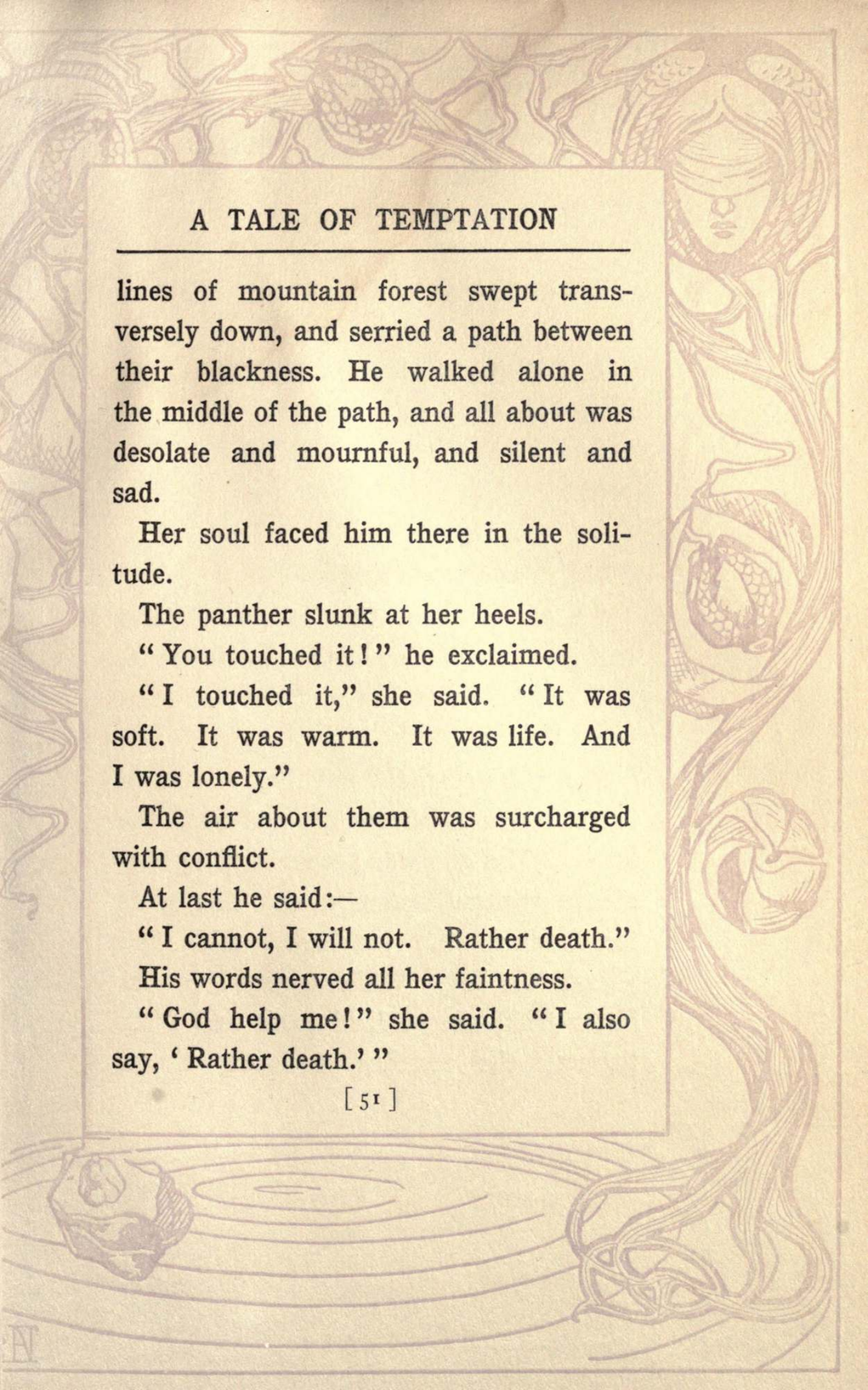
Its eyes were on her, but she did not meet them.

But what did that matter.

It had lost its kitten form.

She sat up in bed, panting and sobbing with fright and distress. It was dark in the room; that is, dark except for the yellow haze of the two glowing eyes that blazed at her feet.

But through the darkness she saw the white crest of the Dent du Midi, and somewhere in the middle distance a traveller, weary and haggard. Two



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

lines of mountain forest swept transversely down, and serried a path between their blackness. He walked alone in the middle of the path, and all about was desolate and mournful, and silent and sad.

Her soul faced him there in the solitude.

The panther slunk at her heels.

“You touched it!” he exclaimed.

“I touched it,” she said. “It was soft. It was warm. It was life. And I was lonely.”

The air about them was surcharged with conflict.

At last he said:—

“I cannot, I will not. Rather death.”

His words nerved all her faintness.

“God help me!” she said. “I also say, ‘Rather death.’”

THE PANTHER

He looked at the beast and then at her.

And then she was alone again in the dark with the yellow eyes.

The next day she said:—

“I cannot bear this longer. I also will go to the Valley of the Ammer; and, if I cannot learn Peace, I may at least learn Strength.”

She bid her maid buy her a suit of loden and a shoulder-bag, and pack the latter. The girl was accustomed to obedience without questioning. She went forth, made the purchases, and then packed the bag. While engaged in the latter task, she walked back and forth through the panther a dozen times.

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

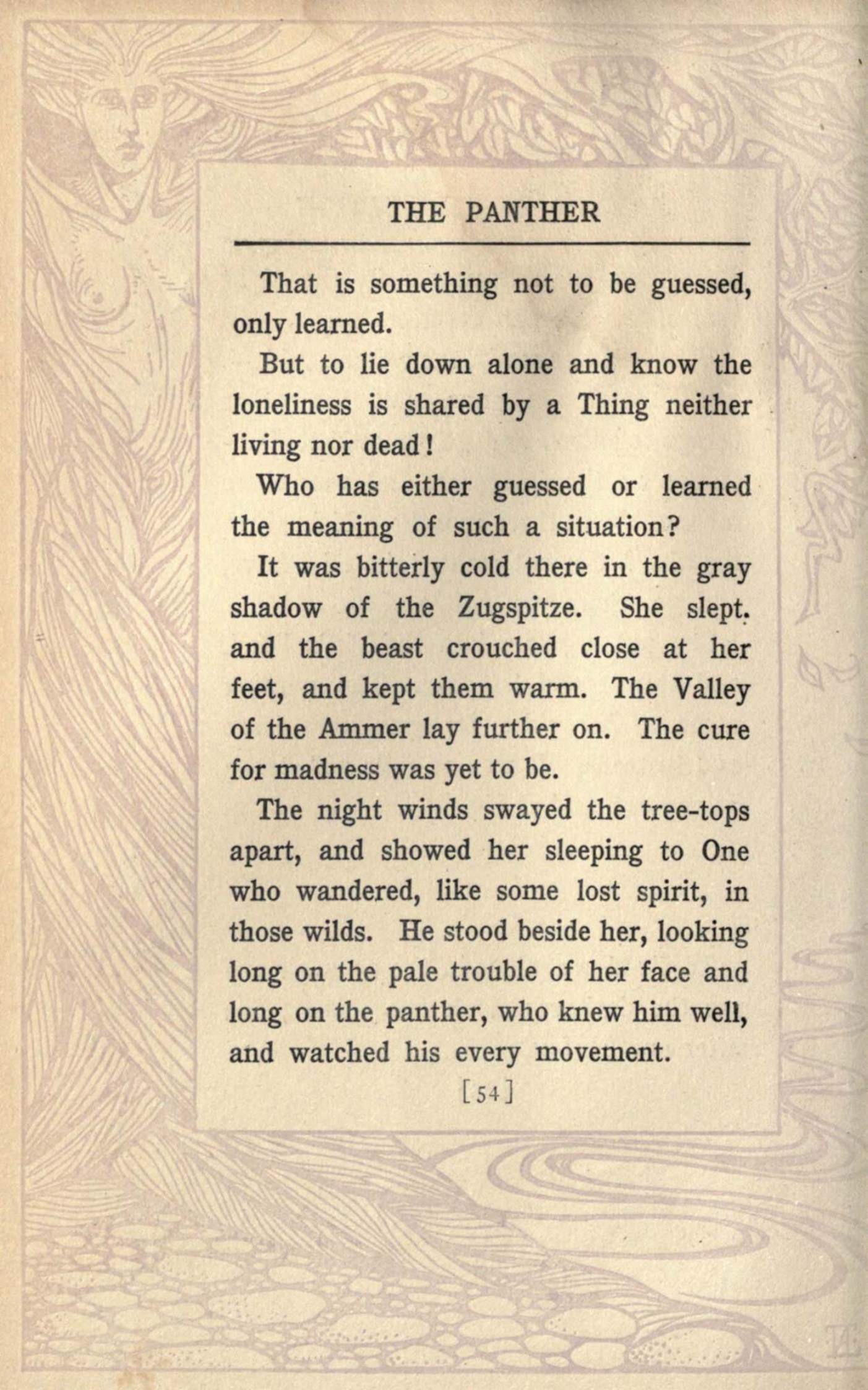
There was a hideousness in the sight that no words can describe.

When all was ready, the woman said:—

“When I am gone, put the other things together, and go yourself to Constance on the Bodensee, and wait there for me. Wait three months. If in three months I am not come, take all I have, and go where you will.”

She put a purse into the girl's hand, and turned and left her. The panther came to her side. Its eyes were large and lustrous. It was as agile and strong as any cat, and as big.

To lie down alone in the open air and see the darkness cloak every form, one after another!



THE PANTHER

That is something not to be guessed, only learned.

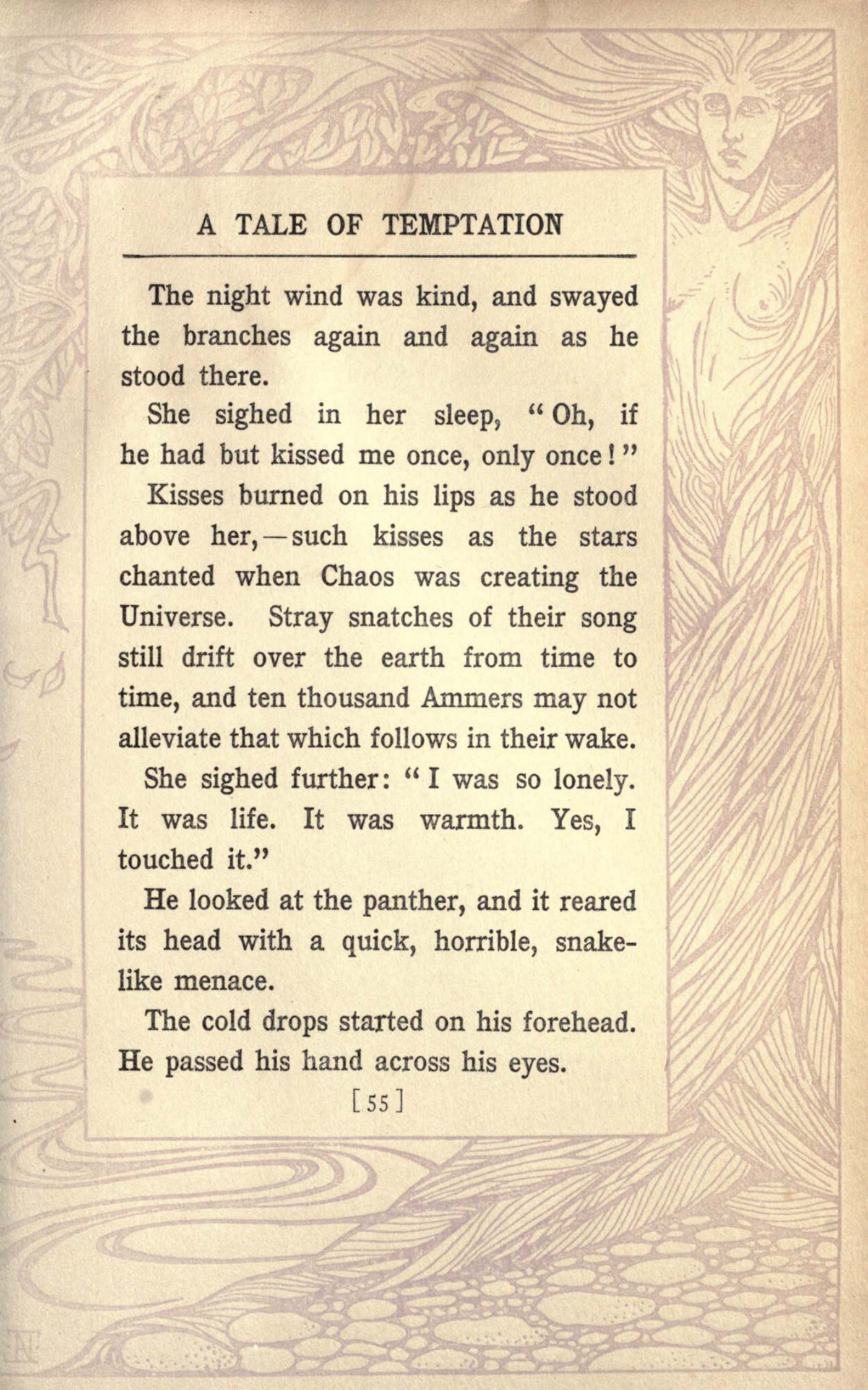
But to lie down alone and know the loneliness is shared by a Thing neither living nor dead!

Who has either guessed or learned the meaning of such a situation?

It was bitterly cold there in the gray shadow of the Zugspitze. She slept, and the beast crouched close at her feet, and kept them warm. The Valley of the Ammer lay further on. The cure for madness was yet to be.

The night winds swayed the tree-tops apart, and showed her sleeping to One who wandered, like some lost spirit, in those wilds. He stood beside her, looking long on the pale trouble of her face and long on the panther, who knew him well, and watched his every movement.





A TALE OF TEMPTATION

The night wind was kind, and swayed the branches again and again as he stood there.

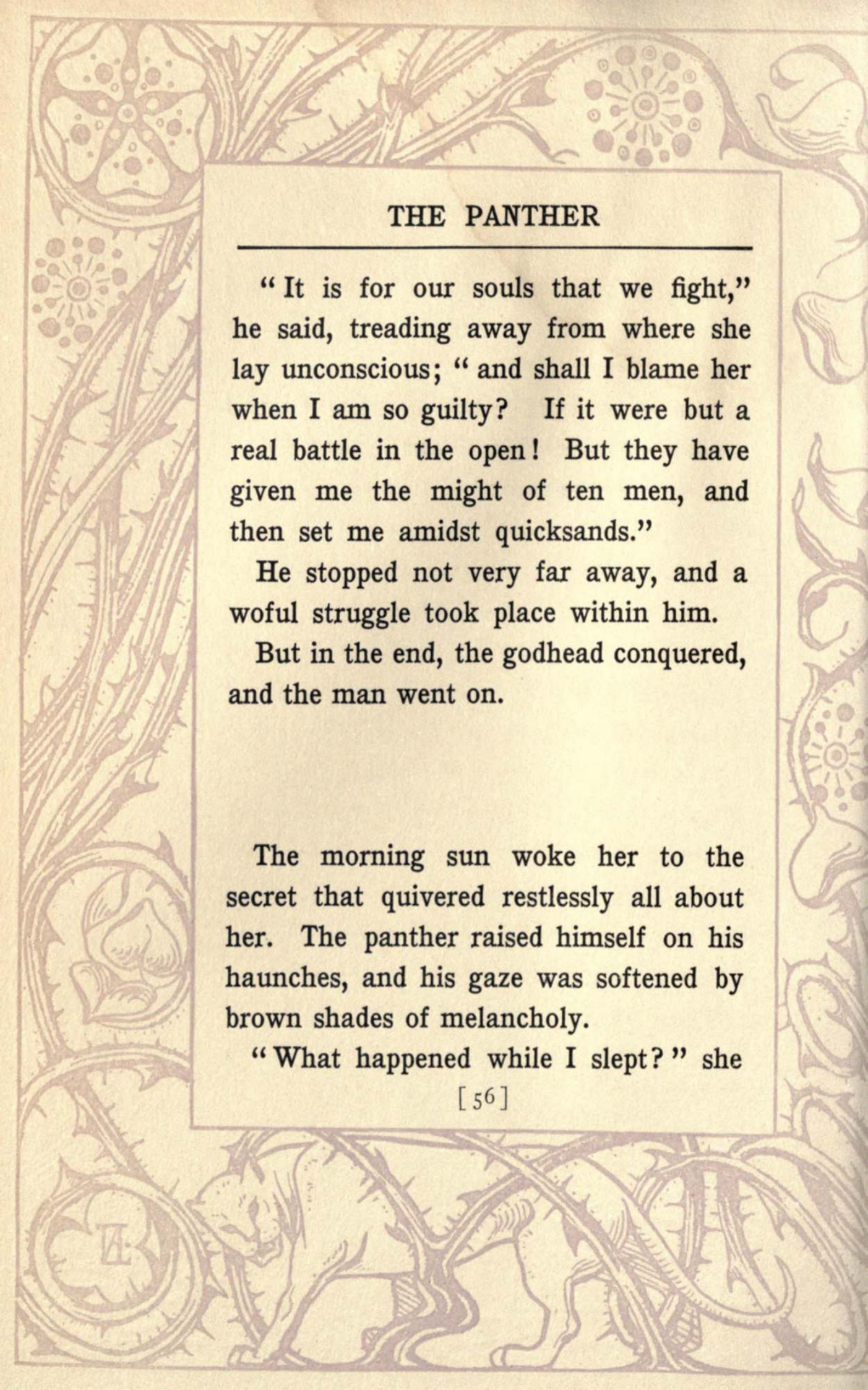
She sighed in her sleep, "Oh, if he had but kissed me once, only once!"

Kisses burned on his lips as he stood above her,—such kisses as the stars chanted when Chaos was creating the Universe. Stray snatches of their song still drift over the earth from time to time, and ten thousand Ammers may not alleviate that which follows in their wake.

She sighed further: "I was so lonely. It was life. It was warmth. Yes, I touched it."

He looked at the panther, and it reared its head with a quick, horrible, snake-like menace.

The cold drops started on his forehead. He passed his hand across his eyes.



THE PANTHER

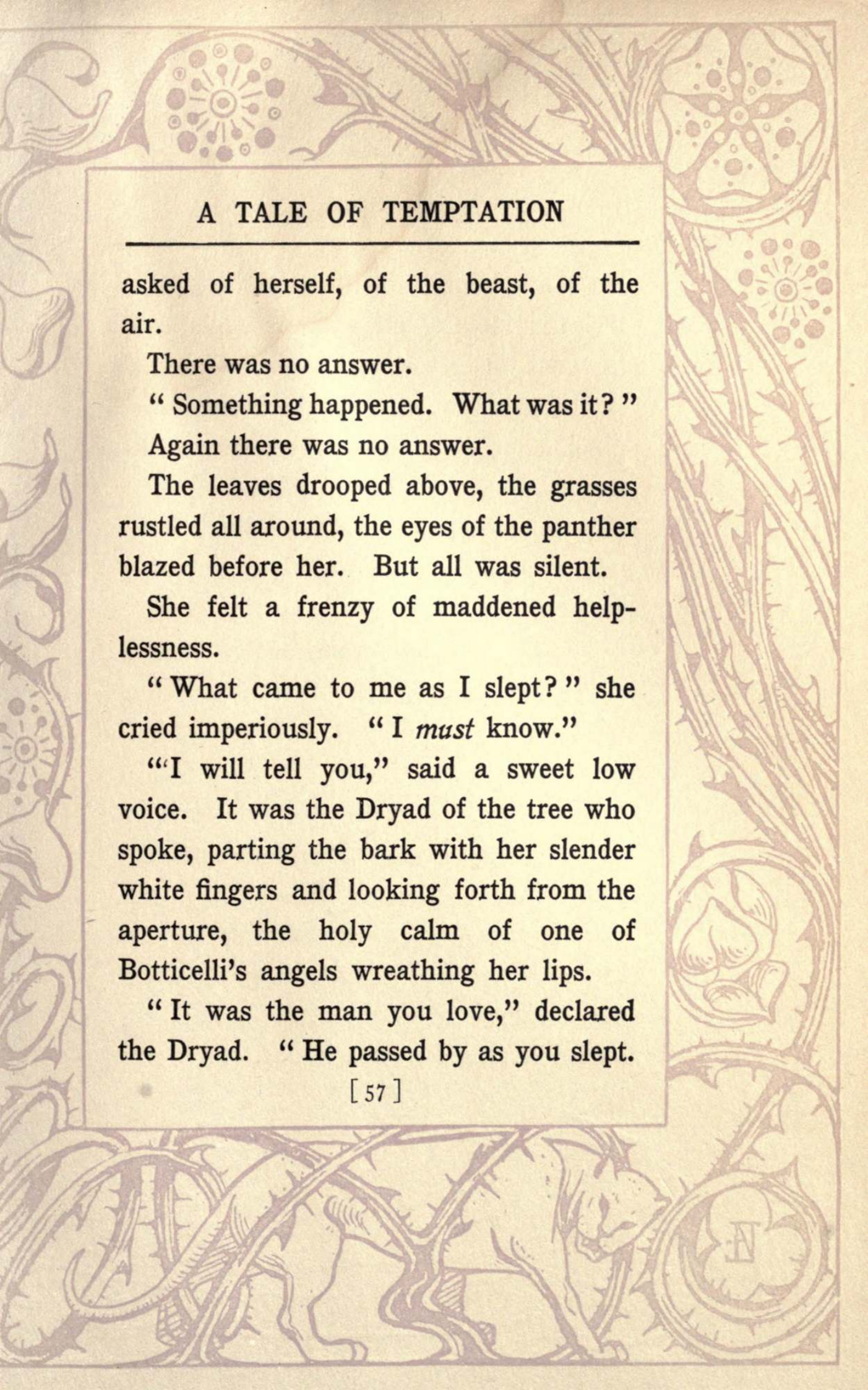
“It is for our souls that we fight,” he said, treading away from where she lay unconscious; “and shall I blame her when I am so guilty? If it were but a real battle in the open! But they have given me the might of ten men, and then set me amidst quicksands.”

He stopped not very far away, and a woful struggle took place within him.

But in the end, the godhead conquered, and the man went on.

The morning sun woke her to the secret that quivered restlessly all about her. The panther raised himself on his haunches, and his gaze was softened by brown shades of melancholy.

“What happened while I slept?” she



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

asked of herself, of the beast, of the air.

There was no answer.

“Something happened. What was it?”

Again there was no answer.

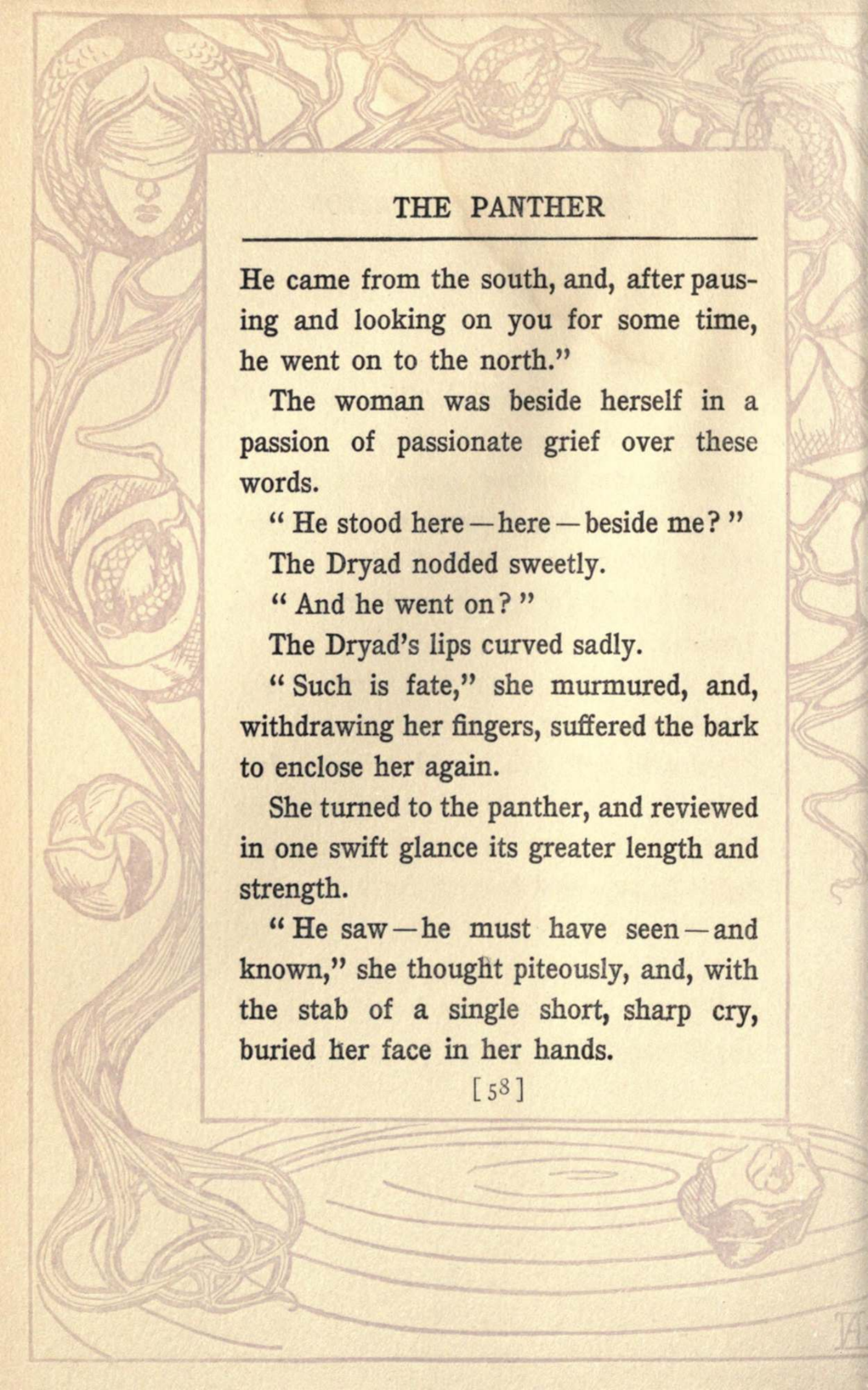
The leaves drooped above, the grasses rustled all around, the eyes of the panther blazed before her. But all was silent.

She felt a frenzy of maddened helplessness.

“What came to me as I slept?” she cried imperiously. “I *must* know.”

“I will tell you,” said a sweet low voice. It was the Dryad of the tree who spoke, parting the bark with her slender white fingers and looking forth from the aperture, the holy calm of one of Botticelli’s angels wreathing her lips.

“It was the man you love,” declared the Dryad. “He passed by as you slept.

The page is framed by a decorative border. On the left side, there is a vertical illustration of a woman's face with her eyes closed, surrounded by intricate, vine-like patterns. The top and right sides also feature similar floral and vine motifs. The background of the page has a subtle, repeating pattern of these designs.

THE PANTHER

He came from the south, and, after pausing and looking on you for some time, he went on to the north."

The woman was beside herself in a passion of passionate grief over these words.

"He stood here — here — beside me?"

The Dryad nodded sweetly.

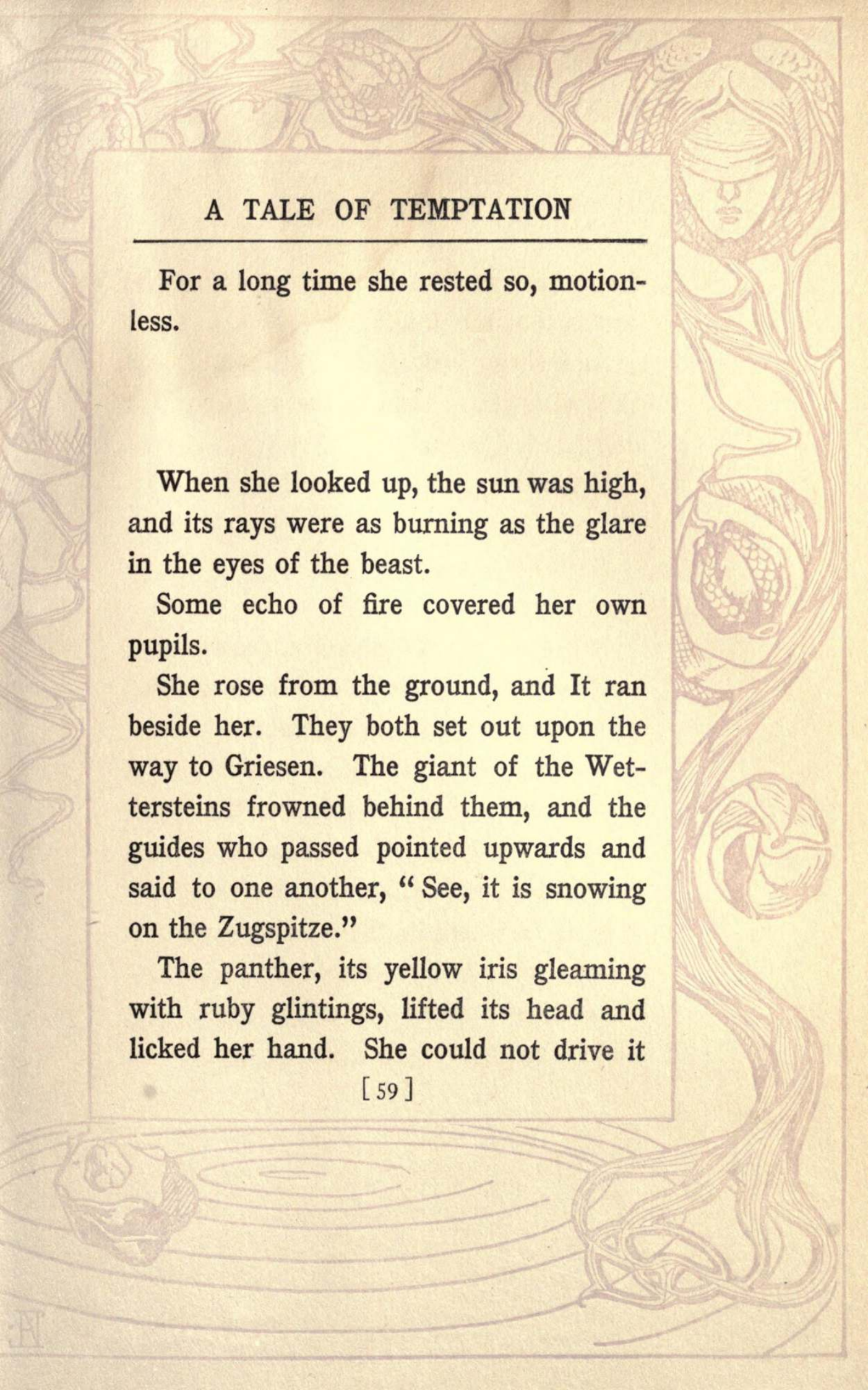
"And he went on?"

The Dryad's lips curved sadly.

"Such is fate," she murmured, and, withdrawing her fingers, suffered the bark to enclose her again.

She turned to the panther, and reviewed in one swift glance its greater length and strength.

"He saw — he must have seen — and known," she thought piteously, and, with the stab of a single short, sharp cry, buried her face in her hands.



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

For a long time she rested so, motionless.

When she looked up, the sun was high, and its rays were as burning as the glare in the eyes of the beast.

Some echo of fire covered her own pupils.

She rose from the ground, and It ran beside her. They both set out upon the way to Griesen. The giant of the Wettersteins frowned behind them, and the guides who passed pointed upwards and said to one another, "See, it is snowing on the Zugspitze."

The panther, its yellow iris gleaming with ruby glintings, lifted its head and licked her hand. She could not drive it

THE PANTHER

from her, and was forced to suffer the caress that tortured.

And then, looking down upon it, she saw with alarm that it was as large as a dog.

Shuddering, she continued on her way.

It grew. It grew steadily, ceaselessly. It began to stretch itself with a yawn of power that made her tremble.

On the third day they passed out of the Graswangthal and came to the banks of the Ammer. The mountains rose mightily on either hand, and clasped the day so fast within their holding that it faded in a twilight four hours long.

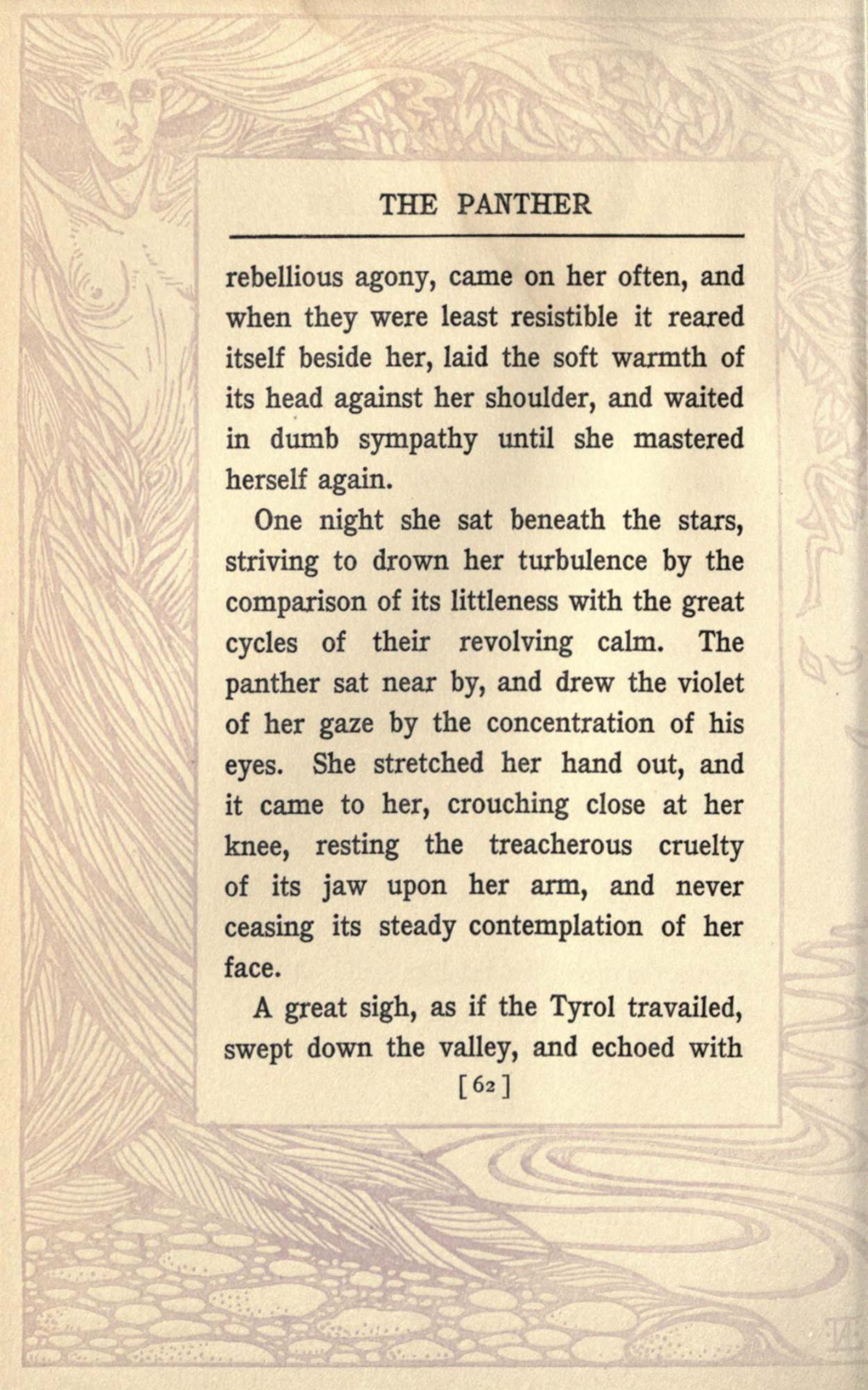
Looking upward on either hand, one had to consider that when mankind was



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

young the rocks above were old, and that multitudes and multitudes of waves of human woe had gathered strength and force, rolled up and back, and been lost forever within the shadow of these hoary piles.

She did consider. She did reflect. She looked up at the mountains and down at the Ammer, and while she looked the panther paused and looked at her. Its eyes were bright with darting yellow, and night and day it sought her hand with its tongue. The touch of that tongue was as silken velvet, it did not even ruffle her breathing or her dreams. Her loathing had to lapse again, her apprehension to become lulled. The creature was so gentle, so quiet, so cat-like still. And it was with her so constantly. And seemed to comprehend. Crises of desperation, of

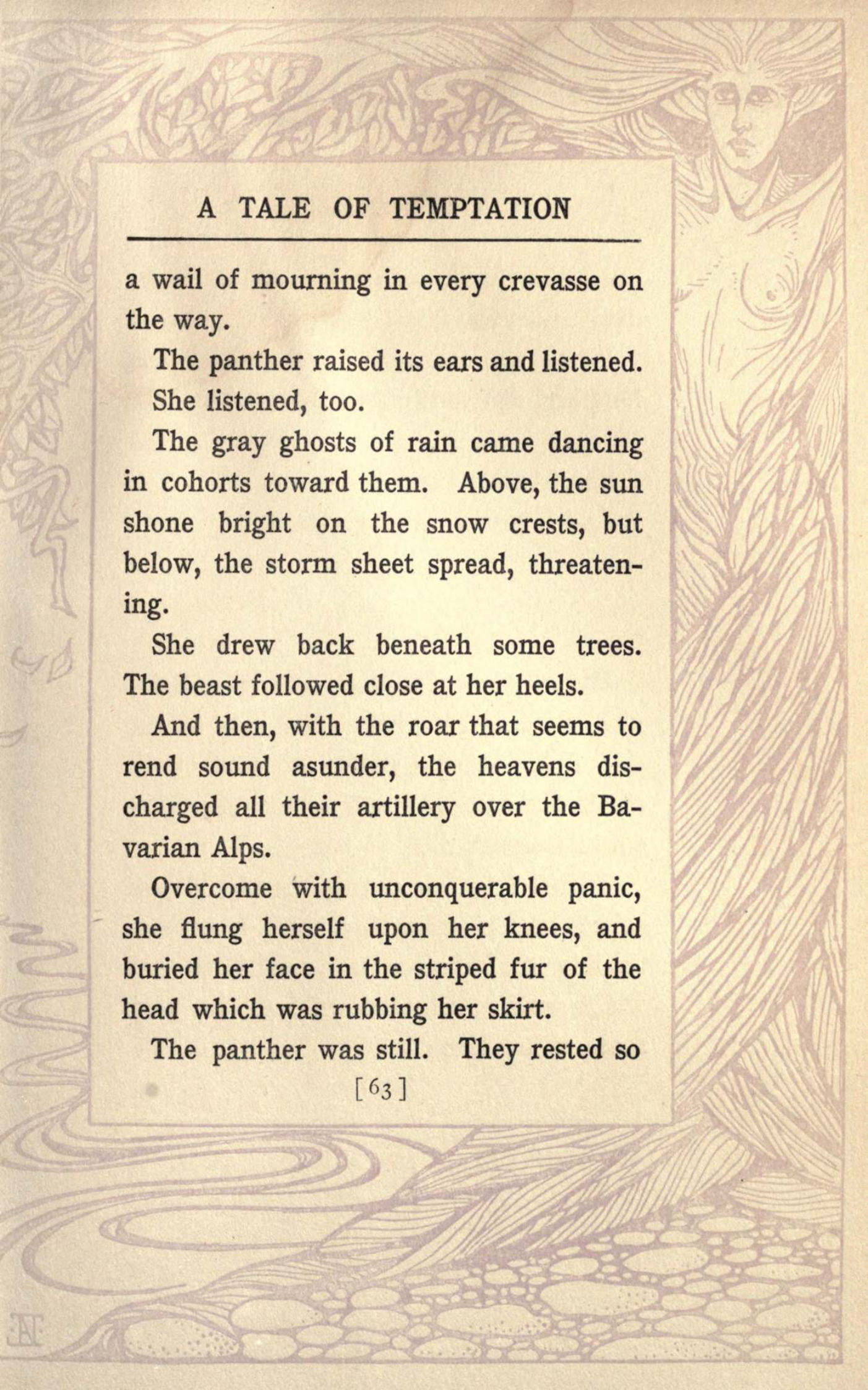


THE PANTHER

rebellious agony, came on her often, and when they were least resistible it reared itself beside her, laid the soft warmth of its head against her shoulder, and waited in dumb sympathy until she mastered herself again.

One night she sat beneath the stars, striving to drown her turbulence by the comparison of its littleness with the great cycles of their revolving calm. The panther sat near by, and drew the violet of her gaze by the concentration of his eyes. She stretched her hand out, and it came to her, crouching close at her knee, resting the treacherous cruelty of its jaw upon her arm, and never ceasing its steady contemplation of her face.

A great sigh, as if the Tyrol travailed, swept down the valley, and echoed with



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

a wail of mourning in every crevasse on the way.

The panther raised its ears and listened. She listened, too.

The gray ghosts of rain came dancing in cohorts toward them. Above, the sun shone bright on the snow crests, but below, the storm sheet spread, threatening.

She drew back beneath some trees. The beast followed close at her heels.

And then, with the roar that seems to rend sound asunder, the heavens discharged all their artillery over the Bavarian Alps.

Overcome with unconquerable panic, she flung herself upon her knees, and buried her face in the striped fur of the head which was rubbing her skirt.

The panther was still. They rested so



THE PANTHER

until the storm wound its way by them, over and away.

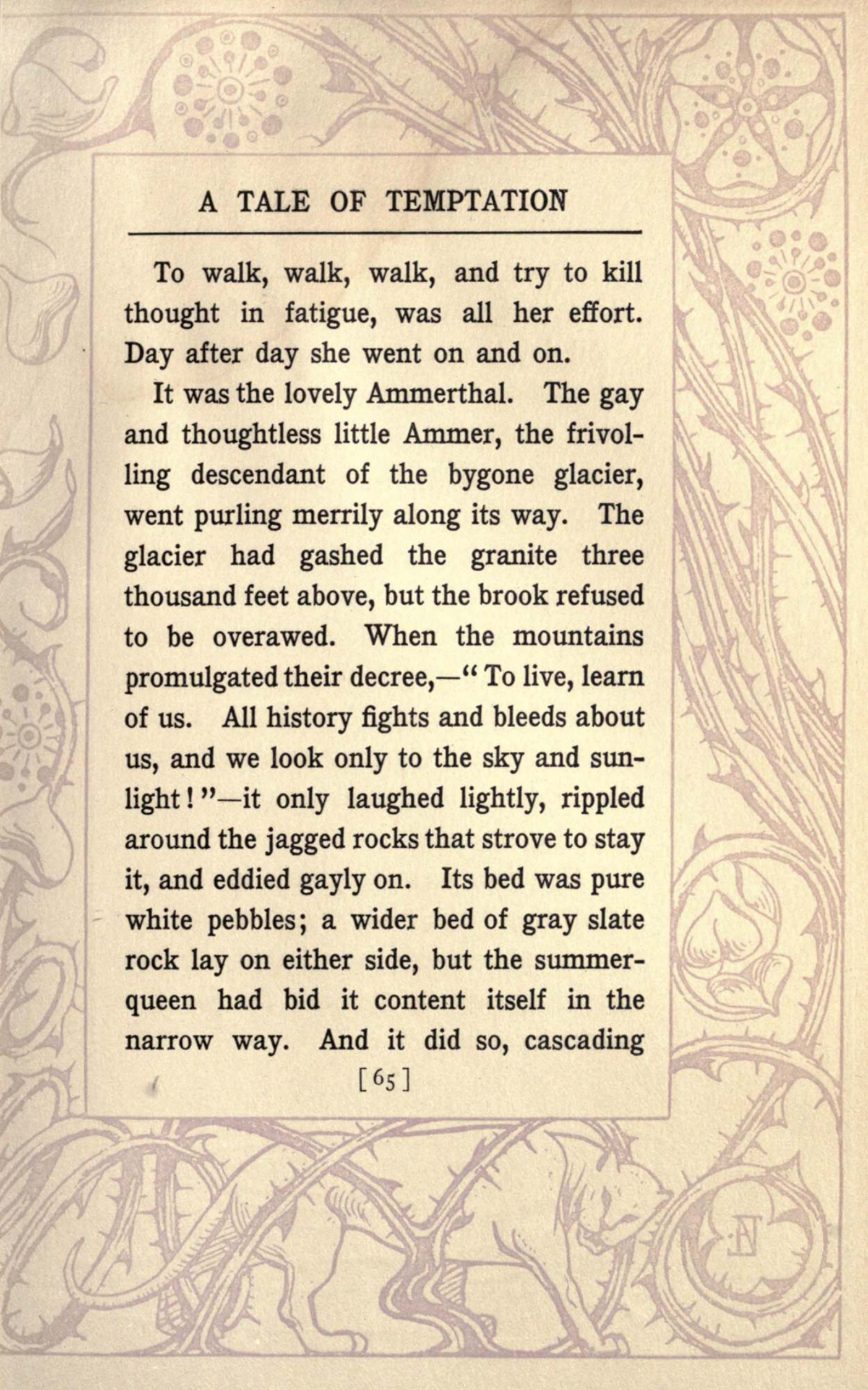
When she uncovered her eyes, *It* was long and lithe and its white claws showed on each foot.

She trembled and quivered.

And it grew. And grew.

The menace of that growth was beginning to penetrate her. She saw in the size of the beast a visible measure of the battle for soul and self which beset her consciousness.

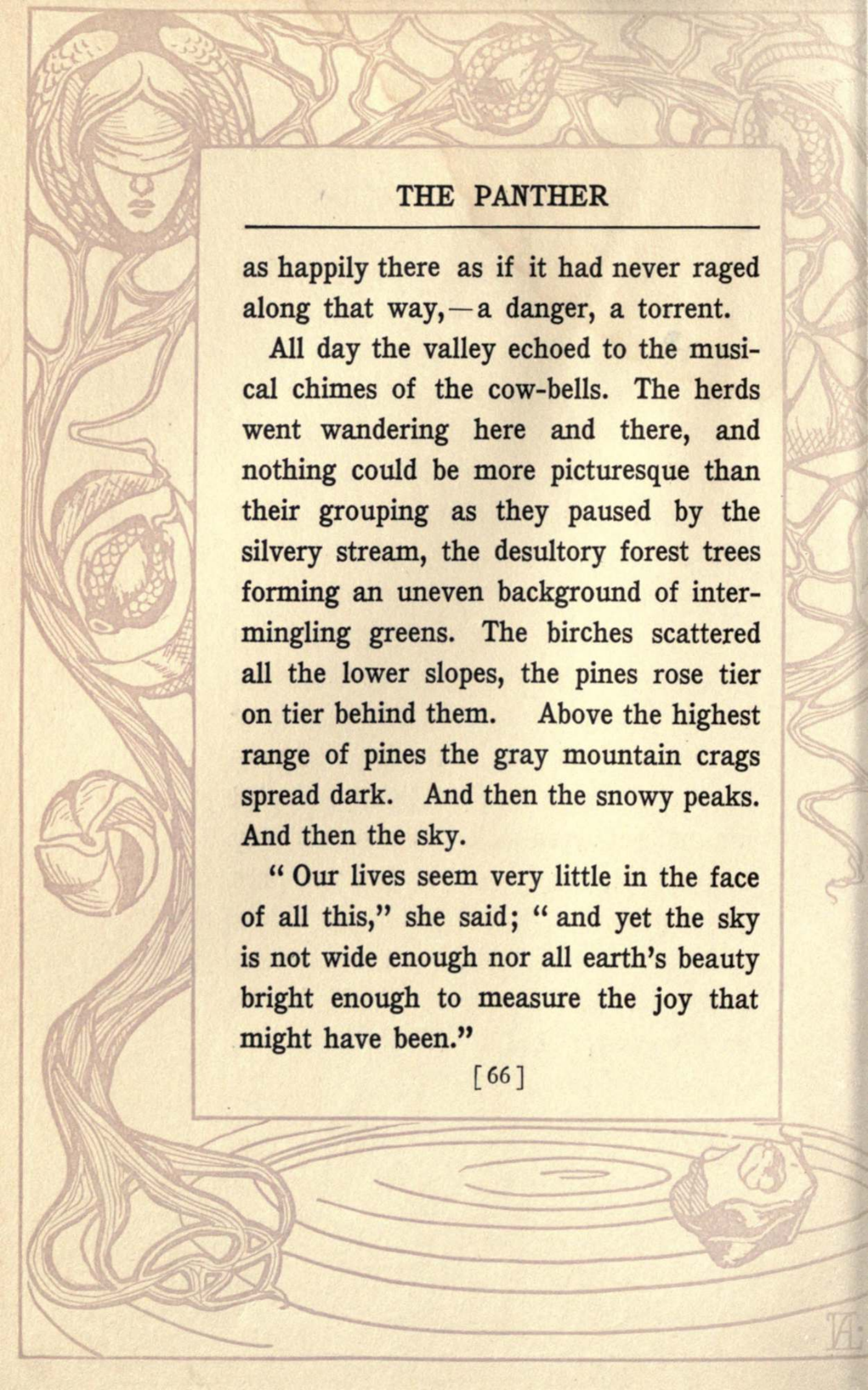
“ Shall I be less strong than he? ” she asked herself miserably, and felt more terribly than before the might of that which was reaching down into the very roots of her being.

A decorative border surrounds the text, featuring intricate floral and thorny patterns in a muted purple or brown color. The patterns include stylized flowers, leaves, and thorny vines, creating a rich, textured background for the text.

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

To walk, walk, walk, and try to kill thought in fatigue, was all her effort. Day after day she went on and on.

It was the lovely Ammerthal. The gay and thoughtless little Ammer, the frivolous descendant of the bygone glacier, went purling merrily along its way. The glacier had gashed the granite three thousand feet above, but the brook refused to be overawed. When the mountains promulgated their decree,—“To live, learn of us. All history fights and bleeds about us, and we look only to the sky and sunlight!”—it only laughed lightly, rippled around the jagged rocks that strove to stay it, and eddied gayly on. Its bed was pure white pebbles; a wider bed of gray slate rock lay on either side, but the summer-queen had bid it content itself in the narrow way. And it did so, cascading

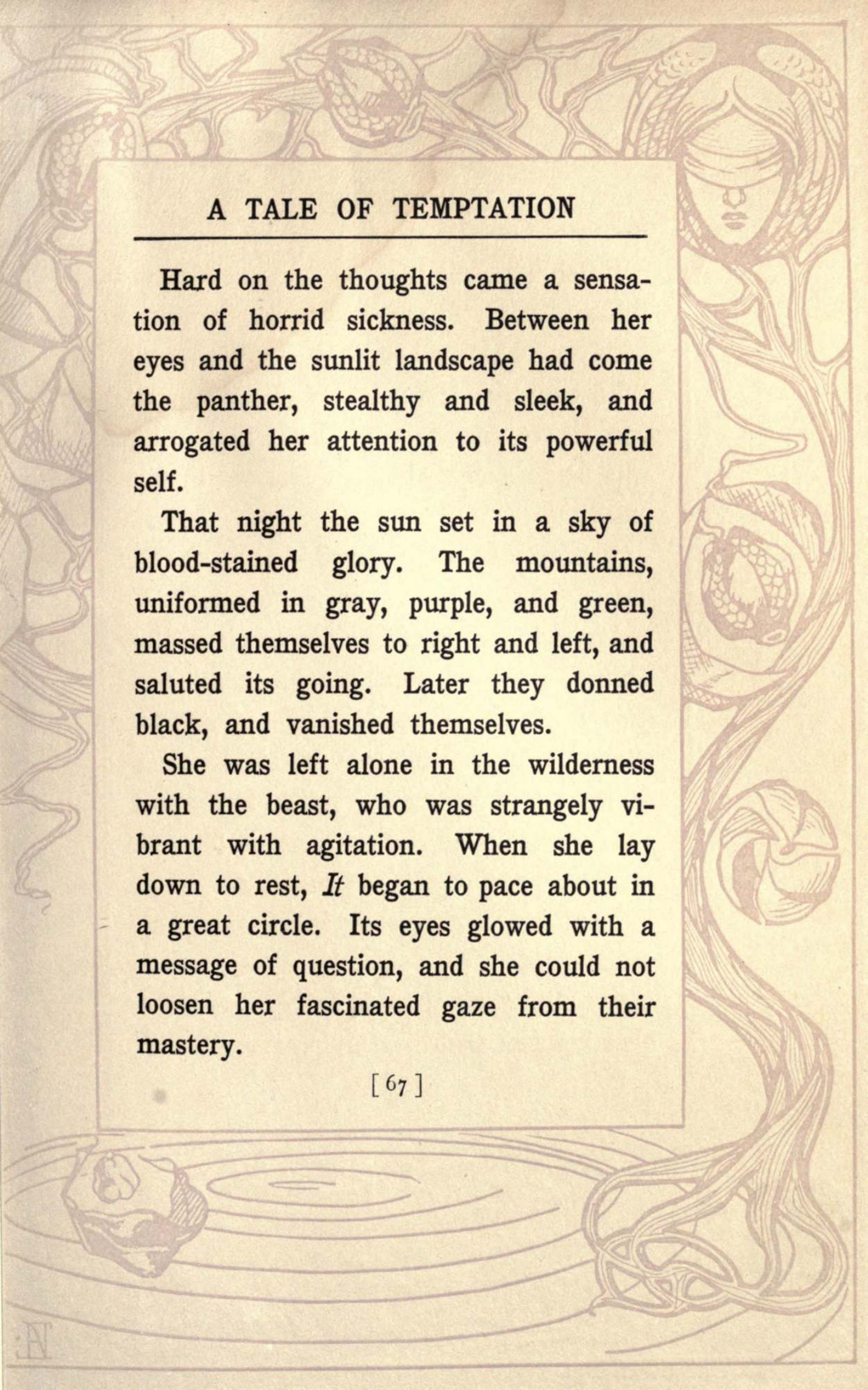
The page is framed by a decorative border. On the left side, there is a vertical illustration of a woman's face with her eyes closed, surrounded by intricate floral and vine-like patterns. The top and right sides also feature similar decorative elements, including what appears to be a stylized flower or fruit. At the bottom of the page, there are concentric circular lines, possibly representing ripples in water, and a small, detailed illustration of a flower or fruit on the right side.

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as happily there as if it had never raged along that way,—a danger, a torrent.

All day the valley echoed to the musical chimes of the cow-bells. The herds went wandering here and there, and nothing could be more picturesque than their grouping as they paused by the silvery stream, the desultory forest trees forming an uneven background of intermingling greens. The birches scattered all the lower slopes, the pines rose tier on tier behind them. Above the highest range of pines the gray mountain crags spread dark. And then the snowy peaks. And then the sky.

“Our lives seem very little in the face of all this,” she said; “and yet the sky is not wide enough nor all earth’s beauty bright enough to measure the joy that might have been.”



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

Hard on the thoughts came a sensation of horrid sickness. Between her eyes and the sunlit landscape had come the panther, stealthy and sleek, and arrogated her attention to its powerful self.

That night the sun set in a sky of blood-stained glory. The mountains, uniformed in gray, purple, and green, massed themselves to right and left, and saluted its going. Later they donned black, and vanished themselves.

She was left alone in the wilderness with the beast, who was strangely vibrant with agitation. When she lay down to rest, *It* began to pace about in a great circle. Its eyes glowed with a message of question, and she could not loosen her fascinated gaze from their mastery.

THE PANTHER

“Behold me,” they proclaimed. “Know me. I am what lies beyond, beneath, behind all Life. I am Life itself. Who can live and not live? Who are you to set your face against me? Who was he to declare himself regnant in my stead?”

She shook and stared. And shook again. But might not cease to stare.

Around and around her tracked the Thing. It was panther-size now, full grown, large, cruelly and splendidly shaped. There was the pride of power in its sweeping, gliding gait. It circled, and, as it circled, its eyes never for one second loosed their fastening on hers. “I am Life!” they declared over and over again.

Something in her passionately voiced the question that said itself in her riven heart.

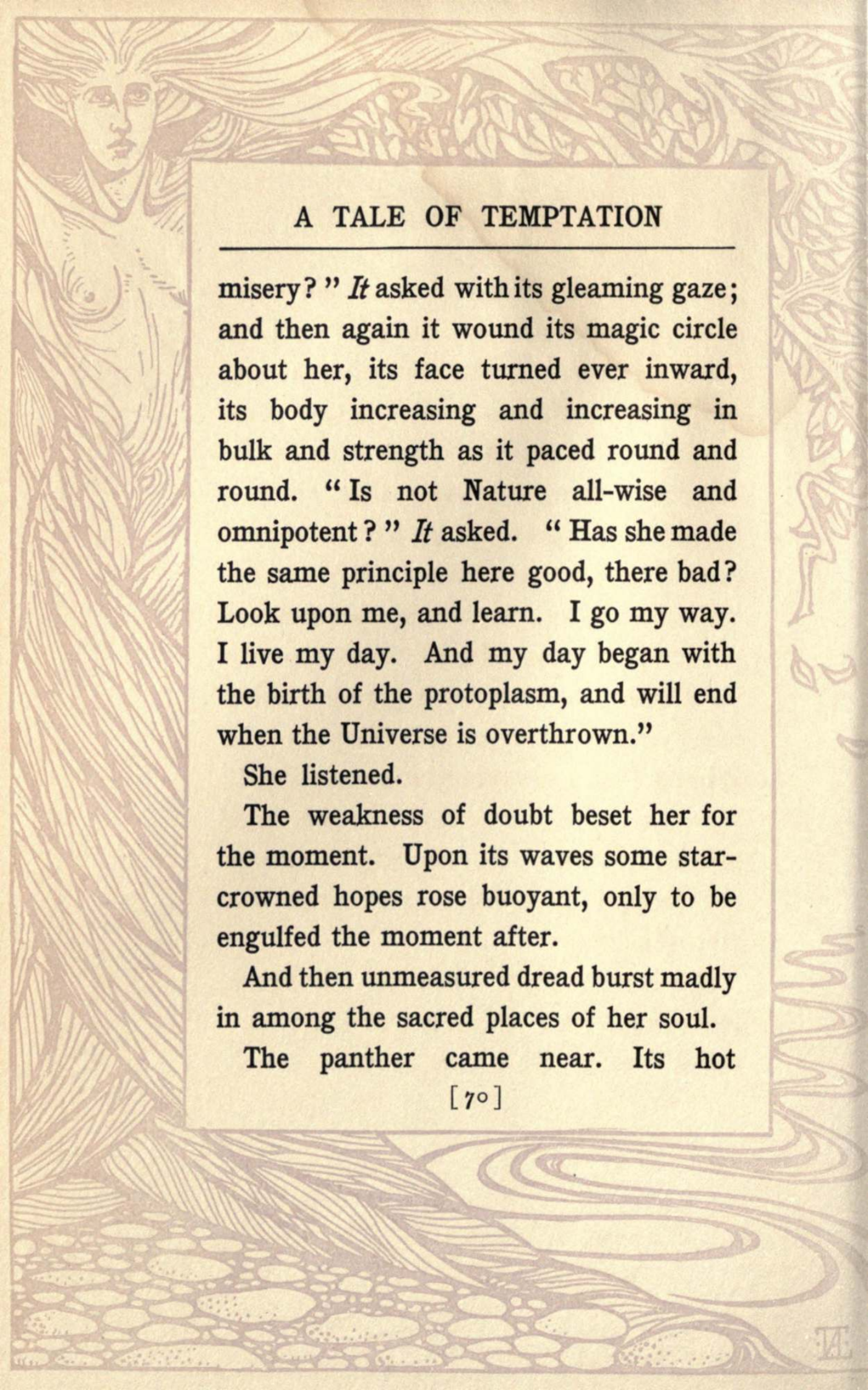
A TALE OF TEMPTATION

The answer glinted in a slit sliver of black that shot athwart the yellow pupils. "You,—you are Death. You are naught but Death. Nature and Life are one. What opposes Nature is one with Death. The world being the world, that which is but itself and promises no further is dead already. Is not that the truth of all Being? Is not the law of the world the Truth—the only truth—of life? Have you the right to doubt what each spring teaches and every autumn learns? What is—Is. What is—I am. Can you gainsay me? Try!"

It ceased moving, and reared itself quickly upward. For a single instant she thought it willed to leap upon her. Her mind reeled. . . .

But it only sank back on all fours, and grew,—grew there before her eyes.

"Where is the virtue in your double



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

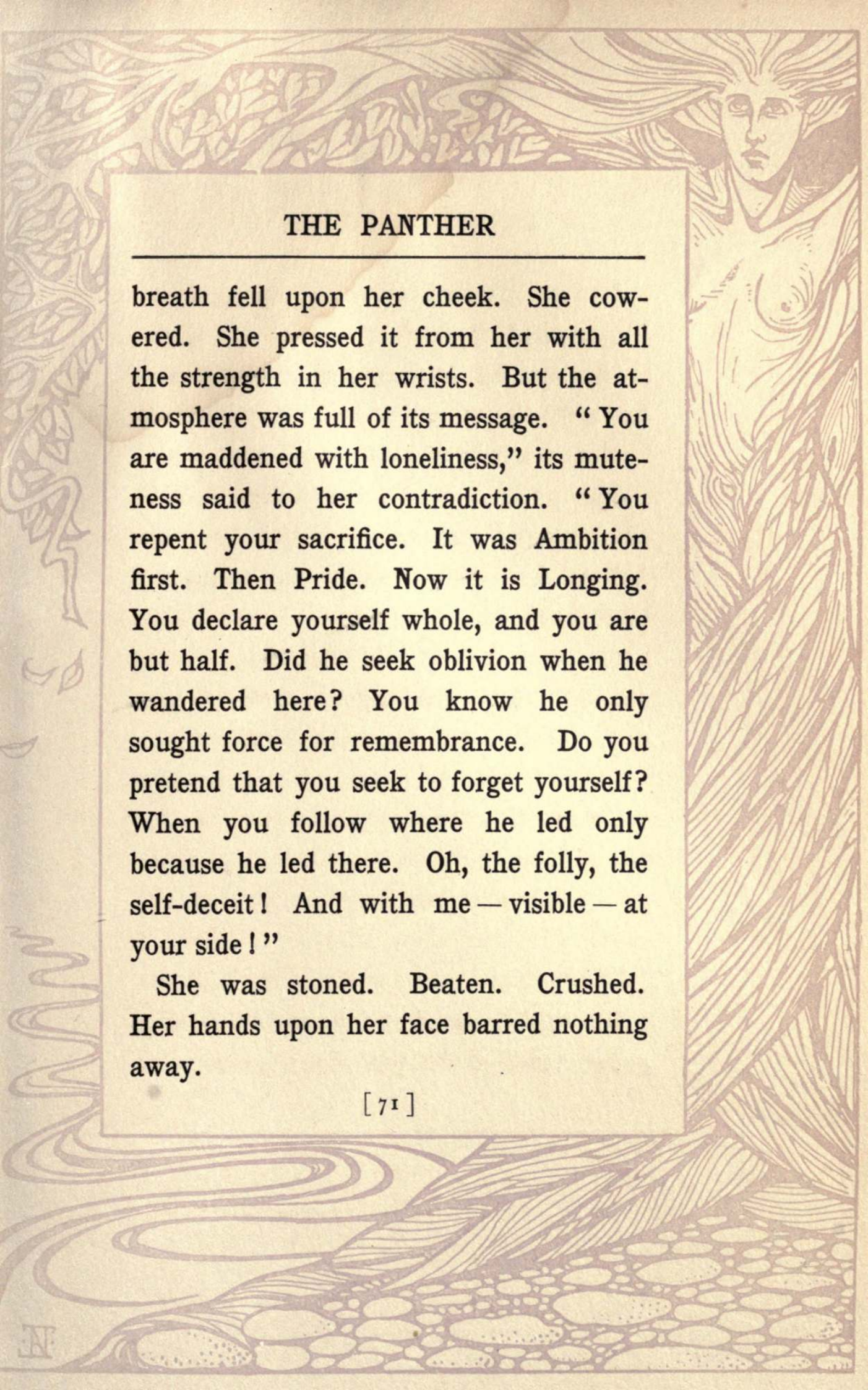
misery? ” *It* asked with its gleaming gaze; and then again it wound its magic circle about her, its face turned ever inward, its body increasing and increasing in bulk and strength as it paced round and round. “Is not Nature all-wise and omnipotent? ” *It* asked. “Has she made the same principle here good, there bad? Look upon me, and learn. I go my way. I live my day. And my day began with the birth of the protoplasm, and will end when the Universe is overthrown.”

She listened.

The weakness of doubt beset her for the moment. Upon its waves some star-crowned hopes rose buoyant, only to be engulfed the moment after.

And then unmeasured dread burst madly in among the sacred places of her soul.

The panther came near. Its hot



THE PANTHER

breath fell upon her cheek. She cowered. She pressed it from her with all the strength in her wrists. But the atmosphere was full of its message. "You are maddened with loneliness," its muteness said to her contradiction. "You repent your sacrifice. It was Ambition first. Then Pride. Now it is Longing. You declare yourself whole, and you are but half. Did he seek oblivion when he wandered here? You know he only sought force for remembrance. Do you pretend that you seek to forget yourself? When you follow where he led only because he led there. Oh, the folly, the self-deceit! And with me — visible — at your side!"

She was stoned. Beaten. Crushed. Her hands upon her face barred nothing away.



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It was unbearable. It passed all human endurance.

She sprang to her feet. Flight was her only thought.

But where?

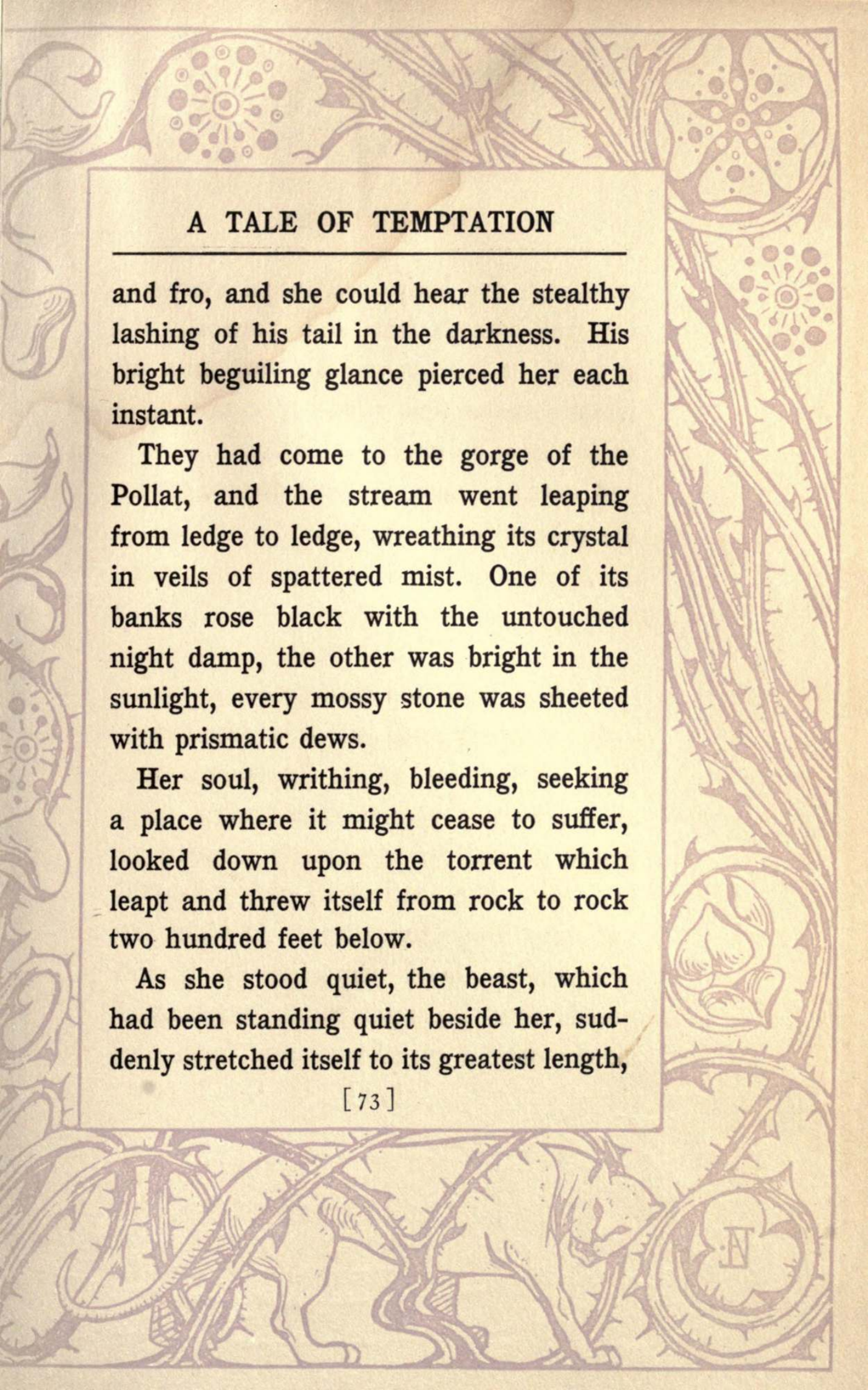
The panther was there and would be everywhere, and the struggle he symbolized was in her soul, and could not be left behind.

She no longer told herself, "I am strong." She no longer promised herself, "Never, no, never."

Instead she whispered with white lips, "I fear."

And feared.

In the days that followed the beast grew steadily. In the night he went to



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

and fro, and she could hear the stealthy lashing of his tail in the darkness. His bright beguiling glance pierced her each instant.

They had come to the gorge of the Pollat, and the stream went leaping from ledge to ledge, wreathing its crystal in veils of spattered mist. One of its banks rose black with the untouched night damp, the other was bright in the sunlight, every mossy stone was sheeted with prismatic dews.

Her soul, writhing, bleeding, seeking a place where it might cease to suffer, looked down upon the torrent which leapt and threw itself from rock to rock two hundred feet below.

As she stood quiet, the beast, which had been standing quiet beside her, suddenly stretched itself to its greatest length,

The page is framed by a decorative border. On the left side, there is a vertical illustration of a woman's face with her eyes closed, surrounded by intricate, flowing lines that resemble hair or vines. At the top and bottom of the page, there are stylized floral or geometric patterns. The overall style is reminiscent of early 20th-century decorative arts.

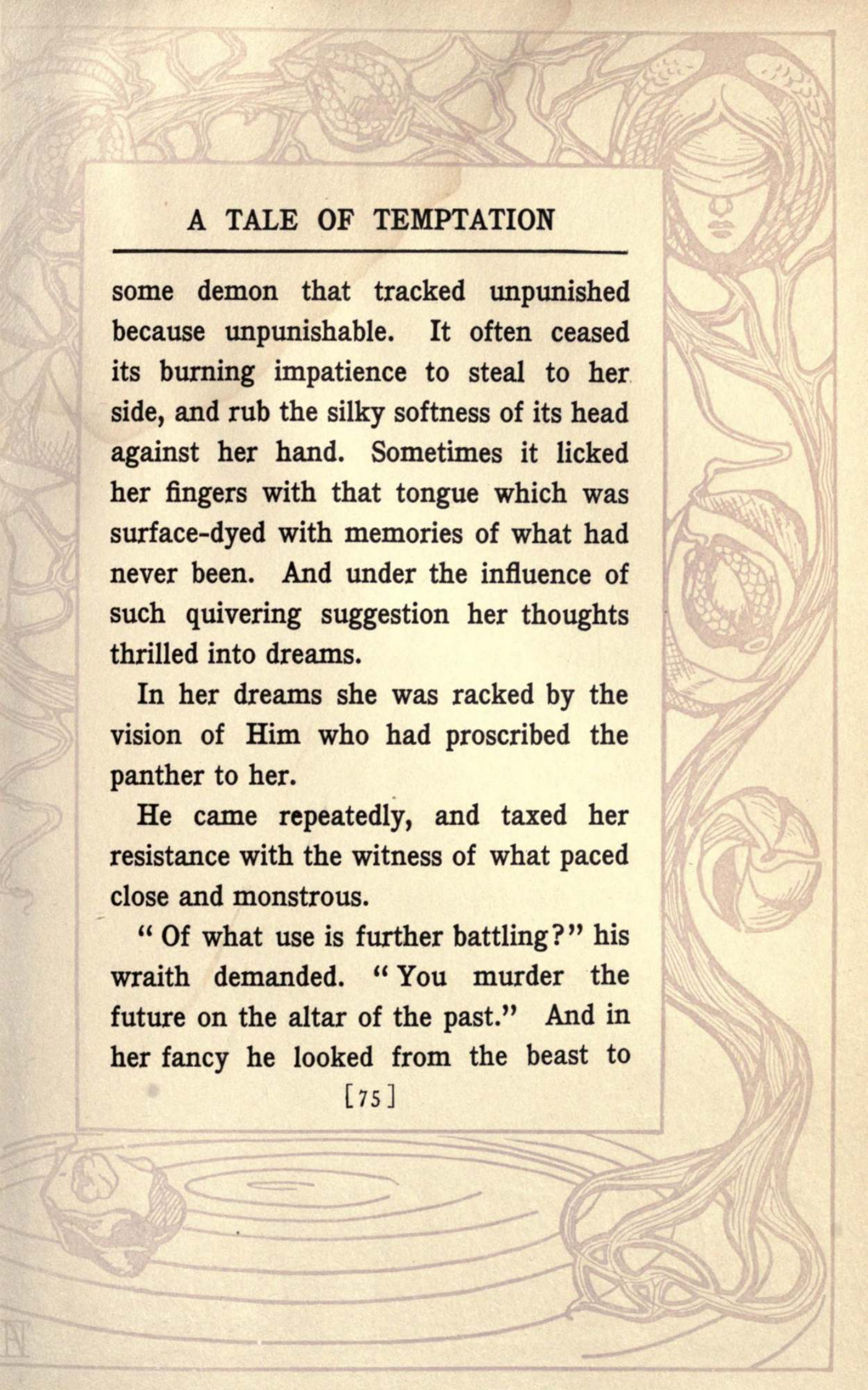
THE PANTHER

swinging its body downward between its well-braced feet and yawning its strength in her face with a vast show of ivory menace that suddenly ended in a snap whose prophecy was awful.

A new and curious flame danced red in the gold of those eyeballs.

“I fear,” she had confessed.

She feared, and yet was fascinated. The omniscience of its knowledge was an everlasting magnet to her spirit. She feared it, and yet fared daily forward on her way. She loathed it, and yet could not resist its potent power. At night she propped her head upon her hand, and noted how its restlessness augmented slowly until it raged back and forth like



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

some demon that tracked unpunished because unpunishable. It often ceased its burning impatience to steal to her side, and rub the silky softness of its head against her hand. Sometimes it licked her fingers with that tongue which was surface-dyed with memories of what had never been. And under the influence of such quivering suggestion her thoughts thrilled into dreams.

In her dreams she was racked by the vision of Him who had proscribed the panther to her.

He came repeatedly, and taxed her resistance with the witness of what paced close and monstrous.

“Of what use is further battling?” his wraith demanded. “You murder the future on the altar of the past.” And in her fancy he looked from the beast to

THE PANTHER

her eyes, which glowed violet behind their drooping lashes, and then back to the beast; and in her shame she strangled, and woke.

It took all her self-control to impress herself with what had really been. A parting forever and a nature of such mould that sooner than break its word it had passed her by on the mountain side without one spoken word. Prayer to the panther were safer than hope based upon a possible alteration of such purpose.

“Shall I be less strong?” she asked herself again and again.

So the day came on which she and *It* ceased to wander in the wilderness, and sought again the world of bed and board.

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

She came to Constance on the Bodensee at last.

Her maid exclaimed in fright, and her mirror echoed the cry. It was a colorless face, in which the eyes burnt purple with purple shadows under them. Something ethereal had touched her form. Her hands appeared transparent. Life and flesh and food had lost their place as entities to her.

But the panther had thriven truly. It passed all measures of its kind, and bordered on the lion-kingdom. When she was seated before her toilette for the maid to dress her hair, its head as it sat on the floor was on a level with hers. Its gaze grew more luminous each hour. It never for one moment slept. Forever awake, she felt herself forever watched, forever threatened. Not that it seemed ferocious:



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on the contrary, its every movement bespoke a species of restrained tenderness. But the more menace then.

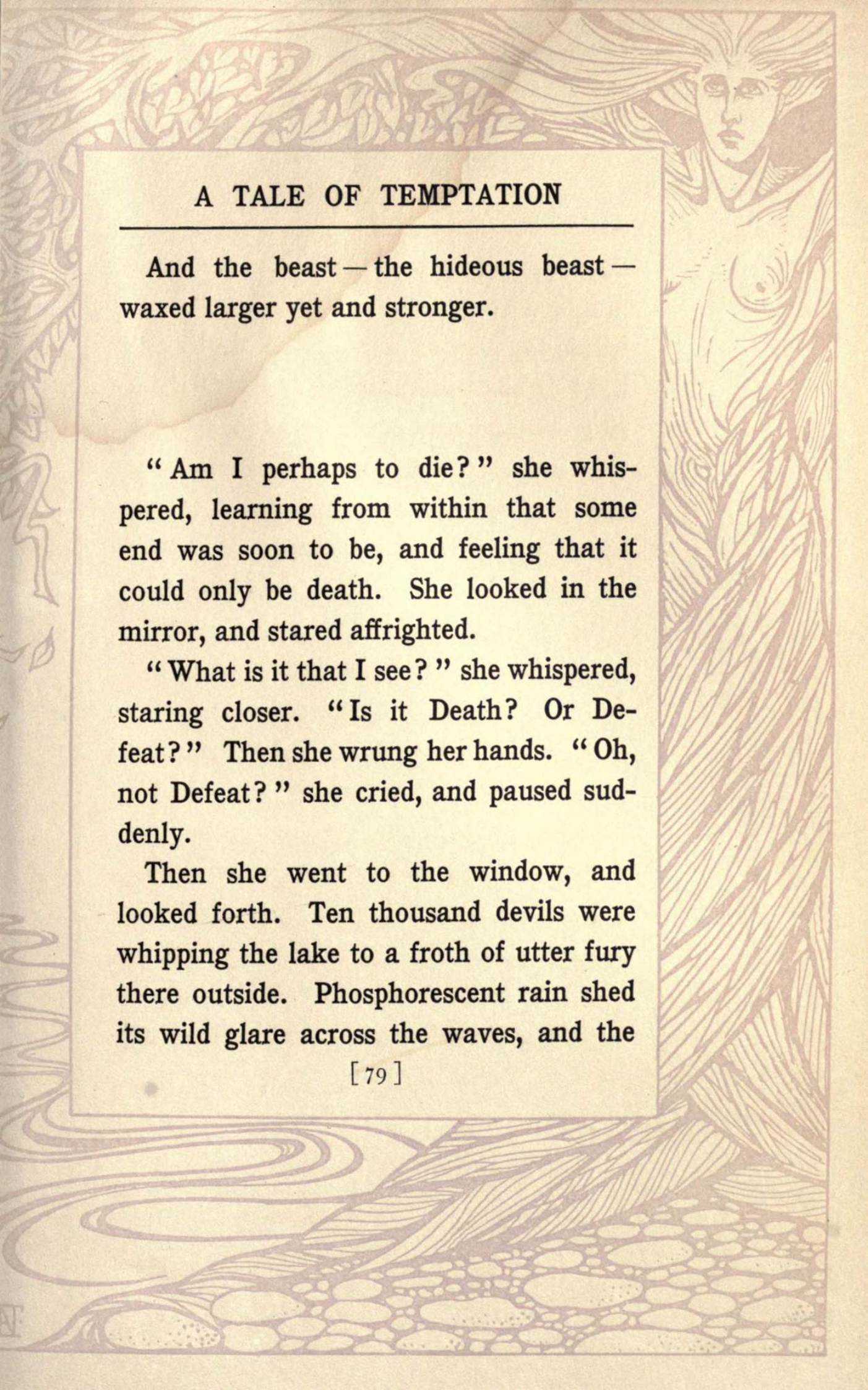
At night her fevered rest was harshly broken in upon by the sudden ramping of its rearing up beside the bed. Its claws would sink deep into the silken coverlet, the muscles on its mighty shoulders would swell like whipcord, and the head—that great feline head—would sway above her, and crush out all her courage with the golden prescience of its eyes.

An end must be, she knew; but what?

A day must dawn; but when?

The conflict was appalling in its continuity, but where there is neither rest nor rebate humanity must surrender in the end.

She began to falter under the burden.



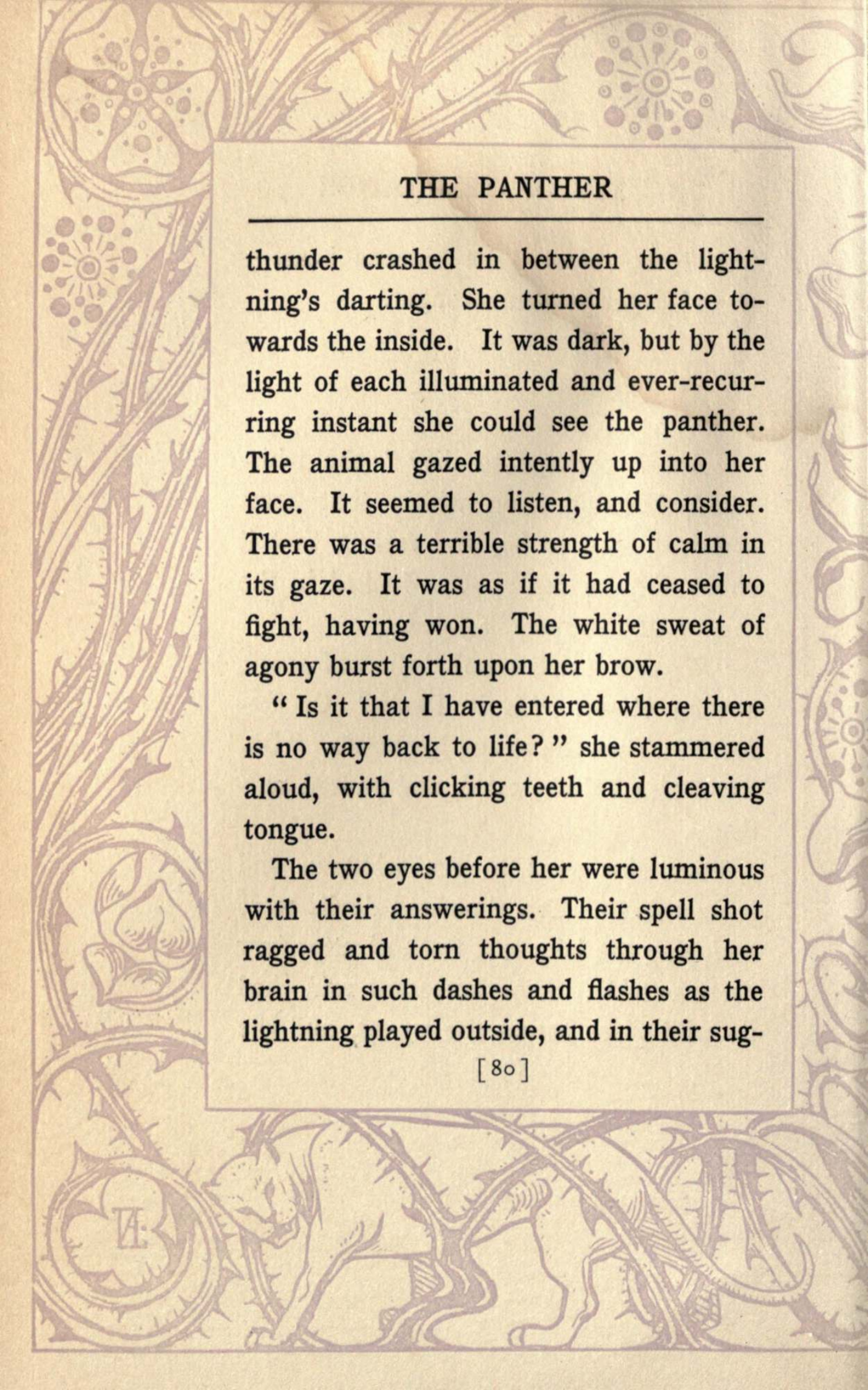
A TALE OF TEMPTATION

And the beast—the hideous beast—
waxed larger yet and stronger.

“Am I perhaps to die?” she whispered, learning from within that some end was soon to be, and feeling that it could only be death. She looked in the mirror, and stared affrighted.

“What is it that I see?” she whispered, staring closer. “Is it Death? Or Defeat?” Then she wrung her hands. “Oh, not Defeat?” she cried, and paused suddenly.

Then she went to the window, and looked forth. Ten thousand devils were whipping the lake to a froth of utter fury there outside. Phosphorescent rain shed its wild glare across the waves, and the

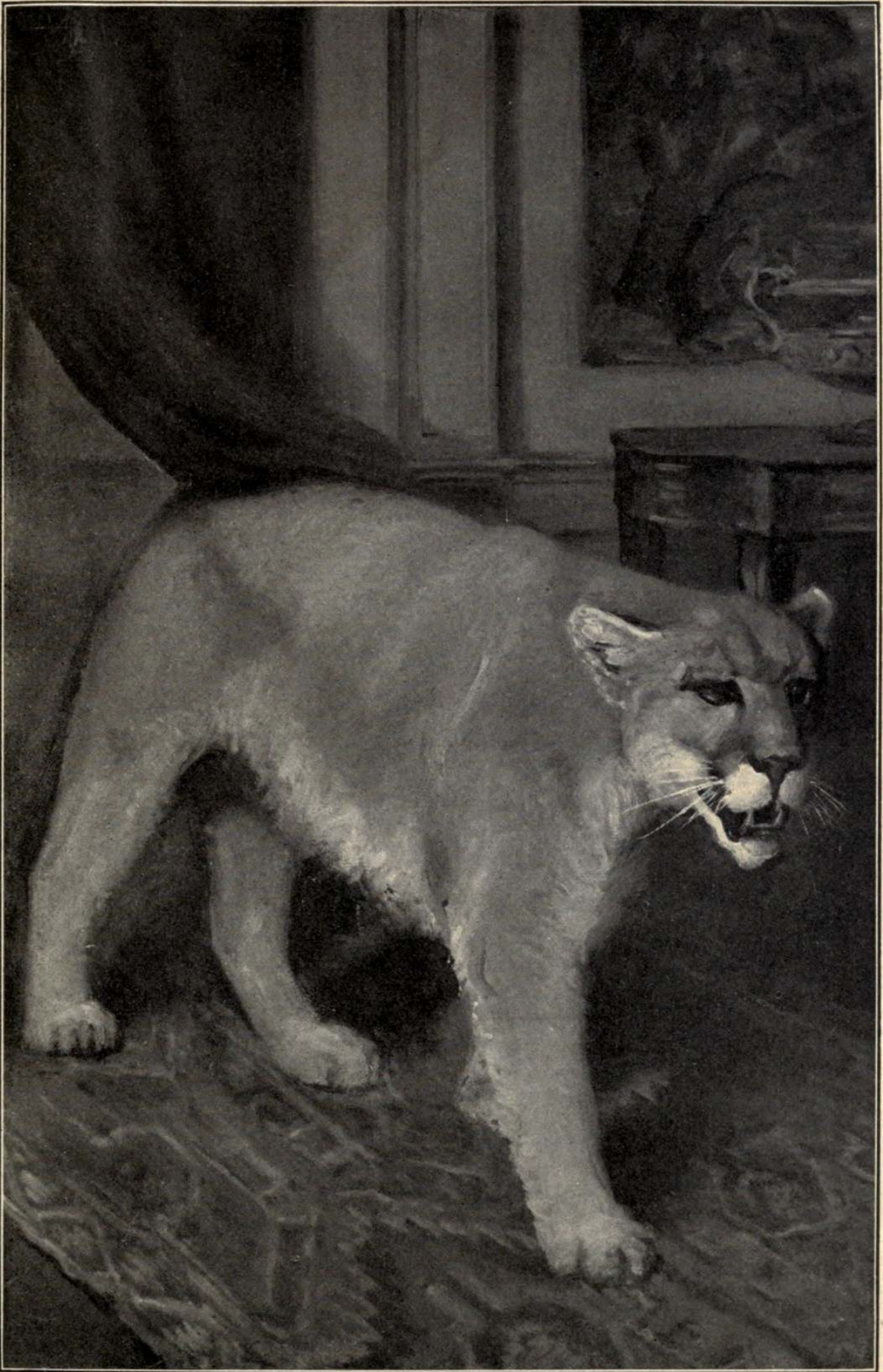


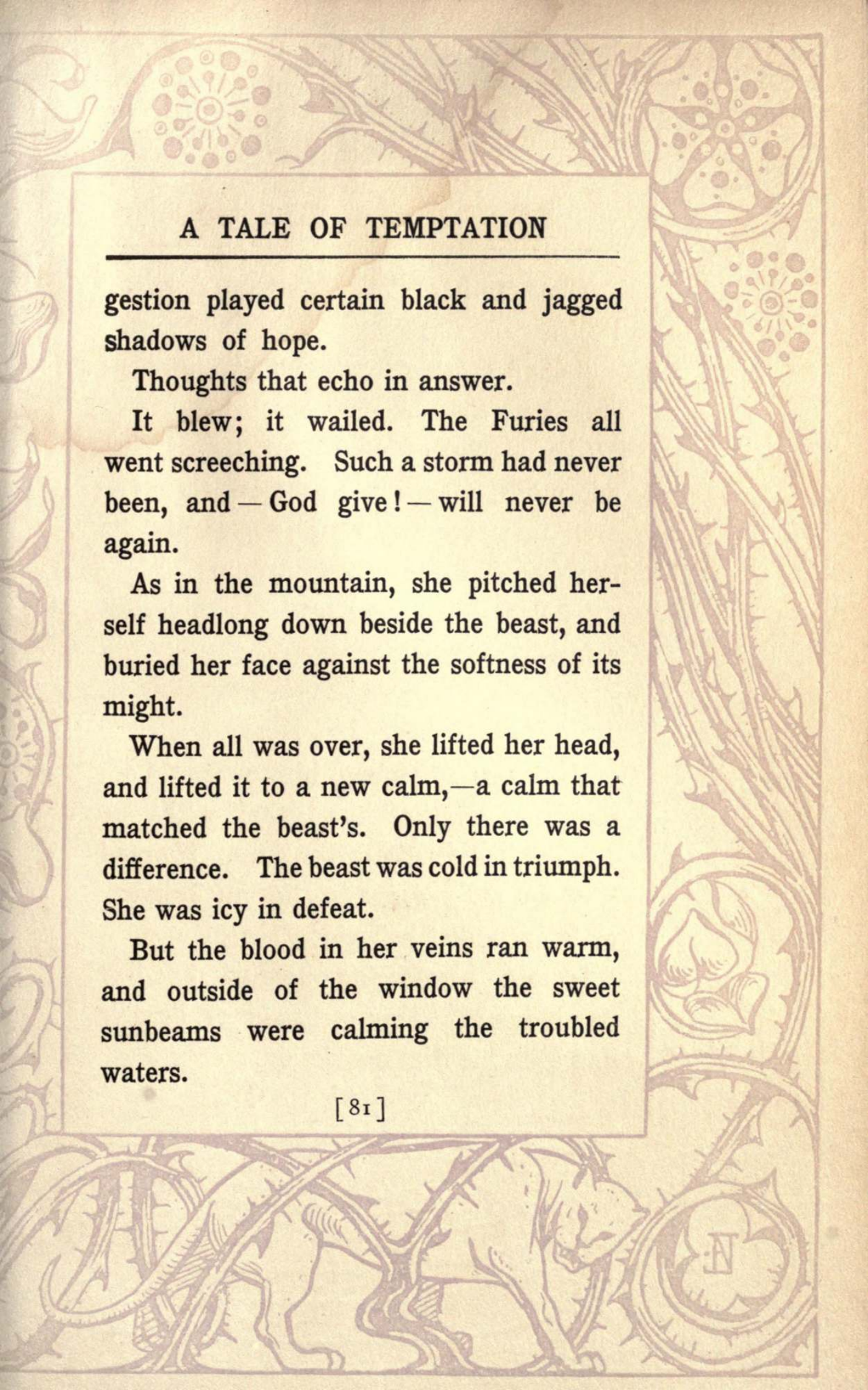
THE PANTHER

thunder crashed in between the lightning's darting. She turned her face towards the inside. It was dark, but by the light of each illuminated and ever-recurring instant she could see the panther. The animal gazed intently up into her face. It seemed to listen, and consider. There was a terrible strength of calm in its gaze. It was as if it had ceased to fight, having won. The white sweat of agony burst forth upon her brow.

“Is it that I have entered where there is no way back to life?” she stammered aloud, with clicking teeth and cleaving tongue.

The two eyes before her were luminous with their answerings. Their spell shot ragged and torn thoughts through her brain in such dashes and flashes as the lightning played outside, and in their sug-





A TALE OF TEMPTATION

gestion played certain black and jagged shadows of hope.

Thoughts that echo in answer.

It blew; it wailed. The Furies all went screeching. Such a storm had never been, and — God give! — will never be again.

As in the mountain, she pitched herself headlong down beside the beast, and buried her face against the softness of its might.

When all was over, she lifted her head, and lifted it to a new calm,—a calm that matched the beast's. Only there was a difference. The beast was cold in triumph. She was icy in defeat.

But the blood in her veins ran warm, and outside of the window the sweet sunbeams were calming the troubled waters.



THE PANTHER

The panther stood apart, and shook itself.

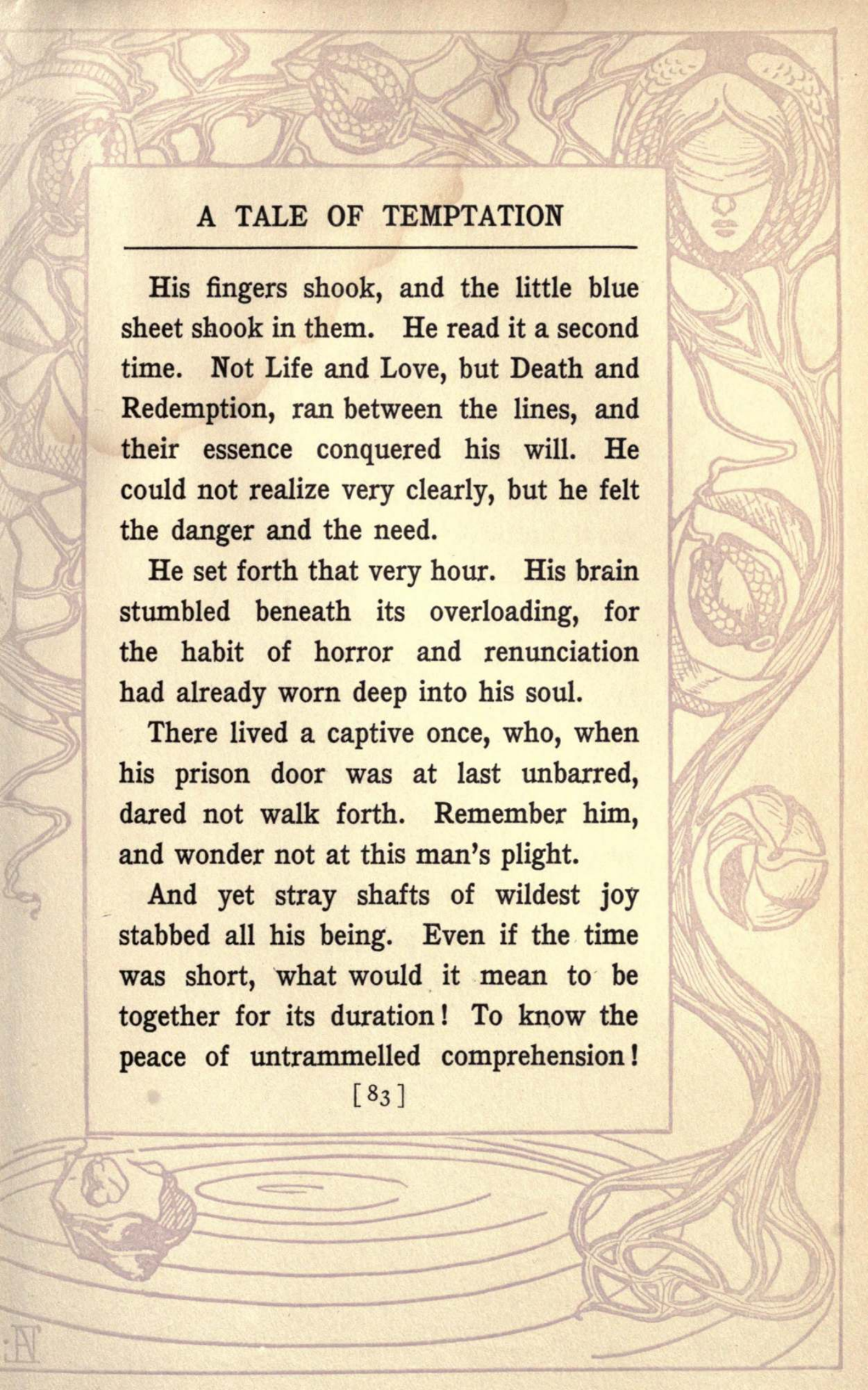
“Shall I dare?” she thought, even as she knew that she was decided.

She glanced furtively at it. It was enormous,—larger than the largest monarch that ever ruled the jungle; and its eyes were molten with meaning.

“I dare anything now,” she said with a fast-beating heart.

Her message found him in the Carpathians, whither the angel with the scourge had finally driven him. He read it alone in a forest walk, all brilliant with autumnal splendor.

It was bewildering because he had never hoped. The certitude of despair had been his firm conviction.



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

His fingers shook, and the little blue sheet shook in them. He read it a second time. Not Life and Love, but Death and Redemption, ran between the lines, and their essence conquered his will. He could not realize very clearly, but he felt the danger and the need.

He set forth that very hour. His brain stumbled beneath its overloading, for the habit of horror and renunciation had already worn deep into his soul.

There lived a captive once, who, when his prison door was at last unbarred, dared not walk forth. Remember him, and wonder not at this man's plight.

And yet stray shafts of wildest joy stabbed all his being. Even if the time was short, what would it mean to be together for its duration! To know the peace of untrammelled comprehension!

THE PANTHER

To choose the way the final hours should lead——

His mind grew dizzy with striving to conceive, to imagine, to adjust——

Despair had been his for so long——

The journey was interminable. At sunset the train whirled out along a river,—the Danube. The great Abbaye, where thousands upon thousands of dead men lived down the sorrows of their lives, lay silent there beyond. When it was past, the splendid curves of hills and valleys swept on an axis of fading glory for a little, and then the night crouched over all.

He did not sleep. He could not sleep. Too much was passing near and far. But he was weary,—oh, intensely so!—and towards dawn the strain began to overcome him. And then he slept.

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

The train went on.

Oh, the hideous chill of the awakening at dawn! The Orient Express was rushing along the border of the Tyrolese mountains, and every mountain rose up stark and gray-granite rough around him. They charged, head-on, beside the train, whirled on their bases, and disappeared behind. He folded his arms upon his bosom, and caught his lip hard in his teeth.

A heavy pall of vague presentiment had come about him, forcing cognizance of certain direful chancings which might well arrive. He canvassed them all with an ever-increasing dread.

A revocation of the edict of surrender?
Uprisal and resistance?
And failing strength?



THE PANTHER

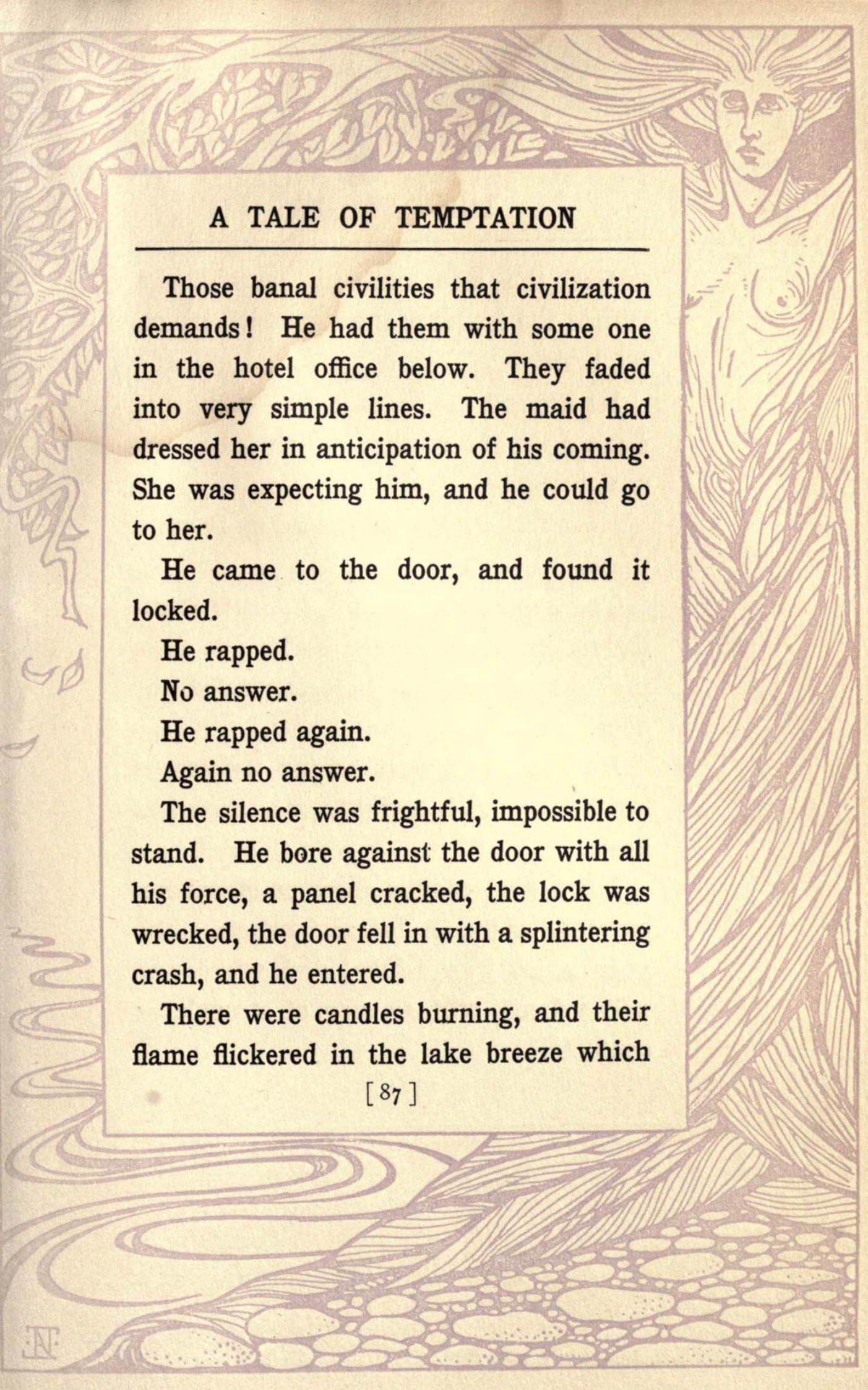
The haunting whispers clung in his weariness. After a while they spoke aloud. And then cried wildly. Above the roaring of the train their foreboding pealed.

He could not quiet their resistance. A hand of lead was laid upon his heart. No longer able to deny the potency, he could only brace himself for what was to be, and wait.

At midnight the end came.

He hurried from the station. It was but a step to the hotel.

His soul shivered. Now! now! The end! the end! He knew not what was to be, but all that was within him assured him that it was not to be joy.

A decorative border surrounds the text. At the top right, a woman's face with long, flowing hair is depicted. The border is filled with intricate, stylized foliage and patterns. The text is contained within a rectangular frame.

A TALE OF TEMPTATION

Those banal civilities that civilization demands! He had them with some one in the hotel office below. They faded into very simple lines. The maid had dressed her in anticipation of his coming. She was expecting him, and he could go to her.

He came to the door, and found it locked.

He rapped.

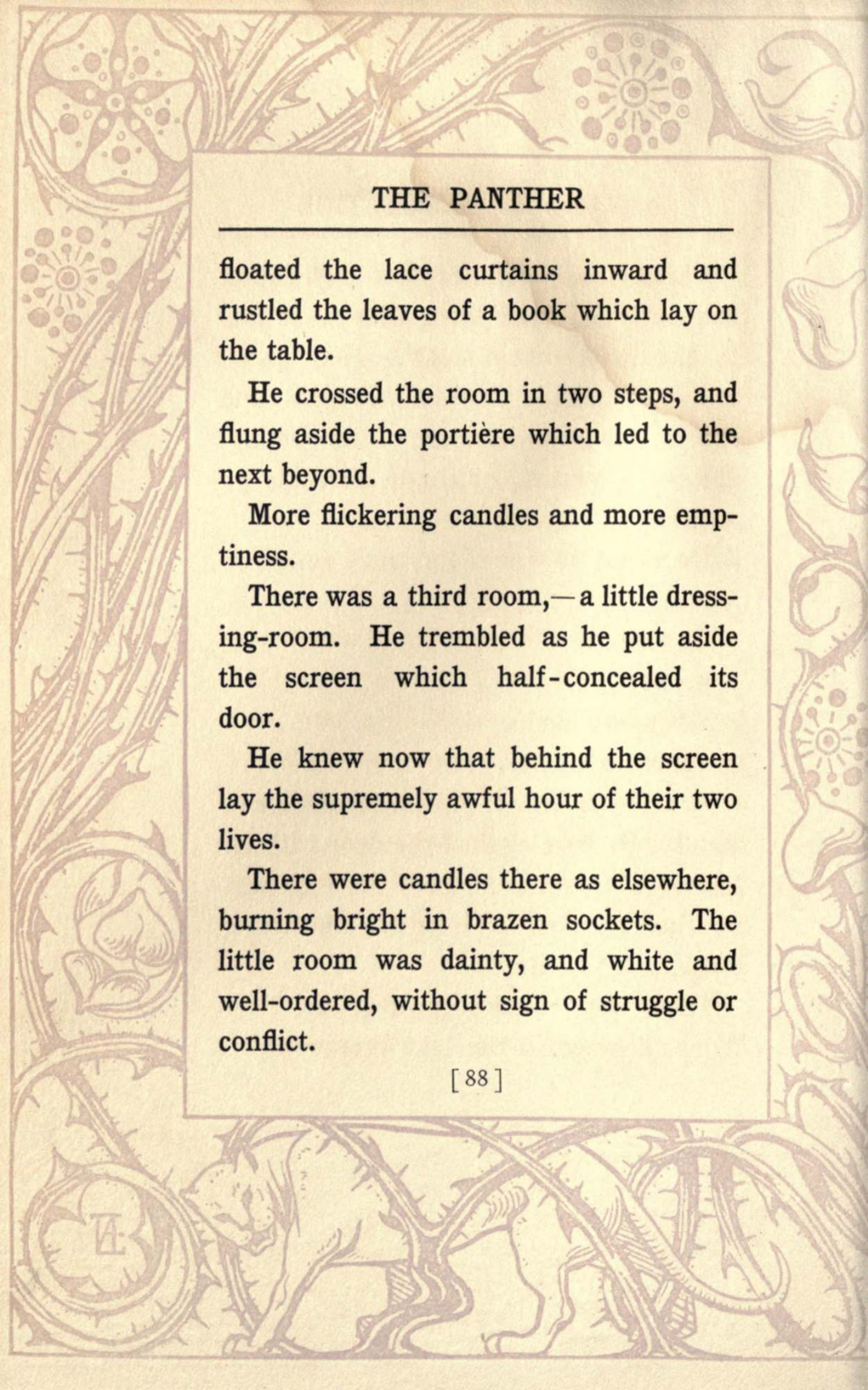
No answer.

He rapped again.

Again no answer.

The silence was frightful, impossible to stand. He bore against the door with all his force, a panel cracked, the lock was wrecked, the door fell in with a splintering crash, and he entered.

There were candles burning, and their flame flickered in the lake breeze which

The page is framed by a decorative border featuring stylized floral motifs and thorny, vine-like patterns. The central text is enclosed in a rectangular frame.

THE PANTHER

floated the lace curtains inward and rustled the leaves of a book which lay on the table.

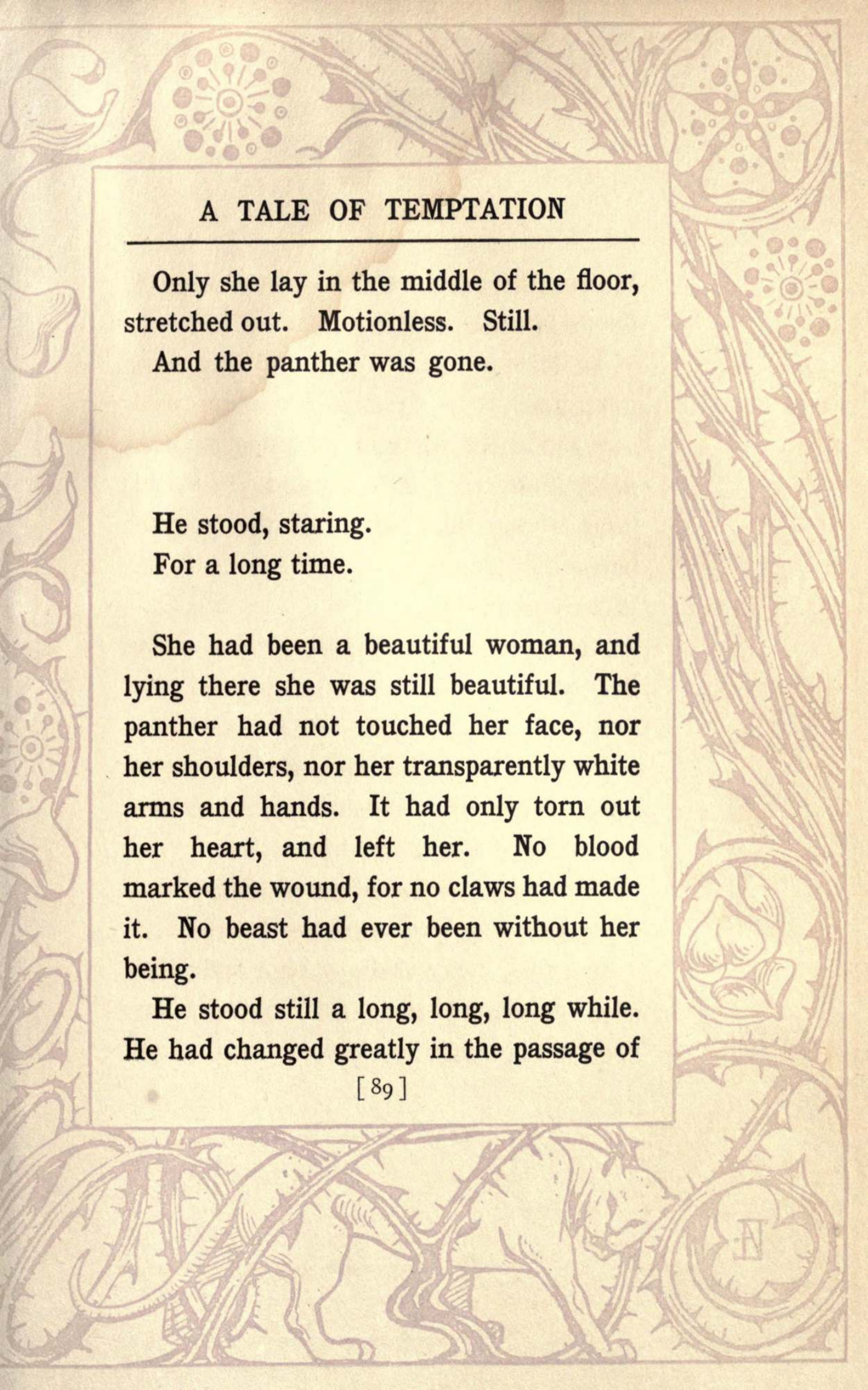
He crossed the room in two steps, and flung aside the portière which led to the next beyond.

More flickering candles and more emptiness.

There was a third room,—a little dressing-room. He trembled as he put aside the screen which half-concealed its door.

He knew now that behind the screen lay the supremely awful hour of their two lives.

There were candles there as elsewhere, burning bright in brazen sockets. The little room was dainty, and white and well-ordered, without sign of struggle or conflict.



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

Only she lay in the middle of the floor,
stretched out. Motionless. Still.
And the panther was gone.

He stood, staring.
For a long time.

She had been a beautiful woman, and lying there she was still beautiful. The panther had not touched her face, nor her shoulders, nor her transparently white arms and hands. It had only torn out her heart, and left her. No blood marked the wound, for no claws had made it. No beast had ever been without her being.

He stood still a long, long, long while.
He had changed greatly in the passage of

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THE PANTHER

the summer, and he changed yet more as he stood there, looking down.

At last he knelt, and laid his hand upon her.

“Tell me,” he said in tones of utter need, “oh, tell me — you and I — in this hour — after all — after all the anguish borne and temptation overthrown — is this Victory — or Defeat?”

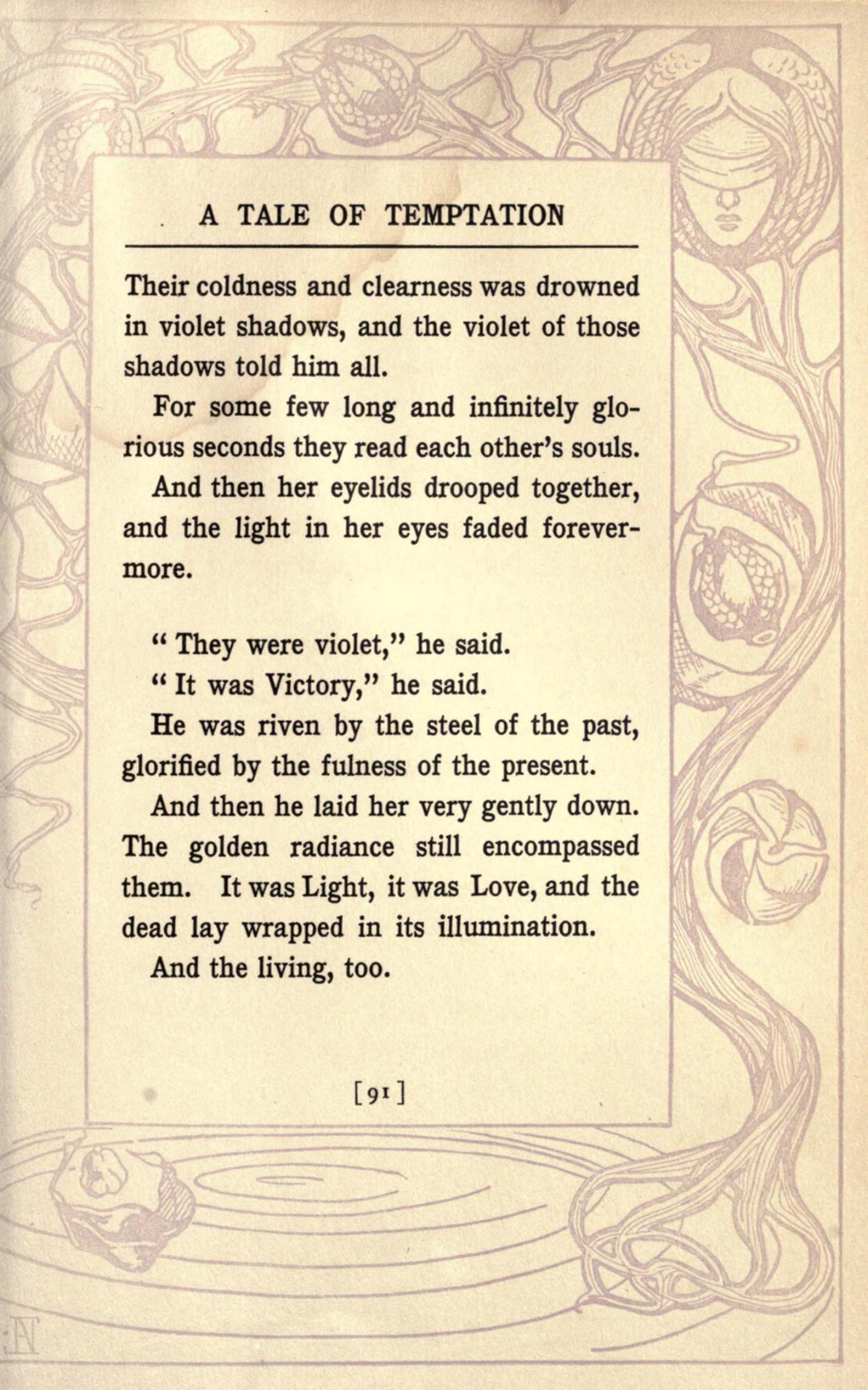
She moved ever so slightly. She opened her lips.

But no sound came.

He took her in his arms and raised her upon his bosom. He bent his face to hers, and his lips kissed her lips at last.

The room was flooded then with light, — a gleaming, golden radiance.

Her eyes — her whilom blue and silver eyes — unclosed their lids, and for one fleeting instant he looked into them.



A TALE OF TEMPTATION

Their coldness and clearness was drowned in violet shadows, and the violet of those shadows told him all.

For some few long and infinitely glorious seconds they read each other's souls.

And then her eyelids drooped together, and the light in her eyes faded forevermore.

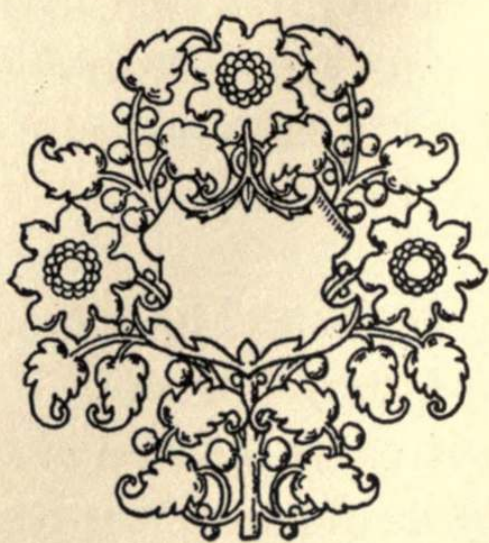
“They were violet,” he said.

“It was Victory,” he said.

He was riven by the steel of the past, glorified by the fulness of the present.

And then he laid her very gently down. The golden radiance still encompassed them. It was Light, it was Love, and the dead lay wrapped in its illumination.

And the living, too.





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