

THE DUELLISTS

To Norah Moore

WHEN Tantalus talked, Jove was angered, He cursed, He
Plunged him in Hades. In torture immersed, he
 Secretly laughed at the wrath of the Gods ;
For, it chanced, he was not at all hungry or thirsty.

So now, are you sure that you know how to use me ?
It is certain the game is to win or to lose me ?

 It is you that stake all—I shall win at the odds !
All I risk is one thing—will you bore or amuse me ?

The god in the garden am I with my gross
Worn mouth, whose indulgence hath made it morose.

 I paw your soft flesh, and you waken a mood
To lip you, to strip you, to study you close.

You are cunning, I know—you stand out for your price !
But to cheat you is all I have left for a vice.

 Then learn! if you try to backgammon the devil
The devil is sure to have loaded the dice.

Just this! you allow, you forbid, you excite me
As you think just enough to enslave me ; you slight me
 As you think may just pique me ; a temperance revel !
As if such a red little beetle could bite me !

I see, and I laugh in my sleeve at, the game.
I have played it myself—the rules are the same.

 But it cannot be played on an expert, my pretty !
You forget that the Jinn are the children of flame !

Without and beyond and above I abide.
Every move I foresee ; I foretell every tide,

The eclipse and the comet, the oiled and the gritty,
I know it by heart—and the balance beside!

Come close! let me suck out your lips as in languor!
Stand off! while I cringe at your towering anger!

I'll grip you and shake you and weep at your knees—
Mere flames of the foil-play, its clatter and clangour!

Your one joy—your pride in your cleverness, maybe!
My one joy—you think you are gulling a gaby,
And at last, when you strike to the heart—if you please!
I riposte with the lightning-flash—“Pens'-tu, mon Bébé?”

You fool—I will ruin you, turn you adrift,
Kick you and spit—you are done! you may shift
For yourself as girls do—on the streets, on the quays,
Till no sot will touch you for a crust or a gift.

And yet in a sense you have won—for you played
All the beauty and passion and wit of a maid.
You are damned: that is great! you drained life to the
lees!
And I—I shall yawn at the end, I'm afraid.

When Christ was in hell, Satan came—how he sneered!
“How's this for a God” and he laughed at His beard:
“After Heaven? and Palestine?”—meant to offend.
How mild the reply of the Saviour appeared!

“Between heaven and hell it were easy to choose:
These ashes are scarce worth celestial dews.
But at least—if you must have it! Satan, my friend,
Your hell may be hot—but I do bar the Jews!”