

The LOST WORD

WHAT IS LIFE WORTH IF YOU GAIN
THE WORLD BUT LOSE YOUR SOUL?



HENRY VAN DYKE

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THE LOST WORD
A CHRISTMAS LEGEND
OF LONG AGO

by

HENRY VAN DYKE

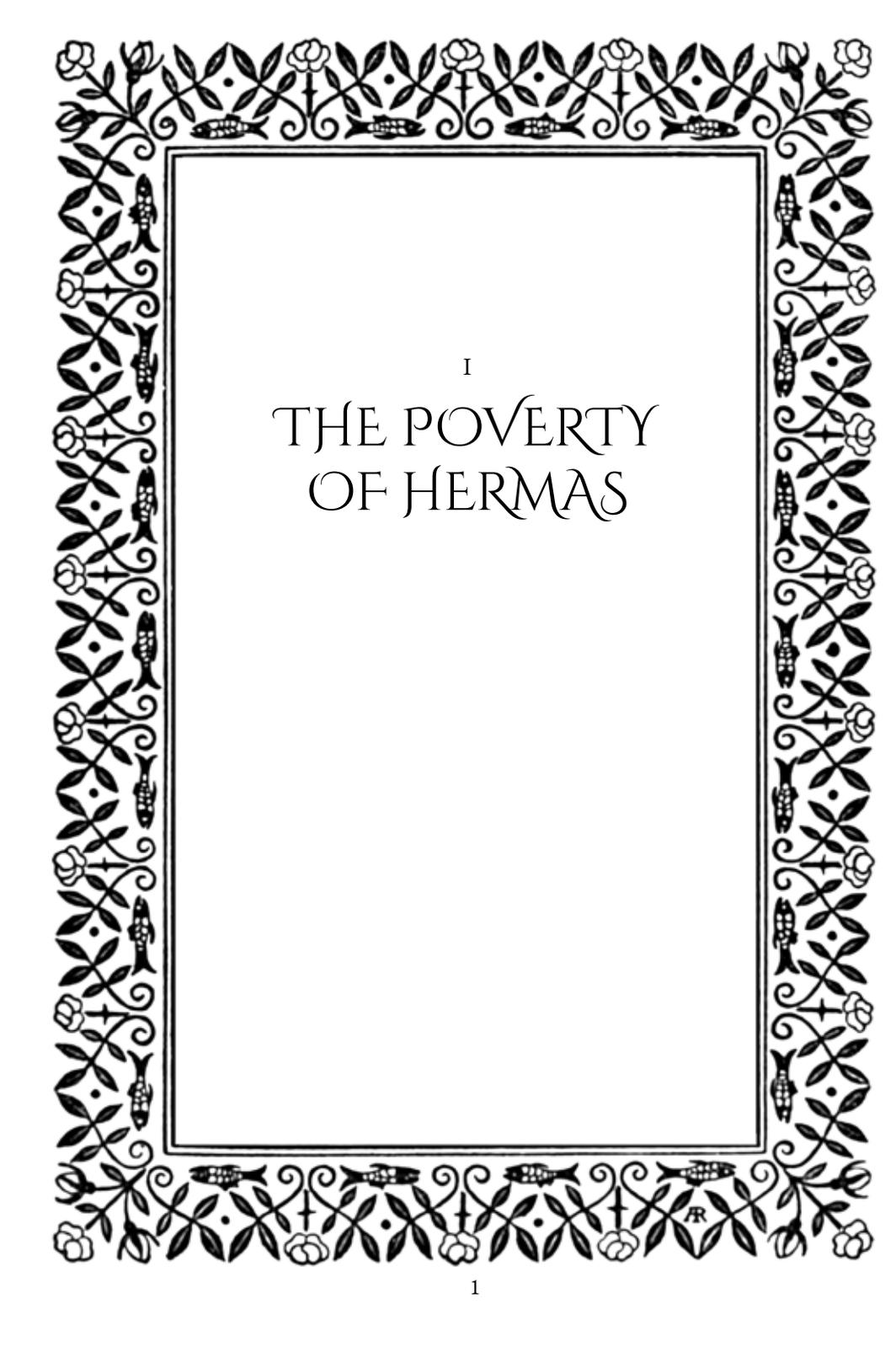




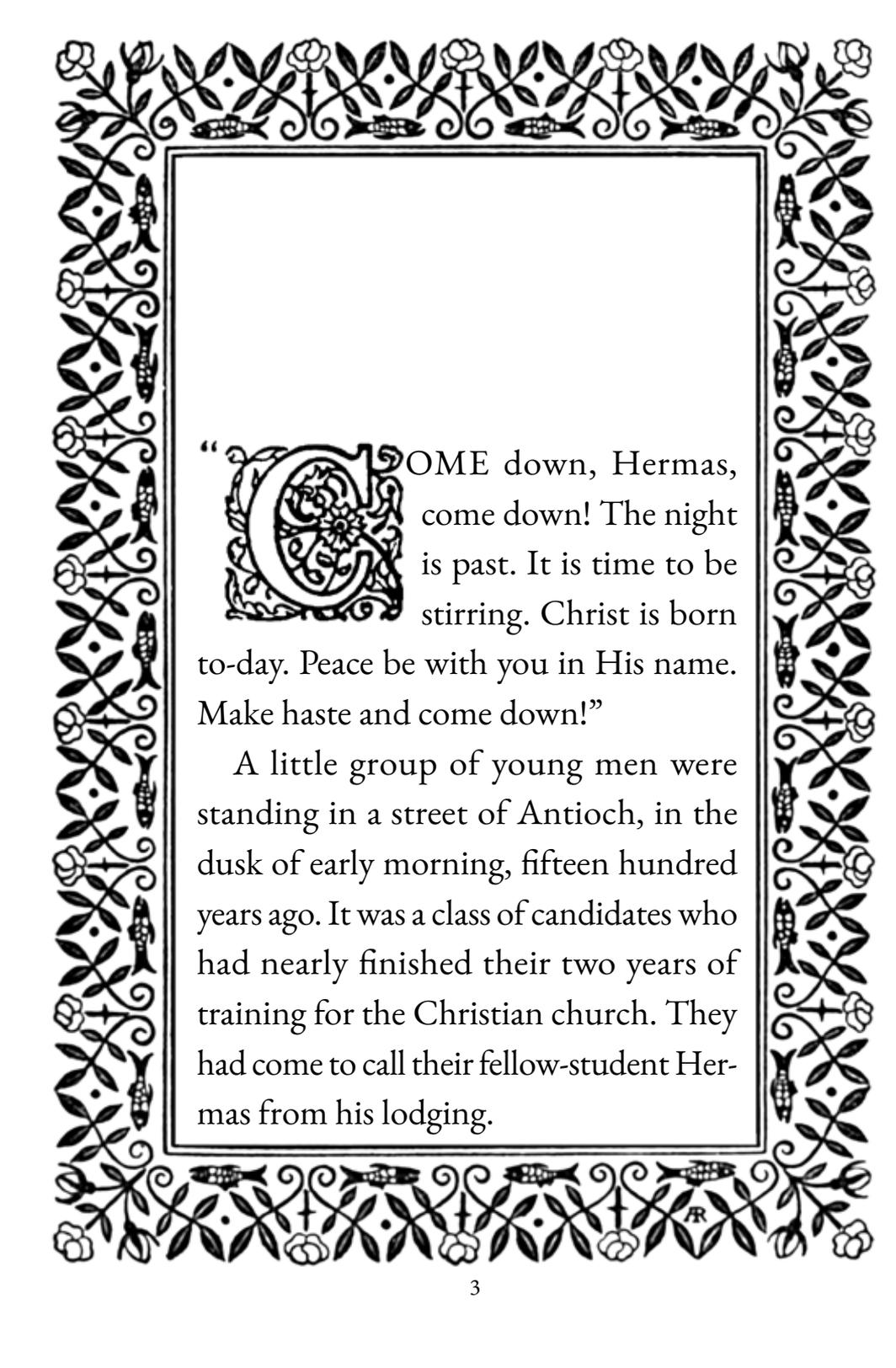
“HE OPENED HIS HEART TO THE OLD MAN AND TOLD HIM
THE STORY OF HIS LIFE.”

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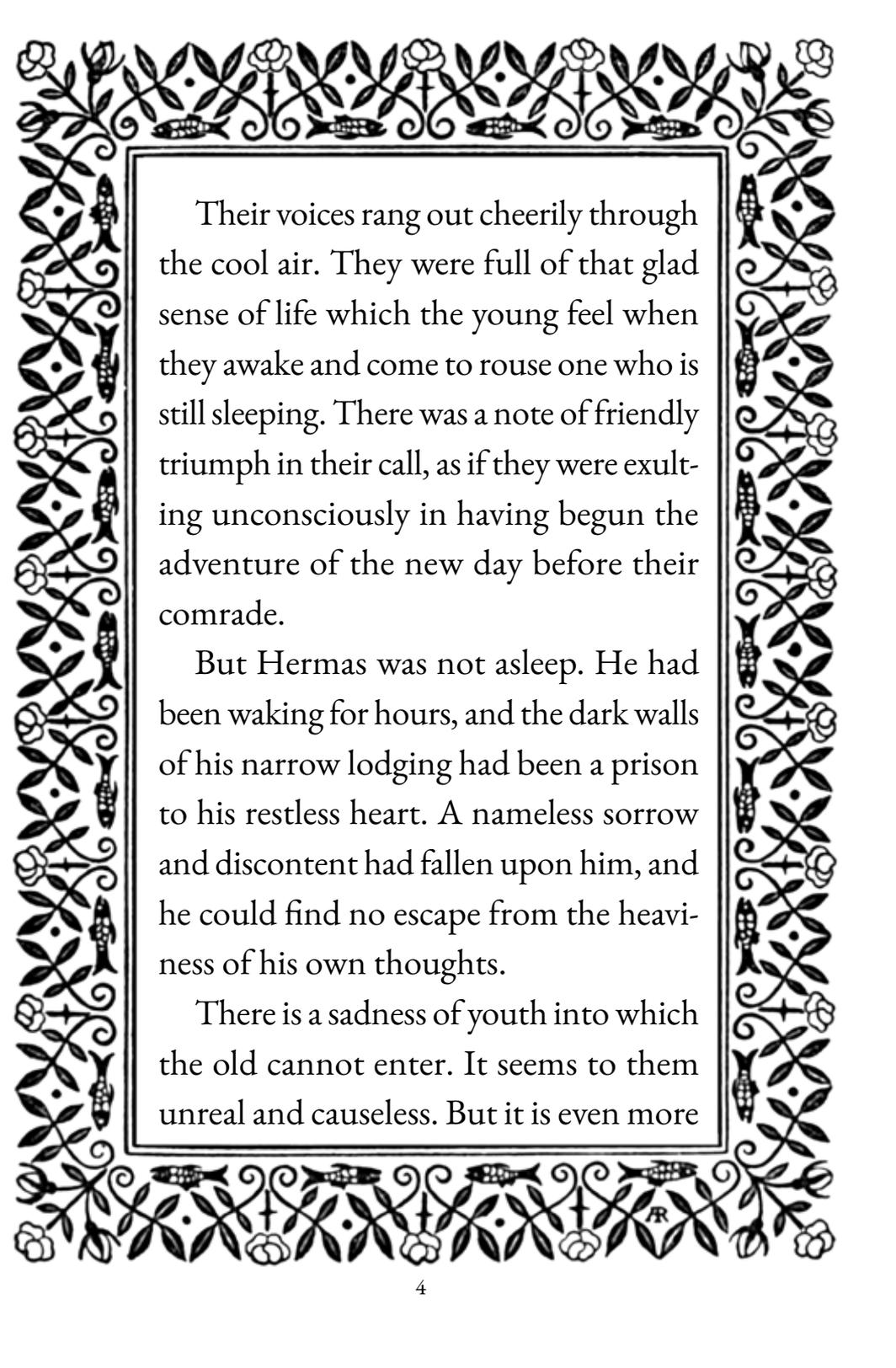


I
THE POVERTY
OF HERMAS



“**G**OME down, Hermas,
come down! The night
is past. It is time to be
stirring. Christ is born
to-day. Peace be with you in His name.
Make haste and come down!”

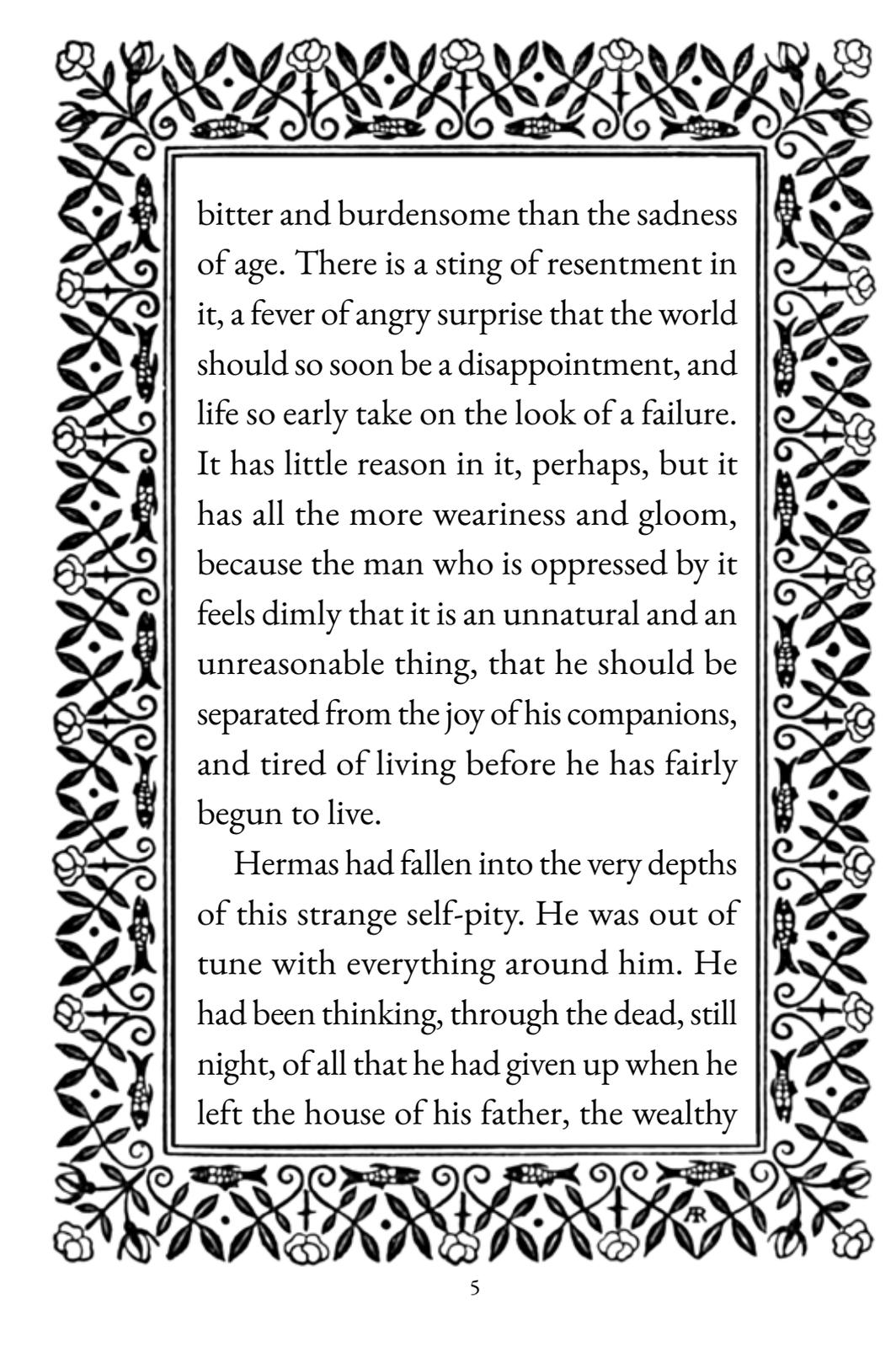
A little group of young men were standing in a street of Antioch, in the dusk of early morning, fifteen hundred years ago. It was a class of candidates who had nearly finished their two years of training for the Christian church. They had come to call their fellow-student Hermas from his lodging.



Their voices rang out cheerily through the cool air. They were full of that glad sense of life which the young feel when they awake and come to rouse one who is still sleeping. There was a note of friendly triumph in their call, as if they were exulting unconsciously in having begun the adventure of the new day before their comrade.

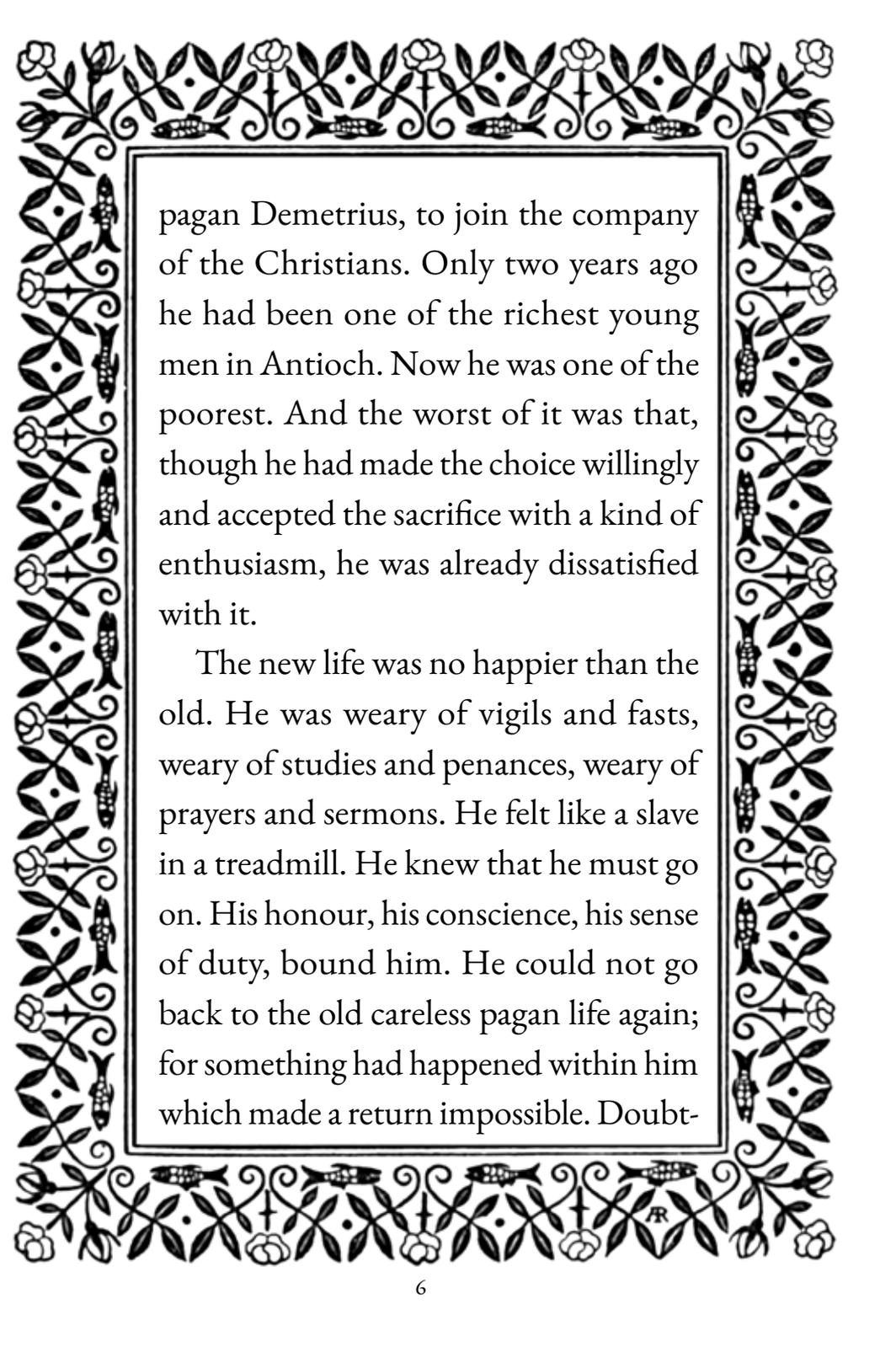
But Hermas was not asleep. He had been waking for hours, and the dark walls of his narrow lodging had been a prison to his restless heart. A nameless sorrow and discontent had fallen upon him, and he could find no escape from the heaviness of his own thoughts.

There is a sadness of youth into which the old cannot enter. It seems to them unreal and causeless. But it is even more



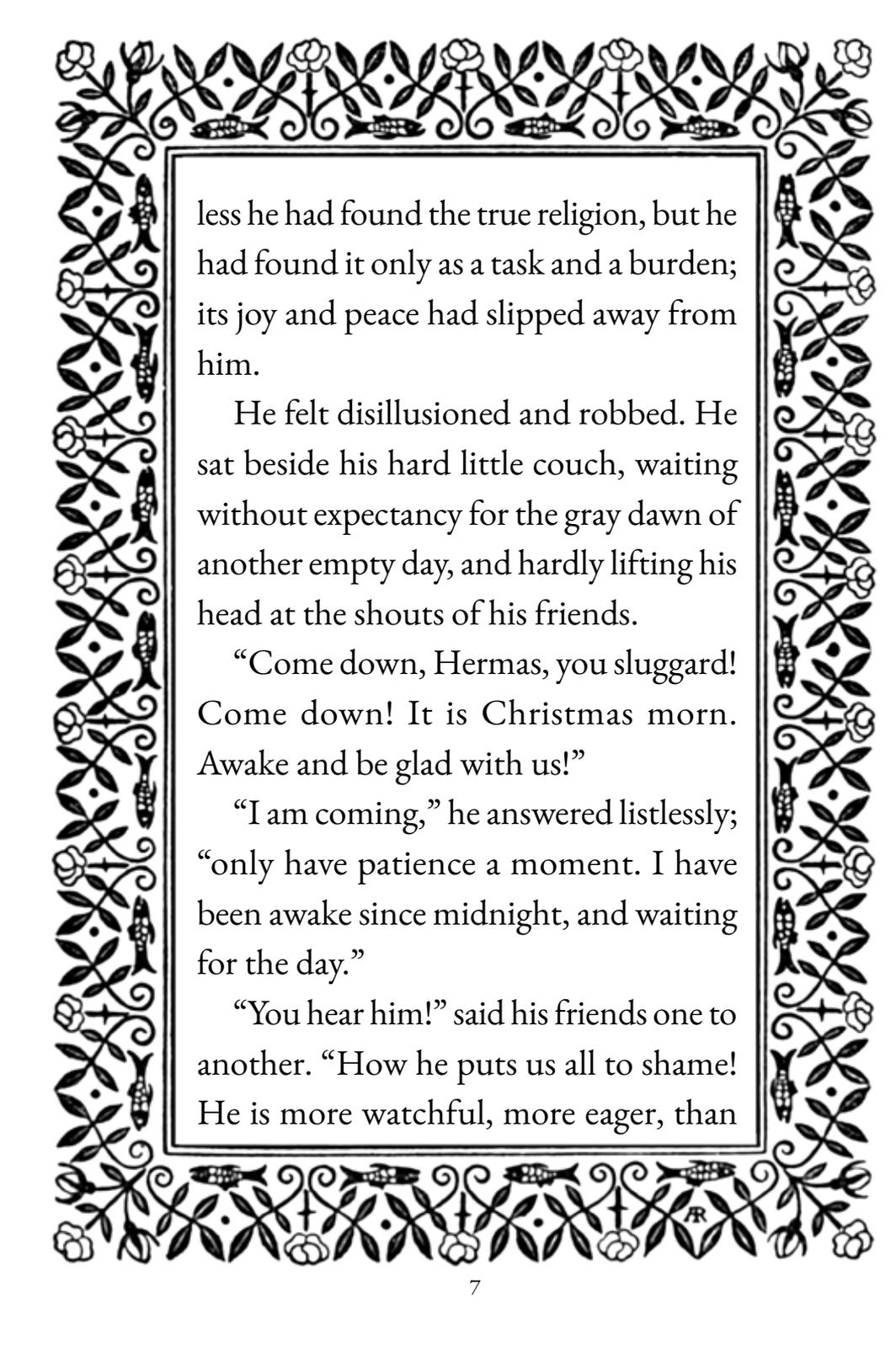
bitter and burdensome than the sadness of age. There is a sting of resentment in it, a fever of angry surprise that the world should so soon be a disappointment, and life so early take on the look of a failure. It has little reason in it, perhaps, but it has all the more weariness and gloom, because the man who is oppressed by it feels dimly that it is an unnatural and an unreasonable thing, that he should be separated from the joy of his companions, and tired of living before he has fairly begun to live.

Hermas had fallen into the very depths of this strange self-pity. He was out of tune with everything around him. He had been thinking, through the dead, still night, of all that he had given up when he left the house of his father, the wealthy

A decorative border surrounds the text, featuring a repeating pattern of stylized flowers, leaves, and fish. The border is composed of two parallel lines with a central decorative motif. The motifs include roses, leaves, and fish, arranged in a symmetrical, repeating pattern.

pagan Demetrius, to join the company of the Christians. Only two years ago he had been one of the richest young men in Antioch. Now he was one of the poorest. And the worst of it was that, though he had made the choice willingly and accepted the sacrifice with a kind of enthusiasm, he was already dissatisfied with it.

The new life was no happier than the old. He was weary of vigils and fasts, weary of studies and penances, weary of prayers and sermons. He felt like a slave in a treadmill. He knew that he must go on. His honour, his conscience, his sense of duty, bound him. He could not go back to the old careless pagan life again; for something had happened within him which made a return impossible. Doubt-



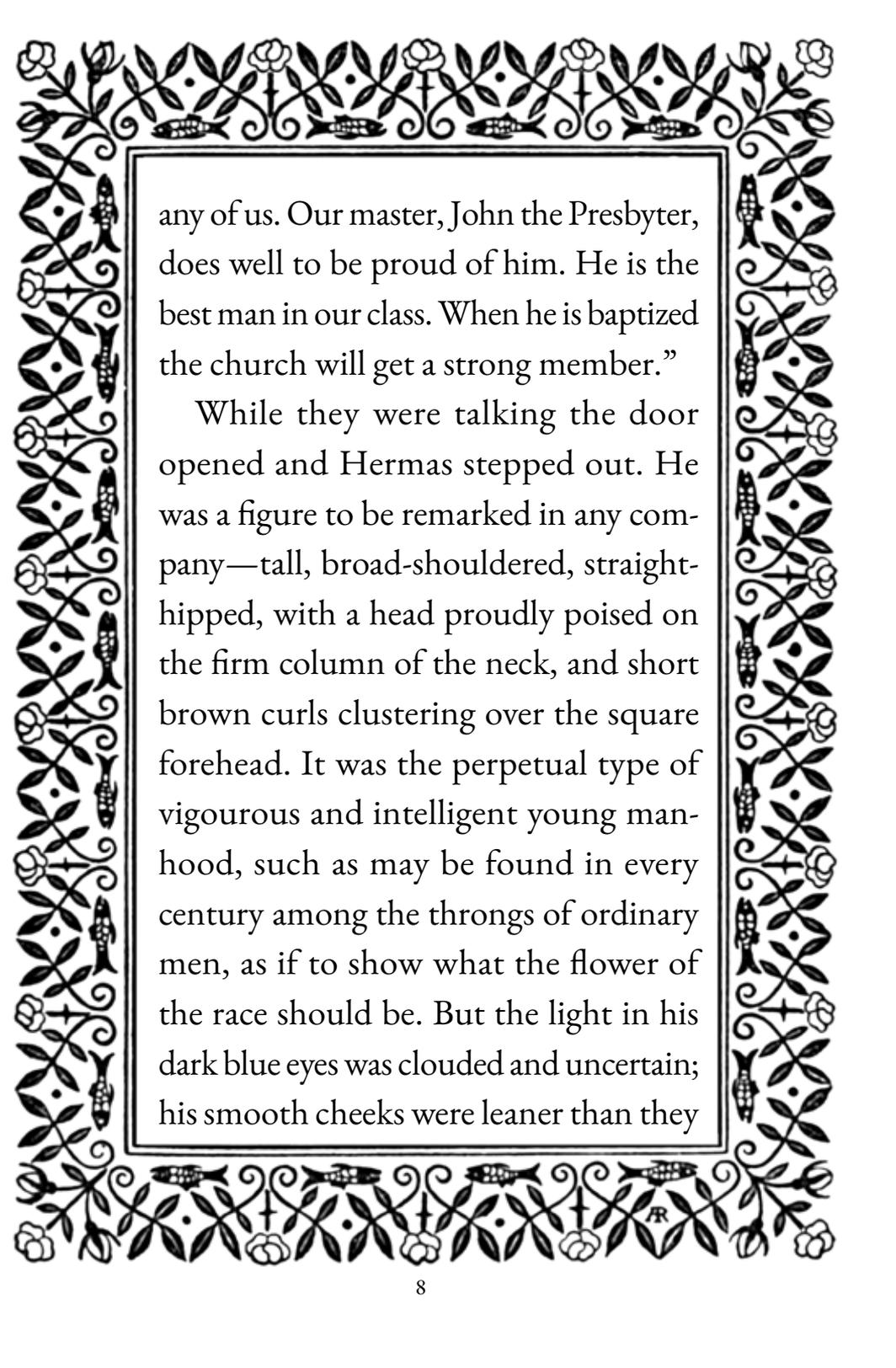
less he had found the true religion, but he had found it only as a task and a burden; its joy and peace had slipped away from him.

He felt disillusioned and robbed. He sat beside his hard little couch, waiting without expectancy for the gray dawn of another empty day, and hardly lifting his head at the shouts of his friends.

“Come down, Hermas, you sluggard! Come down! It is Christmas morn. Awake and be glad with us!”

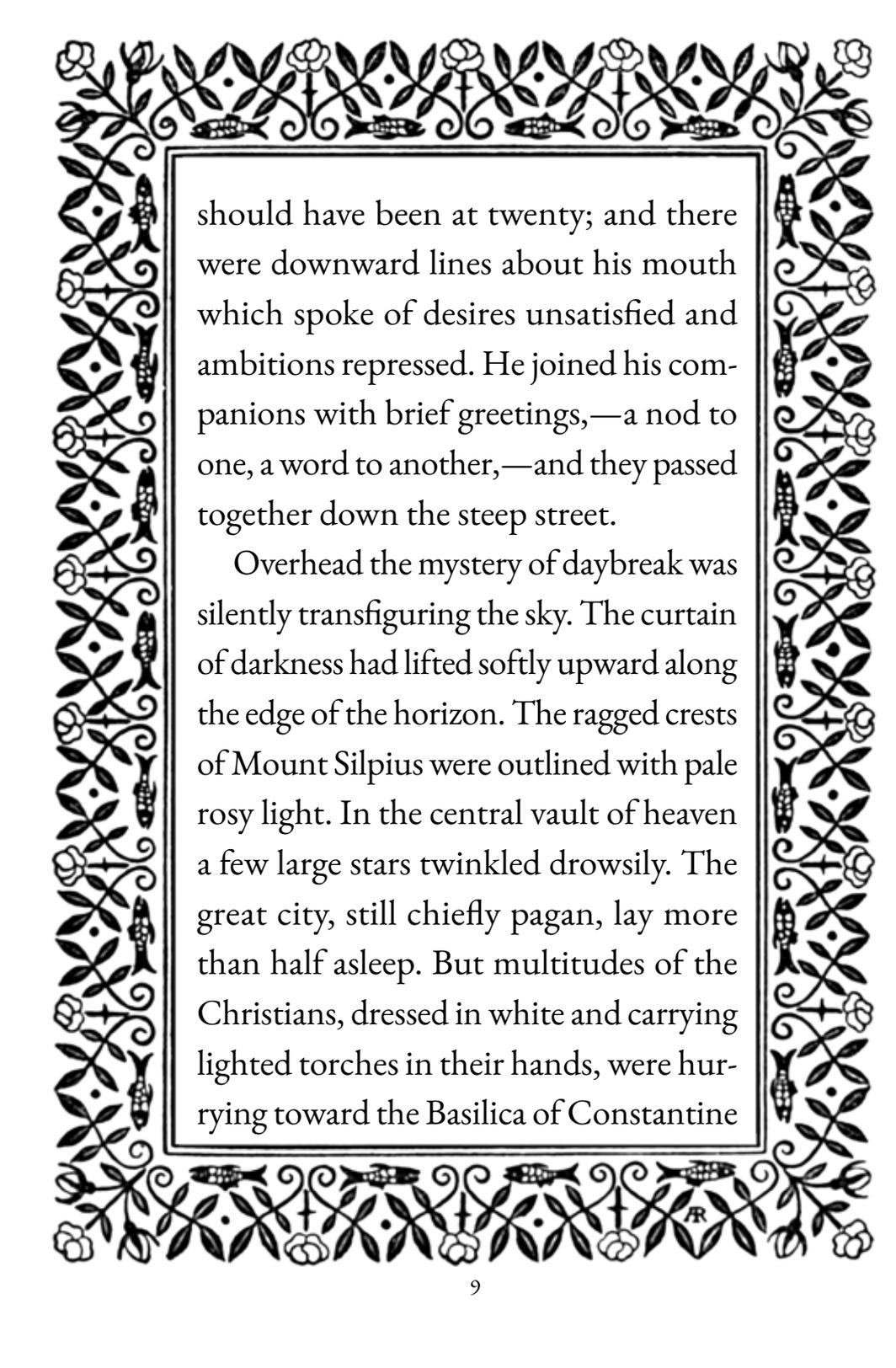
“I am coming,” he answered listlessly; “only have patience a moment. I have been awake since midnight, and waiting for the day.”

“You hear him!” said his friends one to another. “How he puts us all to shame! He is more watchful, more eager, than

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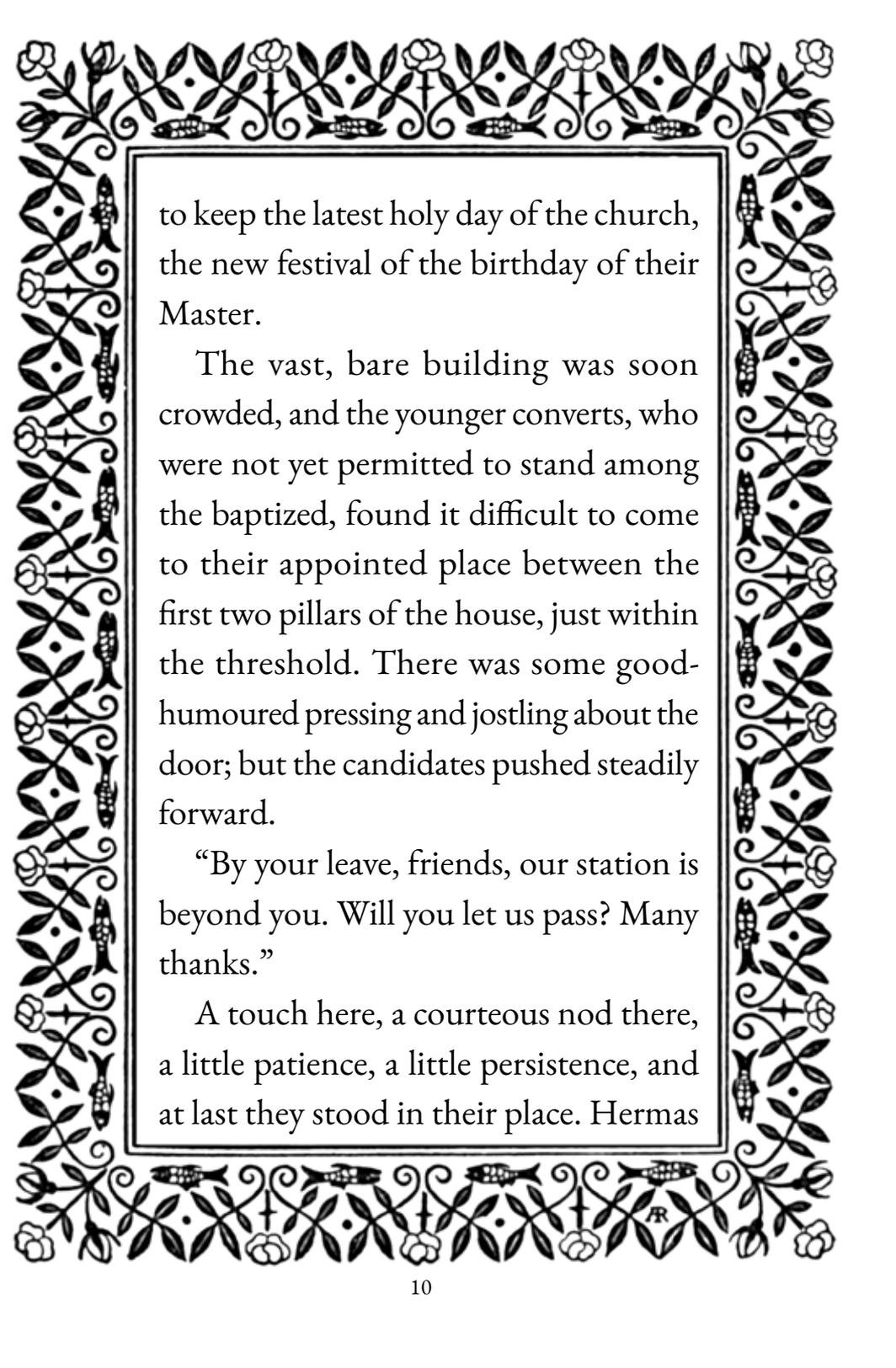
any of us. Our master, John the Presbyter, does well to be proud of him. He is the best man in our class. When he is baptized the church will get a strong member.”

While they were talking the door opened and Hermas stepped out. He was a figure to be remarked in any company—tall, broad-shouldered, straight-hipped, with a head proudly poised on the firm column of the neck, and short brown curls clustering over the square forehead. It was the perpetual type of vigorous and intelligent young manhood, such as may be found in every century among the throngs of ordinary men, as if to show what the flower of the race should be. But the light in his dark blue eyes was clouded and uncertain; his smooth cheeks were leaner than they

A decorative border surrounds the text, featuring a repeating pattern of stylized flowers, leaves, and fish. The border is composed of two parallel lines with intricate designs between them, including roses, leaves, and fish swimming in a stylized sea.

should have been at twenty; and there were downward lines about his mouth which spoke of desires unsatisfied and ambitions repressed. He joined his companions with brief greetings,—a nod to one, a word to another,—and they passed together down the steep street.

Overhead the mystery of daybreak was silently transfiguring the sky. The curtain of darkness had lifted softly upward along the edge of the horizon. The ragged crests of Mount Silpius were outlined with pale rosy light. In the central vault of heaven a few large stars twinkled drowsily. The great city, still chiefly pagan, lay more than half asleep. But multitudes of the Christians, dressed in white and carrying lighted torches in their hands, were hurrying toward the Basilica of Constantine

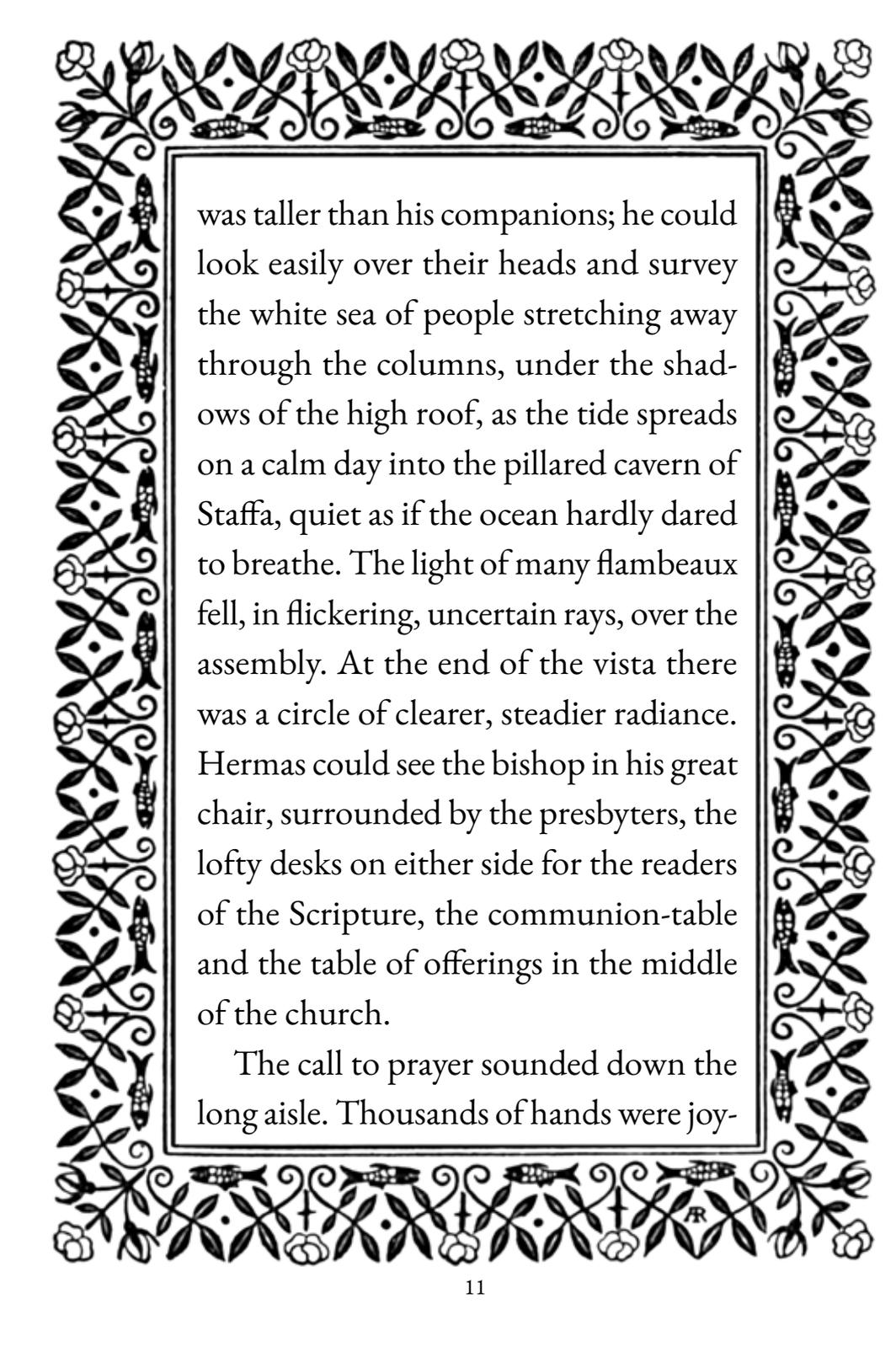
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to keep the latest holy day of the church, the new festival of the birthday of their Master.

The vast, bare building was soon crowded, and the younger converts, who were not yet permitted to stand among the baptized, found it difficult to come to their appointed place between the first two pillars of the house, just within the threshold. There was some good-humoured pressing and jostling about the door; but the candidates pushed steadily forward.

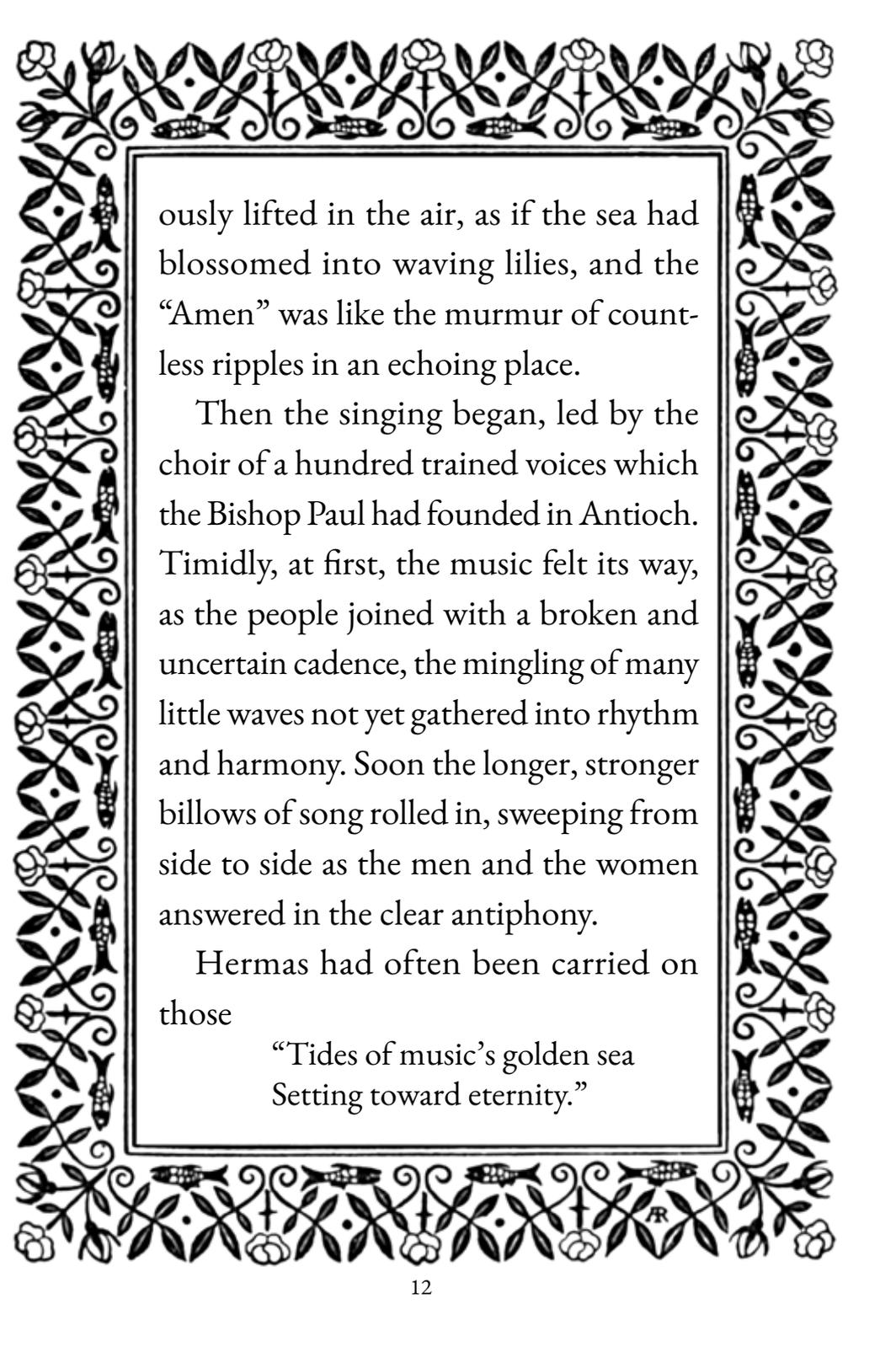
“By your leave, friends, our station is beyond you. Will you let us pass? Many thanks.”

A touch here, a courteous nod there, a little patience, a little persistence, and at last they stood in their place. Hermas



was taller than his companions; he could look easily over their heads and survey the white sea of people stretching away through the columns, under the shadows of the high roof, as the tide spreads on a calm day into the pillared cavern of Staffa, quiet as if the ocean hardly dared to breathe. The light of many flambeaux fell, in flickering, uncertain rays, over the assembly. At the end of the vista there was a circle of clearer, steadier radiance. Hermas could see the bishop in his great chair, surrounded by the presbyters, the lofty desks on either side for the readers of the Scripture, the communion-table and the table of offerings in the middle of the church.

The call to prayer sounded down the long aisle. Thousands of hands were joy-

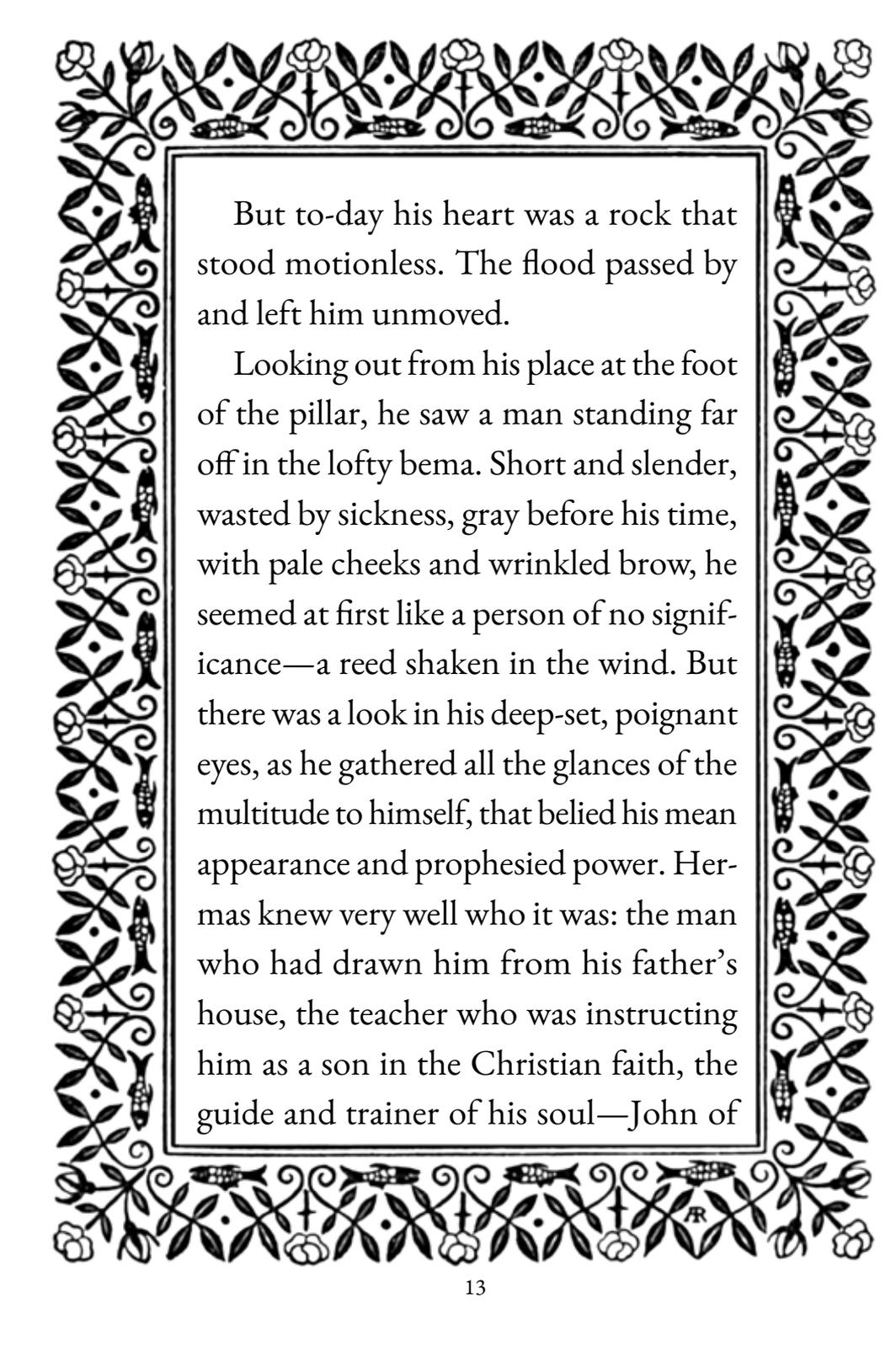


ously lifted in the air, as if the sea had blossomed into waving lilies, and the “Amen” was like the murmur of countless ripples in an echoing place.

Then the singing began, led by the choir of a hundred trained voices which the Bishop Paul had founded in Antioch. Timidly, at first, the music felt its way, as the people joined with a broken and uncertain cadence, the mingling of many little waves not yet gathered into rhythm and harmony. Soon the longer, stronger billows of song rolled in, sweeping from side to side as the men and the women answered in the clear antiphony.

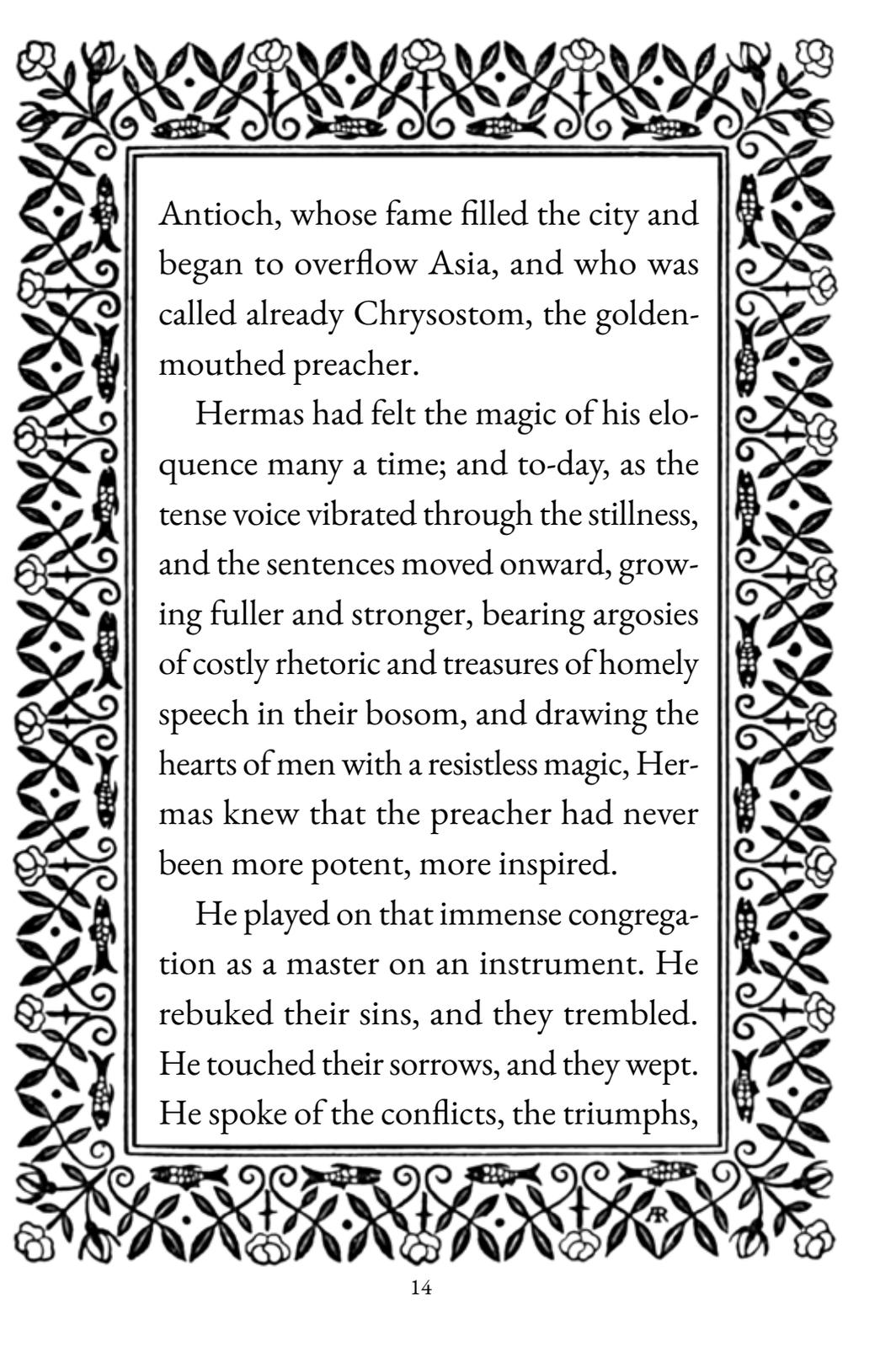
Hermas had often been carried on those

“Tides of music’s golden sea
Setting toward eternity.”

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But to-day his heart was a rock that stood motionless. The flood passed by and left him unmoved.

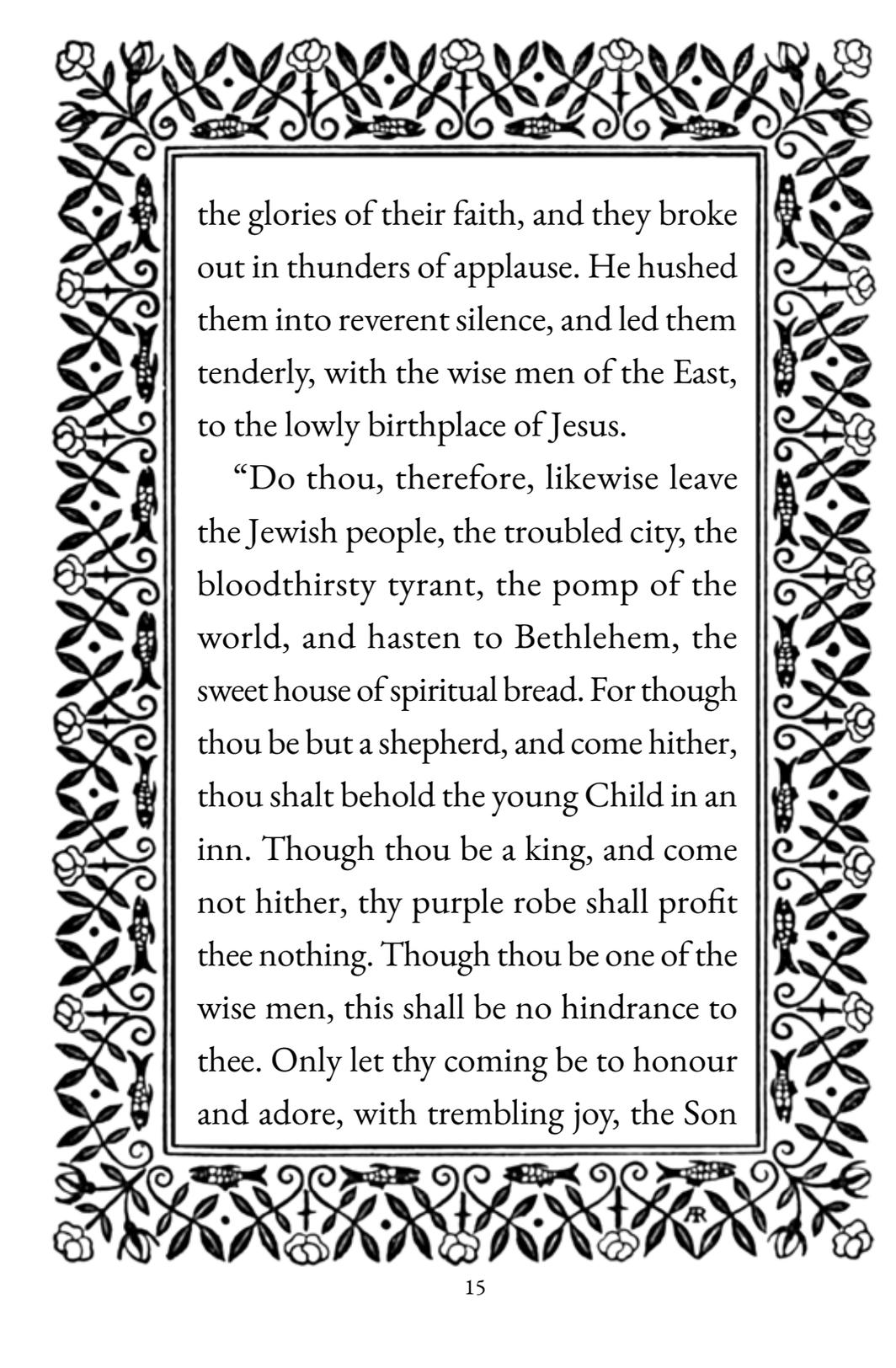
Looking out from his place at the foot of the pillar, he saw a man standing far off in the lofty bema. Short and slender, wasted by sickness, gray before his time, with pale cheeks and wrinkled brow, he seemed at first like a person of no significance—a reed shaken in the wind. But there was a look in his deep-set, poignant eyes, as he gathered all the glances of the multitude to himself, that belied his mean appearance and prophesied power. Hermas knew very well who it was: the man who had drawn him from his father's house, the teacher who was instructing him as a son in the Christian faith, the guide and trainer of his soul—John of

A decorative border surrounds the text, featuring a repeating pattern of stylized flowers, leaves, and fish. The border is composed of two parallel lines with a central decorative motif. The motifs include a five-petaled flower, a leafy branch, and a fish. The border is symmetrical and repeats every few inches.

Antioch, whose fame filled the city and began to overflow Asia, and who was called already Chrysostom, the golden-mouthed preacher.

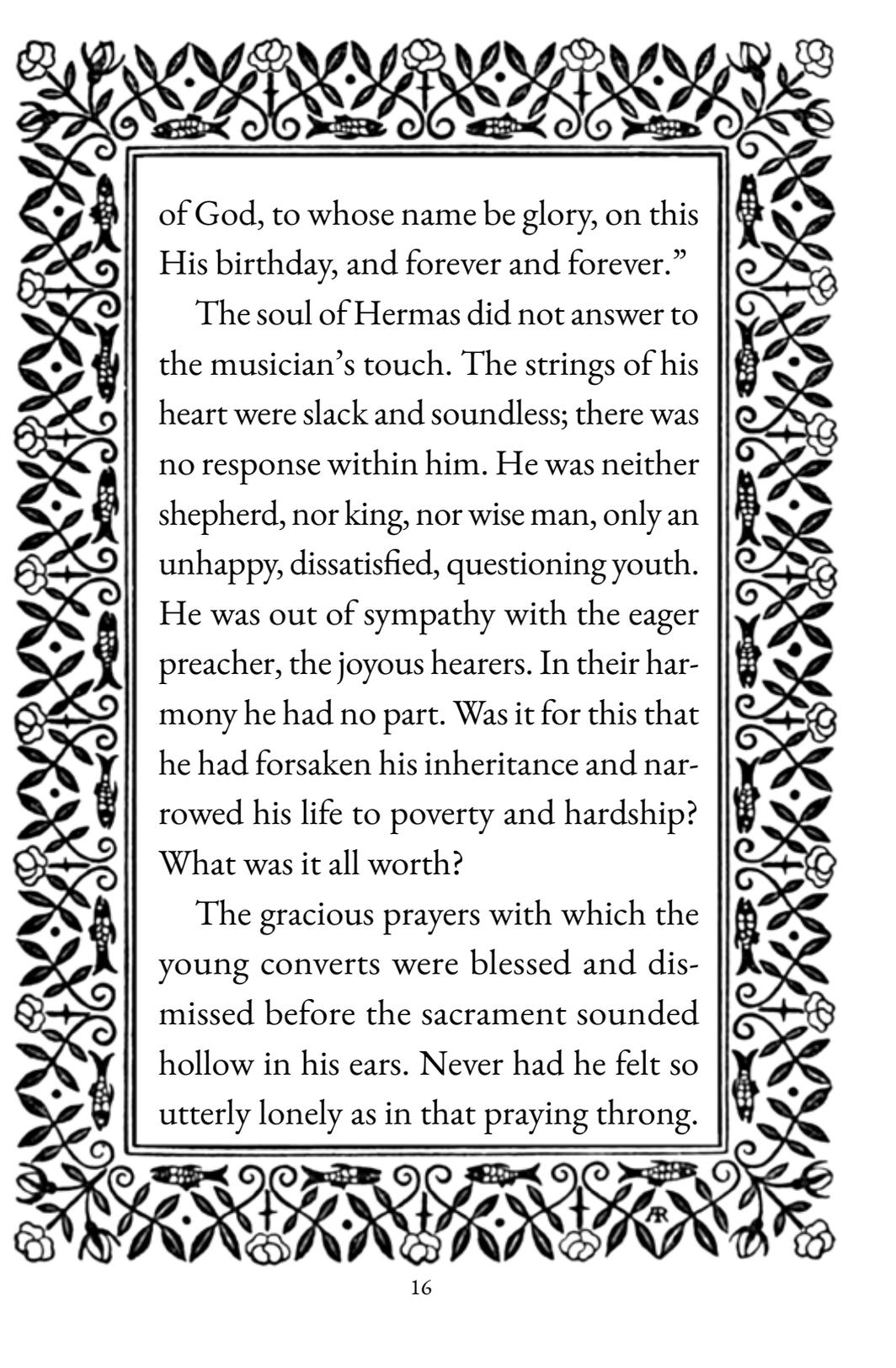
Hermas had felt the magic of his eloquence many a time; and to-day, as the tense voice vibrated through the stillness, and the sentences moved onward, growing fuller and stronger, bearing argosies of costly rhetoric and treasures of homely speech in their bosom, and drawing the hearts of men with a resistless magic, Hermas knew that the preacher had never been more potent, more inspired.

He played on that immense congregation as a master on an instrument. He rebuked their sins, and they trembled. He touched their sorrows, and they wept. He spoke of the conflicts, the triumphs,

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the glories of their faith, and they broke out in thunders of applause. He hushed them into reverent silence, and led them tenderly, with the wise men of the East, to the lowly birthplace of Jesus.

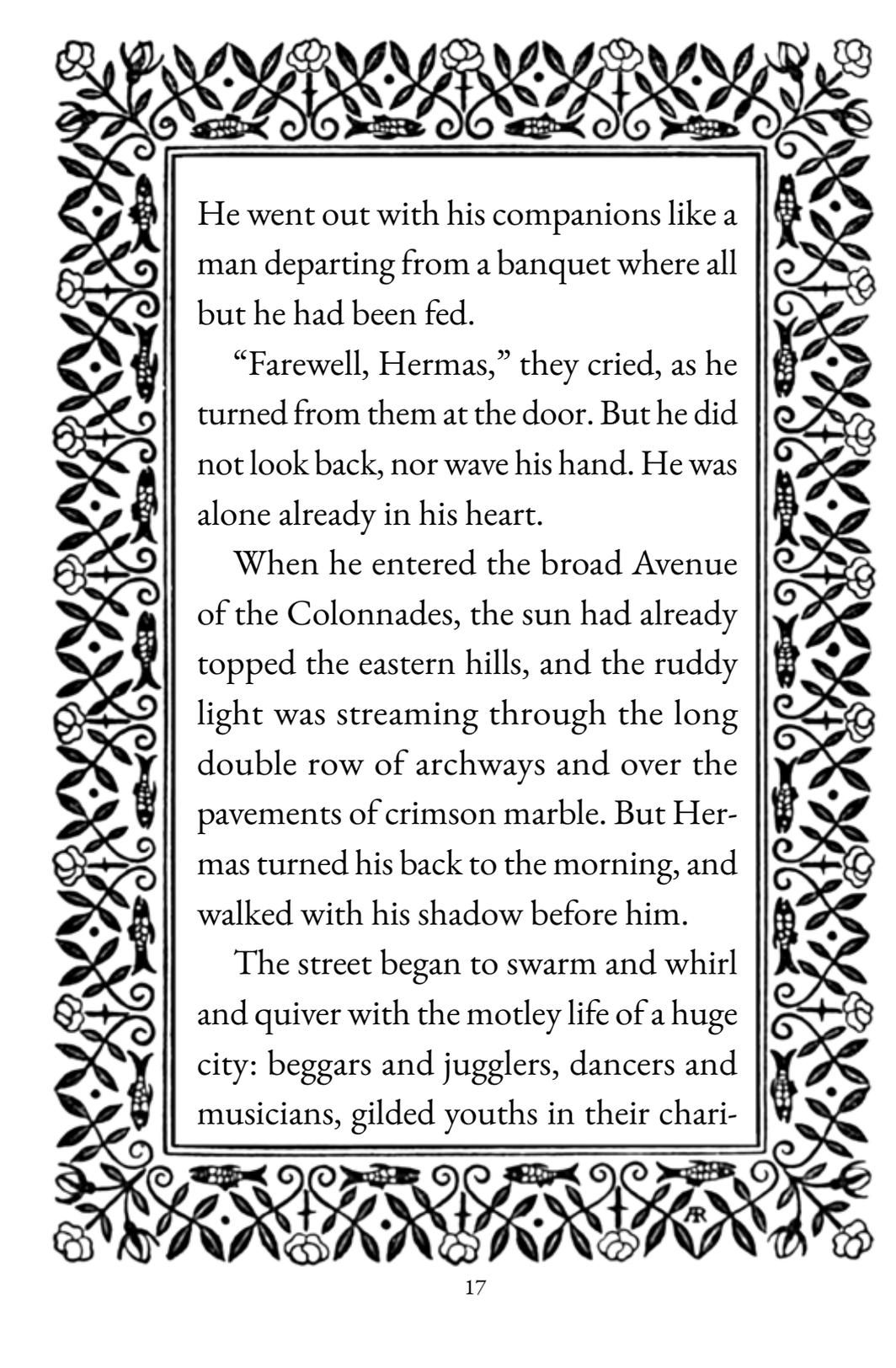
“Do thou, therefore, likewise leave the Jewish people, the troubled city, the bloodthirsty tyrant, the pomp of the world, and hasten to Bethlehem, the sweet house of spiritual bread. For though thou be but a shepherd, and come hither, thou shalt behold the young Child in an inn. Though thou be a king, and come not hither, thy purple robe shall profit thee nothing. Though thou be one of the wise men, this shall be no hindrance to thee. Only let thy coming be to honour and adore, with trembling joy, the Son

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of God, to whose name be glory, on this His birthday, and forever and forever.”

The soul of Hermas did not answer to the musician's touch. The strings of his heart were slack and soundless; there was no response within him. He was neither shepherd, nor king, nor wise man, only an unhappy, dissatisfied, questioning youth. He was out of sympathy with the eager preacher, the joyous hearers. In their harmony he had no part. Was it for this that he had forsaken his inheritance and narrowed his life to poverty and hardship? What was it all worth?

The gracious prayers with which the young converts were blessed and dismissed before the sacrament sounded hollow in his ears. Never had he felt so utterly lonely as in that praying throng.

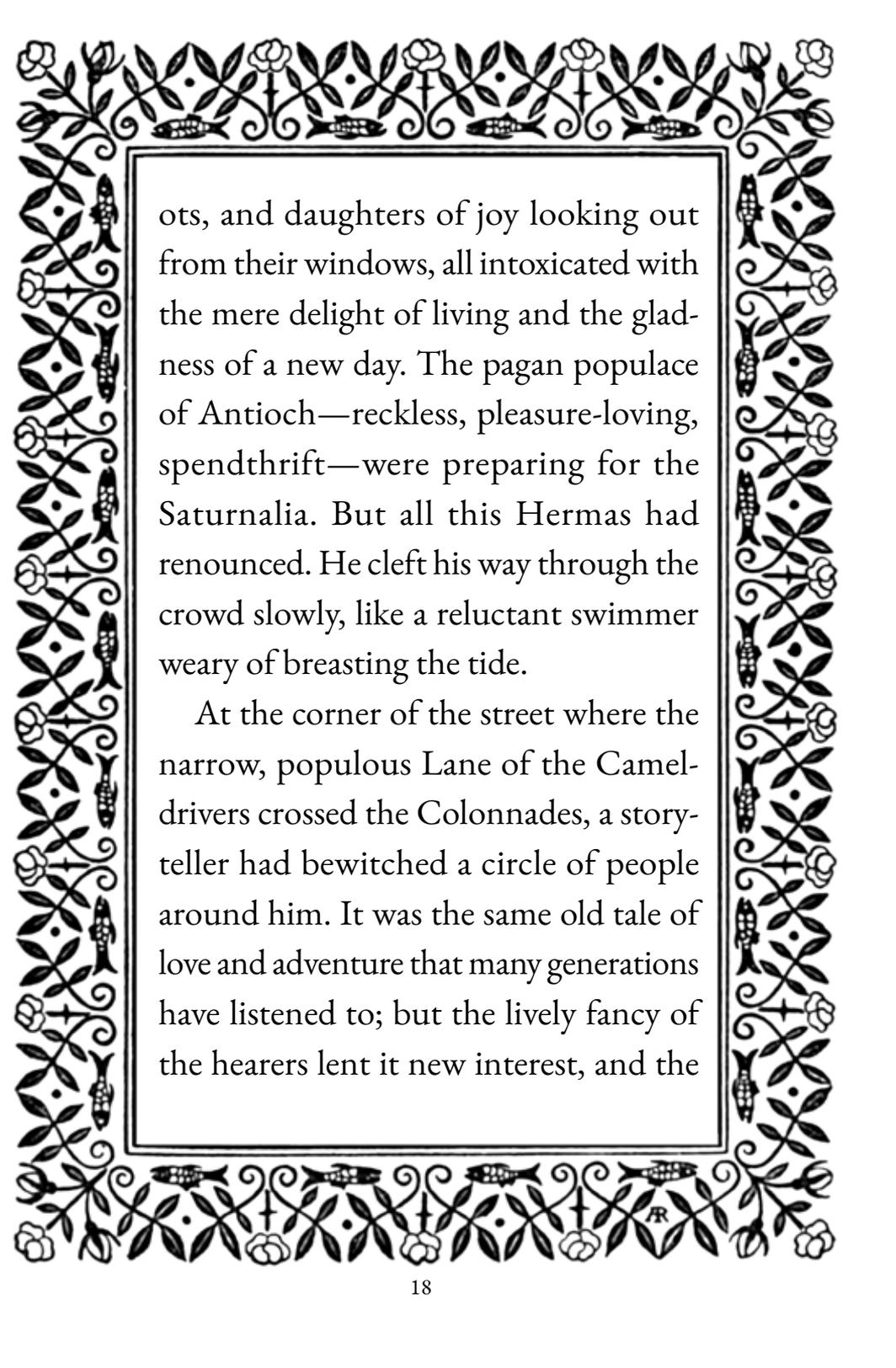
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He went out with his companions like a man departing from a banquet where all but he had been fed.

“Farewell, Hermas,” they cried, as he turned from them at the door. But he did not look back, nor wave his hand. He was alone already in his heart.

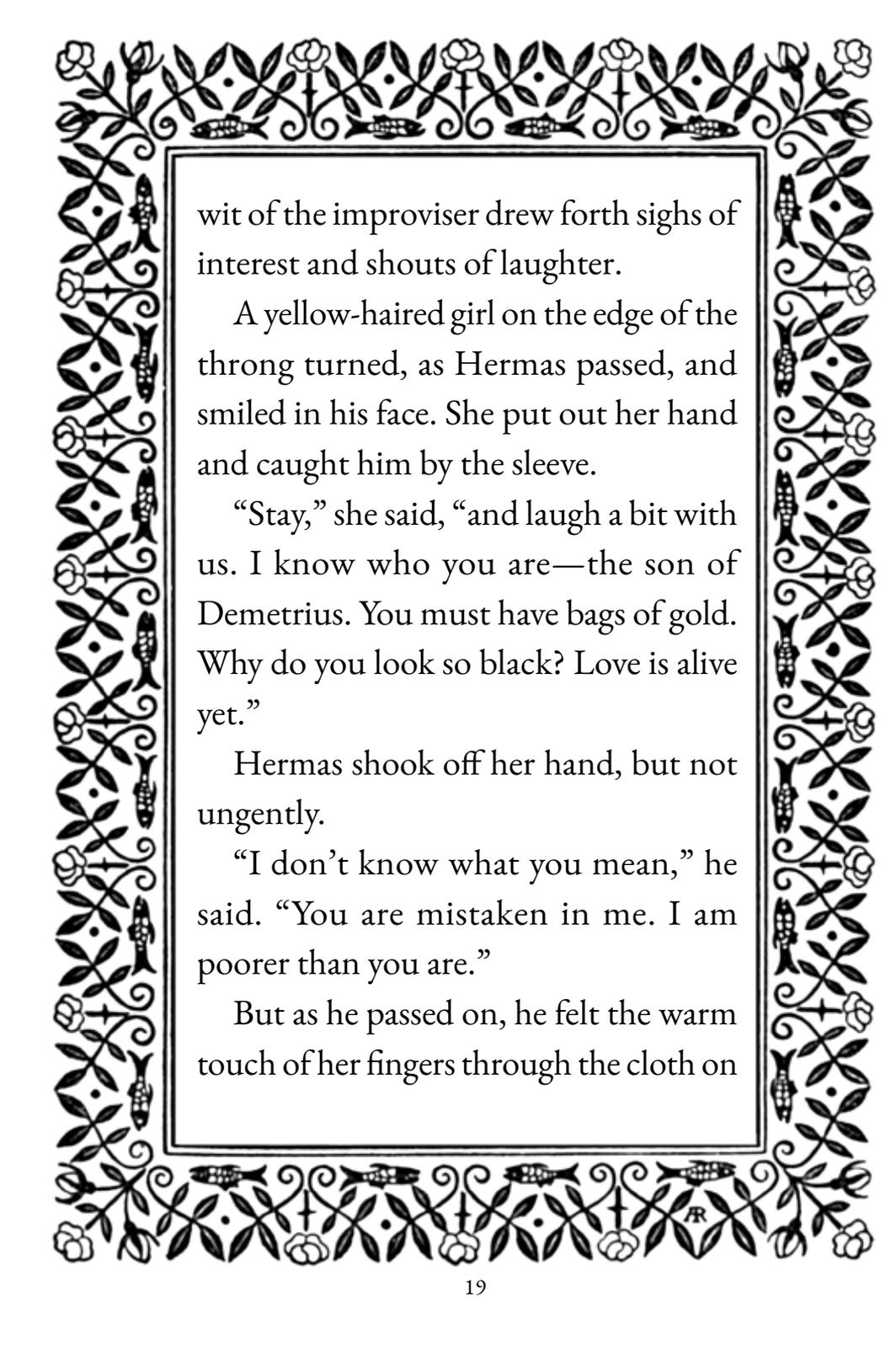
When he entered the broad Avenue of the Colonnades, the sun had already topped the eastern hills, and the ruddy light was streaming through the long double row of archways and over the pavements of crimson marble. But Hermas turned his back to the morning, and walked with his shadow before him.

The street began to swarm and whirl and quiver with the motley life of a huge city: beggars and jugglers, dancers and musicians, gilded youths in their chari-



ots, and daughters of joy looking out from their windows, all intoxicated with the mere delight of living and the gladness of a new day. The pagan populace of Antioch—reckless, pleasure-loving, spendthrift—were preparing for the Saturnalia. But all this Hermas had renounced. He cleft his way through the crowd slowly, like a reluctant swimmer weary of breasting the tide.

At the corner of the street where the narrow, populous Lane of the Camel-drivers crossed the Colonnades, a storyteller had bewitched a circle of people around him. It was the same old tale of love and adventure that many generations have listened to; but the lively fancy of the hearers lent it new interest, and the



wit of the improviser drew forth sighs of interest and shouts of laughter.

A yellow-haired girl on the edge of the throng turned, as Hermas passed, and smiled in his face. She put out her hand and caught him by the sleeve.

“Stay,” she said, “and laugh a bit with us. I know who you are—the son of Demetrius. You must have bags of gold. Why do you look so black? Love is alive yet.”

Hermas shook off her hand, but not ungently.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said. “You are mistaken in me. I am poorer than you are.”

But as he passed on, he felt the warm touch of her fingers through the cloth on