OLD FRENCH ROMANCES
DONE INTO ENGLISH
BY
WILLIAM MORRIS
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
JOSEPH JACOBS

Short Story Index Reprint Series

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INTRODUCTION

ANY of us have first found our way into the Realm of Romance, properly so called, through the pages of a little crimson clad volume or the Bibliothèque Elzevirienne.* Its last pages contain the charming Cante-Fable of Aucassin et Nicolette, which Mr. Walter Pater’s praises and Mr. Andrew Lang’s brilliant version have made familiar to all lovers of letters. But the same volume contains four other tales, equally charming in their way, which Mr. William Morris has now made part of English literature by writing them out again for us in English, reproducing, as his alone can do of living men’s, the tone, the colour, the charm of the Middle Ages. His versions have appeared in three successive issues of the Kelmscott Press, which

* Nouvelles françaises en prose du xiiième siècle, par MM. L. Moland et C. D’Hericault. (Paris : Janet, 1856.)
Introduction have been eagerly snapped up by the lovers of good books. It seemed a pity that these cameos of romance should suffer the same fate as Mr. Lang's version of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, which has been swept off the face of the earth by the Charge of the Six Hundred, who were lucky enough to obtain copies of the only edition of that little masterpiece of translation. Mr. Morris has, therefore, consented to allow his versions of the Romances to be combined into one volume in a form not unworthy of their excellence but more accessible to those lovers of books whose purses have a habit of varying in inverse proportion to the amount of their love. He has honoured me by asking me to introduce them to that wider public to which they now make their appeal.
ALMOST all literary roads lead back to Introduction Greece. Obscure as still remains the origin of that genre of romance to which the tales before us belong, there is little doubt that their models, if not their originals, were once extant at Constantinople. Though in no single instance has the Greek original been discovered of any of these romances, the mere name of their heroes would be in most cases sufficient to prove their Hellenic or Byzantine origin. Heracles, Athis, Porphyrias, Parthenopeus, Hippomedon, Protesilaus, Cliges, Cleomades, Clarus, Berinus—names such as these can come but from one quarter of Europe, and it is as easy to guess how and when they came as whence. The first two crusades brought the flower of European chivalry to Constantinople and restored that spiritual union between Eastern and Western Christendom that had been interrupted by the great schism of the Greek and Roman Churches. The crusaders
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Here again romance has points of contact with the folk tale. The end of the Grimms' tale of *Faithful John* is clearly the same as that of *Amis and Amile.* Once more we are led to believe in some dependence of the Folk-Tale on Romance, or, *vice versa*, since an incident like that of resuscitation by the sacrifice of a child is not likely to occur independently to two different tellers of tales. The tale also contains the curious incident of the unsheathed sword in bed, which, both in romances and folk-tales, is regarded as a complete bar to any divorce court proceedings. It is probable that the sword was considered as a living person, so that the principle *ne coram publico* was applied, and the sword was regarded as a kind of chaperon.† It is noteworthy that the incident occurs in *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*, which is a late interpolation into the *Arabian Nights*, and may be due there to

* It has been suggested that the names of our heroes have given rise to the proverbial saying: "A miss (Amis) is as good as a mile (Amile)," but notwithstanding the high authority from which the suggestion emanates, it is little more than a pun.

† For occurrences of this incident in sagas, etc., see Grimm, *Deutsche Rechtsalterthümer*, 168–70; in folk-tales, Dasent, *Tales from the Norse*, cxxxiv.–v., n. xviii
European influence. But another incident in the Introduction romance suggests that it was derived from a folk-tale rather than the reverse. The two bowls of wood given to the heroes at baptism are clearly a modification of that familiar incident in folk-tales, where one of a pair leaves with the other a "Lifetoken"* which will sympathetically indicate his state of health. As this has been considerably attenuated in our romance, we are led to the conclusion that it is itself an adaptation of a folk-tale.

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The tale of King Florus—the gem of the book—recalls the early part of Shakespeare's Cymbeline and the bet about a wife's virtue, which forms the subject of many romances, not a few folk-tales, and at least one folk-song. The Romance of the Violet, by Gerbert de Montroy, circa 1225, derives its name from the mother's mark of the heroine, which causes her husband to lose his bet. This was probably the source of Boccaccio's novel (ii. 9), from which Shakespeare's more immediately grew.

* Mr. Hartland has studied the "Lifetoken" in the eighth chapter of his elaborate treatise on the Legend of Perseus.
Introduction The Gaelic version of this incident, collected by Campbell (*The Chest*, No. 14), is clearly not of folk origin, but derived directly or indirectly from Boccaccio, in whom alone the Chest is found. Yet it is curious that, practically, the same story as the *Romance of the Violet* is found among folk-songs in modern Greece and in Modern Scotland. In Passow's collection of *Romaic Folk Songs* there is one entitled *Maurianos and the King*, which is in substance our story; and it is probably the existence of this folk-song which causes M. Gaston Paris to place our tale among the romances derived from Byzantium. Yet Motherwell in his *Minstrelsy* has a ballad entitled *Reedisdale and Wise William*, which has the bet as its motive. Here again, then, we have a connection between our romance and the story-store of European folk, and at the same time some slight link with Byzantium.

V

The tale of "Oversea" has immediate connection with the Crusades, since its heroine is represented to be no other than the great grandmother of Saladin. But her adventures resemble those of Boccaccio's *Princess of Babylon* (ii. 7),

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who was herself taken from one of the Greek introduction romances by Xenophon of Ephesus. Here again, then, we can trace back to Greek influence reaching Western Europe in the twelfth century through the medium of the Crusades. But the tale finds no echo among the folk, so far as I am aware, and is thus purely and simply a romance of adventure.

This, however, is not the only story connected with the Crusades in which the Soudan loves a lady of the Franks. Saladin is credited by the chatty Chronicle of Rheims with having gained the love of Eleanor, wife of Louis VII., when they were in Palestine on the Second Crusade. As Saladin did not ascend the throne till twenty years later, chronology is enabled to clear his memory of this piece of scandal. But its existence chimes in with such relations between Moslem and Christian as is represented in our story, which were clearly not regarded at the time with any particular aversion by the folk; they agree with Cardinal Mazarin on this point.
Intraduction

So much for the origin of our tales. Yet who cares for origins nowadays? We are all democrats now, and a tale, like a man, is welcomed for its merits and not for its pedigree. Yet even democracy must own, that pedigree often leaves its trace in style and manner, and certainly the tales before us owe some of their charm to their lineage. "Out of Byzantium by Old France" is a good strain by which to produce thoroughbred romance.

Certainly we breathe the very air of romance in these stories. There is none of your modern priggish care for the state of your soul. Men take rank according to their might, women are valued for their beauty alone. Adventures are to the adventurous, and the world is full of them. Every place but that in which one is born is equally strange and wondrous. Once beyond the bounds of the city walls and none knows what may happen. We have stepped forth into the Land of Faerie, but at least we are in the open air.

Mr. Pater seems to regard our stories as being a premonition of the freedom and gaiety of the Renaissance rather than as especially
characteristic of the times of Romance. All Introduction
that one need remark upon such misconception
is that it only proves that Mr. Pater knew less of
Romance Literature than he did of his favourite
subject. The freshness, the gaiety, the direct
outlook into life are peculiar neither to Romance
nor Renaissance; their real source was the esprit
Gaulois. But the unquestioning, if somewhat
external, piety, the immutability of the caste
system, the spirit of adventure, the frankly
physical love of woman, the large childlike
wonder, these are of the essence of Romance,
and they are fully represented in the tales before
us. Wonder and reverence, are not these the
parents of Romance? Intelligent curiosity and
intellectual doubt—those are what the Renais-
sance brought. Without indulging in invidious
comparisons between the relative value of these
gifts, I would turn back to our stories with the
remark that much of the wonder which they
exhibit is due to the vague localisation which
runs through them. Rome, Paris, Byzantium,
form spots of light on the mediæval map, but all
between is in the dim obscure where anything
may occur, and the brave man moves about with
his life in his hands.

We thus obtain that absence or localisation
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Intradaetian which helps to give the characteristic tone to mediæval romance. Events happen in a sort of sublime No Man's Land. They happen, as it were, at the root of the mountains, on the glittering plain, and in short, we get news from Nowhere. It seems, therefore, peculiarly appropriate that they should be done into English in the same style and by the same hand that has already written the annals of those countries of romance. Writing here, in front of Mr. Morris's versions, I am speaking, as it were, before his face, and must not say all that I should like in praise of the style in which he has clothed them, and of its appropriateness for its present purpose. I should merely like to recall the fact that it was used by him in his versions of the Sagas as long ago as 1869. Since then it has been adopted by all who desire to give an appropriate English dress to their versions of classic or mediæval masterpieces of a romantic character. We may take it, I think, that this style has established itself as the only one suitable for a romantic version, and who shall use it with ease and grace if not its original inventor?

If their style suits Mr. Morris, there is little doubt that their subject is equally congenial. I cannot claim to be in his confidence on the
point, but it is not difficult, I fancy, to guess Introduction what has attracted him to them. Nearly all of them, we have seen, are on the borderland between folk-tale and romance. It is tales such as these that Mr. Morris wishes to see told in tapestry on the walls of the Moot-Hall of the Hammersmith of Nowhere. It was by tales such as these that he first won a hearing from all lovers of English literature. The story of Jason is but a Greek setting of a folk-tale known among the Gaels as the Battle of the Birds, and in Norse as the Master Maid. Many of the tales which the travellers told one another in the Earthly Paradise, such as The Man born to be King (itself derived from the first of our stories), The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon, and The Ring given to Venus, are, on the face of them, folk-tales. Need I give any stronger recommendation of this book to English readers than to ask them to regard it as a sort of outhouse to that goodly fabric so appropriately known to us all as The Earthly Paradise?

JOSEPH JACOBS.
Introduction
came mostly from the Lands of Romance. Permanent bonds of culture began to be formed between the extreme East and the extreme West of Europe by intermarriage, by commerce, by the admission of the nobles of Byzantium within the orders of chivalry. These ties went on increasing throughout the twelfth century till they culminated at its close with the foundation of the Latin kingdom of Constantinople. In European literature these historic events are represented by the class of romances represented in this volume, which all trace back to versions in verse of the twelfth century, though they were done into prose somewhere in Picardy during the course of the next century. Daphnis and Chloe, one might say, had revived after a sleep of 700 years, and donned the garb and spoke the tongue of Romance.

II

The very first of our tales illustrates admirably the general course of their history. It is, in effect, a folk etymology of the name of the great capital of the Eastern Empire. Constantinople, so runs the tale, received that name instead of Byzantium, because of the remarkable career of one of its former rulers, Coustans. M. Wessel
ovsky has published in *Romania* (vi. l. seq.) the *Introduction Dit de l'empereur Constant*, the verse original of the story before us, and in this occur the lines—

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Pour ce que si nobles estoit
Et que nobles œuvres faisoit
L'appelloient Constant le noble
Et pour ço ou Constantinnoble
Li cytés de Bissence a non.
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From which it would appear that we are mistaken in thinking of the capital of Turkey as the “City of Constantine,” whereas it is rather Constant the Noble, and the name Coustant is further explained as “costing” too much. Constantinople, therefore, is the city that costs too much, according to the prophetic etymology of the folk.

The only historic personage with whom this Coustant can be identified is Constantius Chlorus, the father of Constantine the Great and the husband of St. Helena, to whom legend ascribes the discovery of the Holy Rood. But the Coustans of our story never lived or ruled on land or sea, and his predecessor, Muselinus, is altogether unknown to Byzantine annals, while their interlaced history reads more like a page of the *Arabian Nights* than of Gibbon.
But such a legend could scarcely have arisen elsewhere than at Constantinople. It is one of those fables that the disinherited folk have at all times invented to solace themselves for their disinherison. The sudden and fated rise of one of the folk to the heights of power occurs sufficiently often to afford material for the day dreams of ambitious youth. There is even a popular tendency to attribute a lowly origin to all favourites of fortune, as witness the legends that have grown up about the early careers of Beckett, Whittington, Wolsey, none of whom was as ill-born as popular tradition asserts. Yet such legends invariably grow up in the country of their heroes, which is the only one sufficiently interesting in their career, so far as the common people are concerned. Hence the very nature of our story would cause us to locate its origin on the banks of the Bosporus.

But once originated in this manner, there is no limit to the travels it may take. Curiously enough, the very legend before us in all its details has found a home among the English peasantry. The Rev. S. Baring-Gould collected in Yorkshire a story which he contributed to Henderson's *Folklore of the Northern Counties*, x
and entitled *The Fish and the Ring.* In this *Introduction* legend a girl comes as the unwelcome sixth of the family of a very poor man who lived under the shadow of York Minster. A Knight, riding by on the day of her birth, discovers, by consultation of the Book of Fate, that she was destined to marry his son. He offers to adopt her, and throws her into the River Ouse. A fisherman saves her, and she is again discovered after many years by the Knight, who learns what Fate has still in store for his son. He sends her to his brother at Scarborough with a fatal letter, ordering him to put her to death. But on the way she is seized by a band of robbers, who read the letter and replace it by one ordering the Baron's son to be married to her immediately on her arrival.

When the Baron discovers that he has not been able to evade the decree of fate he still persists in his persecution, and taking a ring from his finger throws it into the sea, saying that the girl shall never live with his son till she can show him that ring. She wanders about and becomes a scullery-maid at a great castle, and one day

* I have given a version of it in my *English Fairy Tales*, and there is a ballad on the subject entitled *The Cruel Knight*.  

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Introduction when the Baron is dining at the castle, while cleaning a great fish she finds his ring, and all ends happily.

Now on the east wall of the chancel of Stepney Church there is a monument erected to Dame Rebecca Berry, wife of Thomas Elton, of Stratford, Bow, and relict of Sir John Berry, 1696. The arms on the monument are thus blazoned by heralds ... “Paly of six on a bend three mullets (Elton) impaling a fish, and in the dexter chief point an annulet between two bends wavy.” The reference in the impalement of the blazon is obvious. A local tradition confidently identifies Dame Berry as the heroine of the Yorkshire legend, though of course it is ignorant of her connection with the etymology of Constantinople.

Now this tale, or the first half of it, is but a Yorkshire variant of one spread throughout Europe. The opening of the twenty-ninth story of the collection of the Brothers Grimm, and entitled The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs, is exactly the same, and in their Notes they give references to many similar European folk-tales. The story is found in Modern Greece (Von Hahn, No. XX.), and it is, therefore, possible that the story of King Coustans is the adaptation of a Greek folk-tale for the purposes of a Folk Etymology. But
the letter, “On delivery, please kill bearer,” is Introduction
scarcely likely to have occurred twice to the popular imagination, and one is almost brought
to the conclusion that the romance before us was itself either directly or indirectly the source of all the European Folk-tales in which the letter “To kill bearer” occurs. And as we have before traced the Romance back to Constantinople, one is further tempted to trace back the Letter itself to a reminiscence of Homer’s σήματα λυγρά.

I have said above that no Greek original of any of these Romances has hitherto been discovered. But in the case of King Coustans we can at any rate get within appreciable distance of it. As recently as 1895 a learned Teuton, Dr. Ernst Kuhn, pointed out, appropriately enough in the Byzantinische Zeitschrift, the existence of an Ethiopic and of an Arabic version of the legend. He found in one of Mr. Quaritch’s catalogues a description of an illuminated Ethiopic MS., once belonging to King Theodore of Magdala fame, which from the account given of several of the illustrations he was enabled to identify as the story of “The Man born to be King.” His name in the Ethiopic version is Thalassion, or Ethiopic words to that effect, and
The Greek provenance of the story is thereby established. Dr. Kuhn was also successful in finding an Arabic version done by a Coptic Christian. In both these versions the story is told as a miracle due to the interference of the Angel Michael; and it is a curious coincidence that in Mr. Morris' poetical version of our story in the "Earthly Paradise" he calls his hero Michael. Unless some steps are taken to prevent the misunderstanding, it is probable that some Teutonic investigator of the next century will, on the strength of this identity of names, bring Mr. Morris in guilty of a knowledge of Ethiopic.

But for the name of the hero one might have suspected these Oriental versions of being derived, not from a Greek, but from an Indian original. Mr. Tawney has described a variant found in the Kathākosa* which resembles our tale much more closely than any of the European folk-tales in the interesting point that the predestined bride herself finds the fatal letter and makes the satisfactory substitution. In the Indian tale this is done with considerable ingenuity and vraisemblance. The girl's name is Visha, and the operative clause of the fatal letter is:

* See Clouston, Book of Sindbad, p. 279.
"Before this man has washed his feet, do thou with speed
Give him poison (*visham*), and free my heart from care."

The lady thinks (or wishes) that her father is a bad orthographer, and corrects his spelling by omitting the final *m*, so that the letter reads: "Give him Visha," with results more satisfactory to the young lady than to her father. This variant is so very close to our tale, while the letter incident in it is so much more naturally developed than in the romance that one might almost suspect it of having been the original. But we must know more about the *Kathākosa* and about the communication between Byzantium and India before we can decisively determine which came first.

**III**

Amis and Amil were the David and Jonathan, the Orestes and Pylades, of the mediaeval world. Dr. Hofmann, who has edited the earliest French verse account of the Legend, enumerates nearly thirty other versions of it in almost all the tongues of Western and Northern Europe, not to mention various versions which have crept into different collections of the Lives of the
Introduction Saints. For their peerless friendship raised them
to the ranks of the martyrs, at any rate, at
Mortara and Novara, where, according to the
Legend, they died. The earliest of all these
forms is a set of Latin Hexameters by one
Radulphus Tortarius, born at Fleury, 1063, lived
in Normandy, and died some time after 1122.
It was, therefore, possible that the story had
come back with the first crusaders, and the
Grimms attribute to it a Greek original. But
in its earliest as well as in its present form, it is
definitely located on Romance soil, while the
names of the heroes are clearly Latin (Amicus
and Æmilius). It was, however, only at a later
stage that the story was affiliated to the Epic
Cycle of Charlemagne. On the face of it there
is clearly stamped the impress of popular tradition.
Heads are not so easily replaced, except by a
freak of the Folk imagination. It is probably
for this reason that M. Gaston Paris attributes
an Oriental origin to the latter part of the tale,
and for the same reason the Benedictine Fathers
have had serious doubts about admitting it into
the Acta Sanctorum. On the other hand, the
editors of the French text, the translation of
which we have before us, go so far as to con-
jecture that there is a historic germ for the whole
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Legend in certain incidents of the War of Charlemagne against Didier. But as the whole connection of the Legend with the Charlemagne Cycle is late, we need not attribute much importance to, indeed, we may at once dismiss their conjecture.

These disputes of the pundits cannot destroy the charm of the Legend. Never, even in antiquity, have the claims of friendship been urged with such a passionate emphasis. The very resemblance of the two heroes is symbolic of their similarity of character; the very name of one of them is Friend pure and simple. The world is well lost for friendship’s sake on the one side, on the other nearest and dearest are willingly and literally sacrificed on the altar of friendship. One of the most charming of the Fioretto tells how St. Francis overcame in himself the mediaeval dread at the touch of a leper, and washed and tended one of the poor unfortunates. He was but following the example of Amil, who was not deterred by the dreaded sound of the “tartavelle”—the clapper or rattle which announced the approach of the leper*—from tending his friend.

* Figured in M. Ulysse Robert, Signes d’infamie au moyen âge, Paris, 1891. Lovers of Stevenson will remember the effective use made of this in *The Black Arrow.*