

AUCASSIN

AND

NICOLETTE

AND

OTHER
ROMANCES

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE
AND OTHER MEDIÆVAL ROMANCES
AND LEGENDS



TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY EUGENE MASON

NEW YORK: E. P. DUTTON AND COMPANY, INC.
LONDON: J. M. DENT AND SONS, LIMITED

INTRODUCTION

THE little tales brought together in this volume are drawn from the literature of the Middle Ages, and in many cases were written in France of the thirteenth century. I hope that they may be found interesting in themselves, but to appreciate them fully they should be considered in their relations to a definite historical background. Their conceptions of society, of religion, of politics, of humour—that precious gift which always dies so young—are not common to all of us to-day. They are of the thirteenth century, and we of the twentieth. We may not be better than our forefathers, but a great chasm of seven hundred years yawns between us and them. To enjoy their work without reserve it is necessary for a time to breathe the same air that was breathed—roughly speaking—by the subjects of St. Louis of France.

It is possible to love the period known as the Middle Ages, or it is possible to detest it. But you cannot ignore it, nor find it flavourless on the palate, because that period possesses character, "character, that personal quality, that idiosyncrasy which, no doubt, you are the richer for possessing, be it morally bad or good—for it is surely better to have a bad character than none, and if you are a church, better to be like the Badia than the City Temple." Indeed, it is evident that the personal equation must largely determine what any writer's conception of the Middle Ages is. A great modern poet, for instance, loved the Middle

Ages because economic conditions pressed less hardly on the poor; because London was small and white and clean; because chivalry afforded opportunity for that decorative treatment of knightly episodes which makes his poetry so attractive. Yet across the Channel, much at the same time, an equally distinguished poet treated of the same period in a book of poems which it is instructive to consider side by side with the work of William Morris, and the Frenchman's verse is lurid with fire and bigotry, and the tale of man's inhumanity to man. And the strange point is that both writers could give chapter and verse for the very different type of story they selected. Again, the religious temperament is apt to look back fondly to the Middle Ages as the "Age of Faith." To such minds mediaevalism is a period of easy acquiescence in spiritual authority, a state of health before the world grew sick with our modern disease of doubt. Certainly these centuries produced saints whose arresting examples and haunting words must always be the glory of Christianity, and it is equally certain that the offices and doctrines of the Church entered far more intimately into the lives of the common folk than they do to-day. But side by side with faith there was a "spirit of rebellion and revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the time." It may be found in many strangely different shapes: in the life of Abelard; in the extraordinary spread of witchcraft; and—in its supreme literary expression, perhaps—in a famous passage of "Aucassin and Nicolette." And, to take a third illustration of the same difficulty, were the Middle Ages years of sheer lyric beauty, or rather years of inexpressible ugliness and filth? "If you love the very words 'Middle Age';

if they conjure up to your mind glowing old folios of black letter with gilt and florid initials; crimson and green and blue pages in which slim ladies with spiked head-dresses walk amid sparse flowers and trees like bouquets, or where men-at-arms attack walled cities no bigger than themselves, or long-legged youths with tight waists and frizzed hair kiss girls under apple-trees; or a king is on a dais with gold lilies for his background, minstrels on their knees before him, lovers in the gallery"—well, if you accept all this dainty circumstance, you get sheer lyric beauty, and nothing else. Only there is another side, a side not very pleasant to dwell upon, and it may perhaps be hinted at by saying that such a necessary of the toilet as a pocket-handkerchief was not generally known in this Age of Beauty. Perhaps it would be truer to hold that the Middle Ages comprised all these things—the knight-errant and the tormentor; the altar and the witch's Sabbath; a dream of loveliness having its roots in slime and squalor. These centuries were both "enormous and delicate." They were great enough to include opposites, and to square the circle. You may love them, or you may hate them; but they cannot be given the go-by.

The philosophy of the Middle Ages—that is to say, the idea which governed their political and theological conceptions—was both simple and profound. The Emperor or King was considered to be the guardian of the temporal order of things, just as the Pope was held to be the supreme authority in matters of eternal and spiritual concern. It was an idea fascinating in its simplicity, but life is a tangled and complex matter, and in practice, planets, which in theory moved strictly in

their own orbits, were continually striking across each other's path. Even St. Louis, the King, who carried saintliness to the extreme limit permitted to man, was involved in frequent political quarrels with the supreme head of his Church, and by one of the little ironies of fate came within measurable distance of excommunication. The King—again in theory—was the owner of all his realm. This was necessary to abolish Heptarchies. But for the support of the Crown he parcelled out his realm amongst great lords, and thus established Heptarchies again. The great barons, in their turn, divided their estates amongst knights, bound to assist them in their quarrels, and to furnish a certain number of soldiers to their service. Amongst these knights sprang up one of the supreme institutions of the Middle Ages—the institution of chivalry. "It took its birth in the interior of the feudal mansions, without any set purpose beyond that of declaring, first, the admission of the young man to the rank and occupation of the warrior; secondly, the tie which bound him to his feudal superior—his lord, who conferred upon him the arms of knighthood. But when once the feudal society had acquired some degree of stability and confidence, the usages, the feelings, the circumstances of every kind which attended the young man's admission among the vassal warriors, came under two influences, which soon gave them a fresh direction, and impressed them with a novel character. Religion and imagination, poetry and the Church, laid hold on chivalry, and used it as a powerful means of attaining the objects they had in view, of meeting the moral wants which it was their business to provide for." Throughout a long apprenticeship,

in a castle which contained practically but one woman, the wife of his lord and she removed how infinitely from him in distance and in station, the young squire was trained to feel towards all women something of the dreamy devotion with which art and religion taught him to regard Our Lady herself. And the apprenticeship culminated in the ceremony of knighthood, with all the mystical significance of the symbolism preserved for us in the little story of Sir Hugh of Tabarie and the Sultan Saladin, carefully calculated to impress the recipient in the highest degree. Devotion to God, to his king, and to his lady—these were the ideals of knighthood, not always, unfortunately, its realities. But ideals are difficult of realization in so faulty a world as ours. The Black Prince was the very pattern of chivalry in his youth, yet Froissart remarks in his account of the battle of Poitiers that “the Prince of Wales, who was as courageous and cruel as a lion, took great pleasure this day in fighting and chasing his enemies.” The conduct of that perfect gentle knight, Sir Graelent, towards the lady he discovered bathing in the fountain, was far from chivalrous, according to modern notions, and yet I can assure the reader that I have walked delicately as Agag, and gone to the verge of weakness, in recounting the incident. Finally, here is a passage from a letter written by a knight of the fourteenth century to the Tyrant of Mantua, relating to a French girl, Jeannette, which is sufficiently explicit. “Let her be detained at my suit, for if you should have a thousand golden florins spent for her, I will pay them without delay, for if I should have to follow her to Avignon I will obtain this woman. Now, my lord, should I be asking a trifle contrary

to law, yet ought you not to cross me in this, for some day I shall do more for you than a thousand united women could effect; and if there be need of me in a matter of greater import, you shall have for the asking a thousand spears at my back." Ah, well, ideals that are realized cease to be ideals.

Just as this worship of woman was the great social note of the Middle Ages, so the devotion to the Blessed Virgin was the distinguishing religious feature of those times. In honour of Our Lady were erected the magnificent Gothic cathedrals—those masterpieces of moral elevation—which stud the fair land of France like painted capitals upon a written page. In these buildings the genius of the Middle Ages found its supreme expression. Above the crowded market-place and narrow mediaeval street rose those incomparable churches, "like Gothic queens at prayer, alone, silent and adorned." In her honour, too, they were made beautiful with glass and statuary, so that never before nor since were churches filled with such an entrancing congregation, never had buildings such wonderful eyes. And at a time when masons built to her honour and theologians defined her position, the story-tellers were not slack in her praise. The three legends relating to the Virgin, which I have included in this book of translations, are but specimens of an immense literature devoted to her service. "Our Lady's Tumbler" is, to the modern taste, one of the most appealing of all these legends, but there are others nearly, if not quite, so beautiful. Once upon a time there was a monk who was so ignorant that he was exposed to the rebuke of his brethren. But in his devotion to Our Lady he took for his meditation five psalms, each com-

mencing with a letter of her name. And when it pleased God that his end should come, there happened a very beauteous miracle, for from his mouth came forth five fresh roses, sweet, crimson and leafy, in honour of the five letters of the name of Maria. Again, how exquisite is the story of the nun who by frailty of heart fled from her cloister to give herself over to sin. After many long years she returned to the nunnery, having lost her innocence, but not her faith, for during all her wanderings she had never omitted her habit of prayer to Our Lady. But, to her surprise, always she was addressed by her sisters as if she had never gone from amongst them. For the Blessed Virgin, having clothed herself with the vesture and seeming of the truant who loved her, even in sin, took also upon her the duties of a sacristan from which she had fled, so that no single person had noticed the absence from her cloister of the faithless nun.

Yet, after all, the Middle Ages delighted to honour Our Lady as the tender Mother rather than as the Queen of Heaven. In numberless miniatures, and on the portals of the cathedrals raised to her glory, she stands presenting her Child to the adoration of men. It is as the instrument of the Incarnation that her ultimate dignity consists. Indeed, the religion of the Middle Ages can only be appreciated by regarding it in the light of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Christ is God. The Mass—the popular service instituted by Himself—is an extension of His Incarnation. The Blessed Virgin is to be held in peculiar veneration as the Mother of God. The two threads can easily be seen twined together in that story of how Our Lady tourneyed whilst the knight was at Mass. But belief in

the Incarnation is the keystone of mediaeval theology, and the only explanation of the lives of those saints who poured out their years like water in the service of God and man.

The authors of the stories brought together in this book from various sources are, in some cases, identified, but in others are unknown. They may, perhaps, be regarded as representative of the three classes who are responsible for this kind of fiction—the monk, the *trouvère* and the professional minstrel. The monk, for his part, wrote in French seldom enough. He was a scholar, and when he had something to say, preferred to deliver himself in Latin, the language common to all educated men. But, for once, in the thirteenth century, a monk of Soissons, named Gautier de Coinci, translated into French verse a great collection of the miracles of Our Lady. From this garner I have selected the legend "Of a Jew who took as Surety the Image of Our Lady." Gautier de Coinci may not have been a supreme poet—that saving grace comes seldom enough—but his industry was certainly abnormal. His labour of love must have been the occupation of a lifetime, and it is pleasant to recall the old monk, in silent scriptorium and shady cloister, turning the Latin legends into fluent and pious verse.

The *trouvère* was drawn from the same class as the troubadour, and the circumstances of their lives were in essentials much the same. He lived very probably in some nobleman's castle, where he composed his stories as a sort of amateur, and recited the verses to an audience more or less select. His pride forbade him to appear personally before the populace, but it permitted him to provide wandering minstrels with cop-

ies of these poems, and so entertain the common folk by deputy. In the lord's castle it was, of course, another matter. On summer afternoons he would recite before the baron's household, where they were seated on the steps of the garden terrace, each in his order and degree. You can feel the hush and heat of the Provençal evening, whilst the sombre cypresses spire into the sky, and the olives whisper, and, far below, the broad stretches of the Rhone are suffused with the lovely light and colour of southern France. Or, in winter, after supper, when the tables were cleared, the *trouvère* would recite in hall. At the feet of the ladies sat their knights on silken cushions, fettered with silver chains, each to his friend. It was an audience rich and idle, familiar with the fantastic lives of the troubadours, and with the wanton judgments of the Courts of Love. For such a company no flower of sentiment could be too highly scented, and no tale come amiss, save only that it spoke of love.

If the *trouvères* were "the aristocracy of this literature," the minstrel was its "democracy." Sometimes he rose almost to the status of the *trouvère*, composing his own stories, and reciting them even in kings' houses. Generally, however, the minstrel was but a strolling player, speaking other men's thoughts, and wandering over the length and breadth of the land. Occasionally he went alone with his viol. At other times he was accompanied by bears, or a little troupe of singing boys or dancing girls. The minstrel might have the good fortune to give his entertainment before some knight or count. At any rate, the common folk heard him gladly, before the church or on the village green. If he was lucky, the homeless minstrel got free

lodgings for the night at some hospitable monastery, but occasionally he was turned from the door, with hard words, because of St. Bernard's saying that "the tricks of the jongleurs can never please God." Once upon a time such a minstrel as this knocked at a monastery door, and asked for hospitality. He was received without indecent joy, and the guest-master, forgetting that a grace conferred unwillingly is no favour at all, provided the guest with black bread, salted vegetables, cold water, and a hard and dirty pallet. The abbot obviously felt no passion for strolling vagabonds, and had appointed a guest-master after his own heart. On the morrow, when the minstrel was leaving the monastery, he met the abbot returning from a short journey. To revenge himself, at any rate, on one of the two, the minstrel accosted him effusively. "My lord," said he, "I thank you and all the community from the bottom of my heart, for Brother such-an-one has welcomed me like Christ Himself last night. He lighted a fire in my chamber, and served me with choice wines, excellent fish, and more dishes than I am able to recall. And this morning when he bade me farewell he gave me shoes, and these leathern laces, and a knife." When the abbot heard this he was filled with anger, and, parting shortly from the minstrel, he hastened to the monastery, and promptly relieved the guest-master of his office, before the latter could offer a word of explanation. Thus was the minstrel revenged on this grudging heart.

If, however, any reader would like to see closer the actual life of a minstrel of the thirteenth century, I would suggest that he obtain the excellent little book on Rutebeuf, one of the most famous of them all,

published in the Grands æcrivains Francais series. There he may read of the poet's bare cupboard, and the unfurnished lodging, where he lived with his ugly and dowerless old wife, who brought him but fifty years with her soup. He coughs with cold and gapes with hunger. He has no mattress, but only straw, and a bed of straw is not a bed. He fears to face his wife without money for food and rent. If he cannot dig, emphatically, to beg he is not ashamed. All his goods are in pawn, and his time is wasted in the tavern, playing dice, which are his curse and his downfall. Well, Rutebeuf is not the first nor the last to be ruined by dice. How the Devil must smile! Do you remember the legend of the making of these little figures? A merchant who sold himself to the Devil was bidden by him to make a six-sided piece of bone, and to mark each side with a number. One point was to insult the only true God. Two points were to insult God and the Blessed Virgin. Three points to insult the Holy Trinity. Four points to insult the four Evangelists. Five points to insult the Sacred Wounds; and six points to insult the Days of Creation. From that hour the little figures spread rapidly through the world, to man's confusion. Such is the picture Rutebeuf paints of his life—a life curiously anticipative of that of many a Bohemian poet since. It is not a very attractive picture, and though for artistic and other reasons the shadows may be unduly darkened, yet in the main it is doubtless substantially correct.

The stories written by such men as these are racy of their soil, and give the very form and pressure of their times. I have tried to make my little selection representative, and have included in this book not only

romances of love and chivalry, but legends of devotion and moralities. Greatly daring, I have translated a specimen of their humour even—not too characteristic, I hope, of the robust merriment of the feudal period. These stories will be found illustrative of some of the ideas with which the mind of the Middle Ages was concerned. The devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to Our Lady; the languid and overwrought sentiment of love; the mystical ceremonies of knight-hood; all these things are illuminated by the tales which follow this Introduction. Bound up with them are customs and ideas which to the modern mind are, perhaps, less happy. It seems odd, for instance, that the feudal knight should see nothing repugnant in accepting money and clothing from the lady who had given him already the supreme favour of her love. It is possible to entertain a high ideal of friendship without being prepared to cut the throats of your children for the sake of your friend. Yet this is what Amile did for Amis in the great epic of friendship of the Middle Ages. In its stark adherence to a superhuman standard, it puts one in mind of the animal-like patience of Griselda—which story (not included here) may perhaps be regarded as the modest ideal of the mediaeval husband. It is strange, too, to find in stories so concerned with the knightly exercises of the tourney and the joust, no hint of the singular disfavour in which these games (or, perhaps, pursuits) were held by the Church. Popes prohibited them; St. Louis forbade them. Those slain therein were refused burial in consecrated ground. The Church testified, “Of those who fell in tournament there is no question but that they go down to hell, unless they are aided by the great

benefit of absolution." At Cologne sixty knights and squires were killed, and the cries were heard all about of demons carrying off their souls to perdition. Apparently all this tremendous machinery failed utterly in its purpose. The most pious knights strove in tournaments equally with the most reckless, and—according to Miss Knox, to whose admirable *Court of a Saint* I am indebted—a son of St. Louis himself was thrown at a tourney, and was afterwards weak in intellect as a consequence.

Nor is it only with the lives of the rich that the mediaeval minstrel was concerned. He dealt, too, with the lives and aspirations of that yet more numerous class, the poor. Such a story as "The Three Thieves" is indeed a picture of the home of the hind. We see the mean mud and timber hovel, into which the thieves broke so easily, with its cauldron upon the fire of fagots, its big bedstead, and the little lean-to byre. The peasant's tools stood around the wall, whilst outside was the garden, in which a wise ordinance of St. Louis required that pot-herbs should be planted. And if the tale of "The Three Thieves" shows us the home of the peasant, his soul is stripped for us to the quick, in—of all places in the world of literature—"Aucassin and Nicolette." Amongst the full-blown flowers of sentiment in that incomparable love-story is placed an episode which, in its violence and harsh realism, has been likened to a spot of blood and mud on a silver ground. Possibly it was inserted merely to show the hero's good heart, or is simply an instance of that artistic use of contrast so noticeable throughout the book. Any way, there are few things in feudal literature more striking than the meeting of the "dan-

sellon" with the tattered, hideous ploughman, the one weeping in delicate grief, the other telling, dry-eyed, the sordid story of the abject poor. It is very far from being the happiest incident in the romance, but it is certainly one of the most memorable. One wonders how it was taken by an audience that concerned itself so little with the interests of the serf, and whose literature never mentioned that class, except in scorn. Was the author possibly of the ploughman's kindred, like Chaucer's parish priest in *The Canterbury Tales*? Had the stinging whips of captivity taught him sympathy with unpoetical sorrows; or is this an early hint of the coming storm! "They are clothed in velvet, and warm in their furs and their ermines, while we are covered with rags. They have wine and spices and fair bread; and we, oat-cake and straw, and water to drink. They have leisure and fine houses; we have pain and labour, the rain and the wind in the fields." We cannot tell; but comparing this dainty make-belief with that tragic misery, we feel the significance of the peasant's cry, "Woe to those who shall sorrow at the tears of such as these."

I hope I have not dwelt unduly on these stories considered as pictures of the customs and philosophy of their times. Perhaps, after all, these matters are of interest to the archaeologist and the ecclesiologist rather than to the general reader. Not being a scholar myself, I have no pretension to write for scholars. My object is more modest. I have tried to bring together a little garland for the pleasure of the amateurs of beautiful tales. To me these mediaeval stories are beautiful, and I have striven to decant them from one language into another with as little loss as may be. To this end I have

refined a phrase, or, perhaps, softened an incident here and there. I do not pretend that they are perfect works of art. "All poets are unequal, except the bad, and they are uniformly bad." Sometimes a story drags, or there are wearisome repetitions. The psychology occasionally strikes a modern reader as remarkably summary. When Amis, for example, became a leper, we are gravely told that his wife held him in bitter hatred, and many a time strove to strangle him. Here is an author who, obviously, is astonished at nothing. But in reading these narratives you will remember how they have delighted, and been used by, writers in some cases greater than their own authors. Is it possible, for instance, to peruse "The Lay of the Little Bird" without recalling Shelley's "Sensitive Plant"? The tale of "The Divided Horsecloth" is told, in another version, both by Montaigne and Browning. The principal incident of "King Florus and the Fair Jehane" is used by Shakespeare in "Cymbeline." "Our Lady's Tumbler" and "A Jew who took as Surety the Image of Our Lady" have been re-written by Monsieur Anatole France with such perfection of art and artistry as to be the admiration and despair of all who come after him.

It should not be forgotten that the majority of these stories were intended to be recited, and not read. Repetition, therefore, is the more easily excused. This also accounts for the dramatic use of dialogue, so noticeable in "The Palfrey" and in "Aucassin and Nicolette." But it is evident that this Introduction, already over-long, will not permit me to go *seriatim* through these tales, "Item, a grey eye or so. Item, two lips, indifferent red." Let me therefore content myself