

CHAPTER XXX

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ROMANCE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

THE value of romantic literature, which has been, so far as the Middle Ages are concerned, unjustly depreciated, does not depend upon beauty of words or beauty of fact. To-day the immense debt of modern literature to the literature of the Middle Ages is better understood; and we are generally beginning to recognize what we owe to the imagination of the Middle Ages, in spite of the ignorance, the superstition and the cruelty of that time. If the evils of the Middle Ages had really been universal, those ages could not have imparted to us lessons of beauty and lessons of nobility having nothing to do with literary form in themselves, yet profoundly affecting modern poetry of the highest class. No; there was very much of moral goodness, as well as of moral badness in the Middle Ages; and what was good happened to be very good indeed. Commonly it used to be said (though I do not think any good critic would say it now) that the fervid faith of the time made the moral beauty. Unless we modify this statement a great deal, we cannot now accept it at all. There was indeed a religious beauty, particularly mediæval, but it was not that which created the romance of the period. Indeed, that romantic literature was something of a reaction against the religious restraint upon imagination. But if we mean by mediæval faith only that which is very much older than any European civilization, and which does not belong to the West any more than to the East—the profound belief in human moral experience—then I think that the statement is true enough. At no time in European history were men more sincere believers in the value of certain virtues than during the

Middle Ages — and the very best of the romances are just those romances which illustrate that belief, though not written for a merely ethical purpose.

But I cannot better illustrate what I mean than by telling a story, which has nothing to do with Europe or the Middle Ages or any particular form of religious belief. It is not a Christian story at all; and it could not be told you exactly as written, for there are some very curious pages in it. But it is a good example of the worth that may lie in a mere product of imagination.

There was a king once, in Persia or Arabia, who, at the time of his accession to power, discovered a wonderful subterranean hall under the garden of his palace. In one chamber of that hall stood six marvellous statues of young girls, each statue being made out of a single diamond. The beauty as well as the cost of the work was beyond imagination. But in the midst of the statues, which stood in a circle, there was an empty pedestal, and on that pedestal was a precious casket containing a letter from the dead father of the king. The letter said:

“O my son, though these statues of girls are indeed beyond all praise, there is yet a seventh statue incomparably more precious and beautiful which I could not obtain before I died. It is now your duty, O my son, to obtain that statue, that it may be placed upon the seventh pedestal. Go, therefore, and ask my favourite slave, who is still alive, how you are to obtain it.” Then the young king went in all haste to that old slave, who had been his father’s confidant, and showed him the letter. And the old man said, “Even now, O master, I will go with you to find that statue. But it is in one of the three islands in which the genii dwell; and it is necessary, above all things, that you do not fear, and that you obey my instructions in all things. Also, remember that if you make a promise to the Spirits of that land, the promise must be kept.”

And they proceeded upon their journey through a great wilderness, in which “nothing existed but grass and the

presence of God." I cannot try now to tell you about the wonderful things that happened to them, nor about the marvellous boat, rowed by a boatman having upon his shoulders the head of an elephant. Suffice it to say that at last they reached the palace of the king of the Spirits; and the king came to meet them in the form of a beautiful old man with a long white beard. And he said to the young king, "My son, I will gladly help you, as I helped your father; and I will give you that seventh statue of diamond which you desire. But I must ask for a gift in return. You must bring to me here a young girl, of about 16 years old; and she must be very intelligent; and she must be a true maiden, not only as to her body, but as to her soul, and heart, and all her thoughts." The young king thought that was a very easy thing to find, but the king of the Spirits assured him that it was not, and further told him this, "My son, no mortal man is wise enough to know by his own wisdom the purity that is in the heart of a young girl. Only by the help of this magical mirror, which I now lend you, will you be able to know. Look at the reflection of any maiden in this mirror, and then, if her heart is perfectly good and pure, the mirror will remain bright. But if there be any fault in her, the mirror will grow dim. Go now, and do my bidding."

You can imagine, of course, what happened next. Returning to his kingdom, the young king had brought before him many beautiful girls, the daughters of the noblest and highest in all the cities of the land. But in no case did the mirror remain perfectly clear when the ghostly test was applied. For three years in vain the king sought; then in despair he for the first time turned his attention to the common people. And there came before him on the very first day, a rude man of the desert, who said, "I know of just such a girl as you want." Then he went forth and presently returned with a simple girl from the desert, who had been brought up in the care of her father only, and had lived with no other companion than the members of

her own family and the camels and horses of the encampment. And as she stood in her poor dress before the king, he saw that she was much more beautiful than any one whom he had seen before; and he questioned her, only to find that she was very intelligent; and she was not at all afraid or ashamed of standing before the king, but looked about her with large wondering eyes, like the eyes of a child; and whoever met that innocent gaze, felt a great joy in his heart, and could not tell why. And when the king had the mirror brought, and the reflection of the girl was thrown upon it, the mirror became much brighter than before, and shone like a great moon.

There was the maid whom the Spirit-king wished for. The king easily obtained her from her parents; but he did not tell her what he intended to do with her. Now it was his duty to give her to the Spirits; but there was a condition he found very hard to fulfil. By the terms of his promise he was not allowed to kiss her, to caress her, or even to see her, except veiled after the manner of the country. Only by the mirror had he been able to know how fair she was. And the voyage was long; and on the way, the girl, who thought she was going to be this king's bride, became sincerely attached to him, after the manner of a child with a brother; and he also in his heart became much attached to her. But it was his duty to give her up. At last they reached the palace of the Spirit-king; and the figure of the old man came forth and said, "My son, you have done well and kept your promise. This maiden is all that I could have wished for; and I accept her. Now when you go back to your palace, you will find on the seventh pedestal the statue of the diamond which your father desired you to obtain." And, with these words, the Spirit-king vanished, taking with him the girl, who uttered a great and piercing cry to heaven at having been thus deceived. Very sorrowfully the young king then began his journey home. All along the way he kept regretting that girl, and regretting the cruelty which he had practised in deceiving her and

her parents. And he began to say to himself, "Accursed be the gift of the king of the Spirits! Of what worth to me is a woman of diamond any more than a woman of stone? What is there in all the world half so beautiful or half so precious as a living girl such as I discovered? Fool that I was to give her up for the sake of a statue!" But he tried to console himself by remembering that he had obeyed his dead father's wish.

Still, he could not console himself. Reaching his palace, he went to his secret chamber to weep alone, and he wept night and day, in spite of the efforts of his ministers to comfort him. But at last one of them said, "O my king, in the hall beneath your garden there has appeared a wonderful statue upon the seventh pedestal; perchance if you go to see it, your heart will become more joyful."

Then with great reluctance the king properly dressed himself, and went to the subterranean hall.

There indeed was the statue, the gift of the Spirit-king; and very beautiful it was. But it was not made of diamond, and it looked so strangely like the girl whom he had lost, that the king's heart leapt in his breast for astonishment. He put out his hand and touched the statue, and found it warm with life and youth. And a sweet voice said to him, "Yes, it is really I—have you forgotten?"

Thus she was given back to him; and the Spirit-king came to their wedding, and thus addressed the bridegroom, "O my son, for your dead father's sake I did this thing. For it was meant to teach you that the worth of a really pure and perfect woman is more than the price of any diamond or any treasure that the earth can yield."

Now you can see at once the beauty of this story; and the moral of it is exactly the same as that of the famous verse, in the Book of Proverbs, "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies." But it is simply a story from the "Arabian Nights"—one of those stories which you will not find in the ordinary European translations, because it is written in such a way that no English

translator except Burton would have dared to translate it quite literally. The obscenity of parts of the original does not really detract in the least from the beauty and tenderness of the motive of the story; and we must remember that what we call moral or immoral in style depends very much upon the fashion of an age and time.

Now it is exactly the same kind of moral charm that distinguishes the best of the old English romances—a charm which has nothing to do with the style, but everything to do with the feeling and suggestion of the composition. But in some of the old romances, the style too has a very great charm of quaintness and simplicity and sincerity not to be imitated to-day. In this respect the older French romances, from which the English made their renderings, are much the best. And the best of all is said to be “Amis et Amile,” which the English rendered as “Amis and Amiloun.” Something of the story ought to interest you.

The whole subject of this romance is the virtue of friendship, though this of course involves a number of other virtues quite as distinguished. Amis and Amile, that is to say Amicus and Amelius, are two young knights who at the beginning of their career become profoundly attached to each other. Not content with the duties of this natural affection, they imposed upon themselves all the duties which chivalry also attached to the office of friend. The romance tells of how they triumph over every conceivable test to which their friendship was subjected. Often and often the witchcraft of woman worked to separate them, but could not. Both married, yet after marriage their friendship was just as strong as before. Each has to fight many times on account of the other, and suffer all things which it is most hard for a proud and brave man to bear. But everything is suffered cheerfully, and the friends are such true knights that, in all their trials, neither does anything wrong, or commits the slightest fault against truth—until a certain sad day. On that day it is the duty of Amis to fight in a trial by battle. But he is sick, and cannot fight; then to

save his honour his friend Amile puts on the armour and helmet of Amis, and so pretending to be Amis, goes to the meeting place, and wins the fight gloriously. But this was an act of untruthfulness; he had gone into battle under a false name, and to do anything false even for a good motive is bad. So heaven punishes him by afflicting him with the horrible disease of leprosy.

The conditions of leprosy in the Middle Ages were of a peculiar kind. The disease seems to have been introduced into Europe from Asia—perhaps by the Crusaders. Michelet suggests that it may have resulted from the European want of cleanliness, brought about by ascetic teachings—for the old Greek and Roman public bath-houses were held in horror by the mediæval church. But this is not at all certain. What is certain is that in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries leprosy became very prevalent. The disease was not then at all understood; it was supposed to be extremely contagious, and the man afflicted by it was immediately separated from society, and not allowed to live in any community under such conditions as could bring him into contact with other inhabitants. His wife or children could accompany him only on the terrible condition of being considered lepers. Every leper wore a kind of monk's dress, with a hood covering the face; and he had to carry a bell and ring it constantly to give notice of his approach. Special leper-houses were built near every town, where such unfortunates might obtain accommodation. They were allowed to beg, but it was considered dangerous to go very near them, so that in most cases alms or food would be thrown to them only, instead of being put into their hands.

Now when the victim of leprosy in this romance is first afflicted by the disease, he happens to be far away from his good friend. And none of his own family is willing to help him; he is regarded with superstitious as well as with physical horror. There is nothing left for him to do but to yield up his knighthood and his welfare and his family, to

put on the leper's robe, and to go begging along the roads, carrying a leper's bell. And this he does. For long, long months he goes begging from town to town, till at last, by mere chance, he finds his way to the gate of the great castle where his good friend is living—now a great prince, and married to the daughter of the king. And he asks at the castle gate for charity and for food.

Now the porter at the gate observes that the leper has a very beautiful cup, exactly resembling a drinking cup belonging to his master, and he thinks it his duty to tell these things to the lord of the castle. And the lord of the castle remembers that very long ago he and his friend each had a cup of this kind, given to them by the bishop of Rome. So, hearing the porter's story, he knew that the leper at the gate was the friend who "had delivered him from death, and won for him the daughter of the King of France to be his wife."* Here I had better quote from the French version of the story, in which the names of the friends are changed, but without changing the beauty of the tale itself:

"And straightway he fell upon him, and began to weep greatly, and kissed him. And when his wife heard that, she ran out with her hair in disarray, weeping and distressed exceedingly, for she remembered that it was he who had slain the false Andres. And thereupon they placed him in a fair cell, and said to him, Abide with us until God's will be accomplished in thee, for all that we have is at thy service. So he abode with them."*

You must understand, by the allusion to "God's will," that leprosy was in the Middle Ages really considered to be a punishment from heaven—so that in taking a leper into his castle, the good friend was not only offending against the law of the land, but risking celestial punishment as well, according to the notions of that age. His charity, therefore, was true charity indeed, and his friendship without fear. But it was going to be put to a test more terrible than any

* Walter Pater *The Renaissance*, pp. 11—12.

ever endured before. To comprehend what followed, you must know that there was one horrible superstition of the Middle Ages—the belief that by bathing in human blood the disease of leprosy might be cured. Murders were often committed under the influence of that superstition. I believe you will remember that the “Golden Legend” of Longfellow is founded upon a mediæval story in which a young girl voluntarily offers up her life in order that her blood may cure the leprosy of her king. In the present romance there is much more tragedy. One night while sleeping in his friend’s castle, the leper was awakened by an angel from God—Raphael—who said to him:

“I am Raphael, the angel of our Lord, and am come to tell thee how thou mayst be healed; for thy prayers are heard. Thou shalt bid Amile, thy comrade, that he slay his two children and wash thee in their blood, and so thy body shall be made whole.” And Amis said to him, “Let not this thing be, that my comrade should become a murderer for my sake.” But the angel said, “It is convenient that he do this.” And thereupon the angel departed.

The phrase, “it is convenient,” must be understood as meaning, “it is ordered.” For the mediæval lord used such gentle expressions when issuing his commands; and the angel talked like a feudal messenger. But in spite of the command, the sick man does not tell his friend about the angel’s visit, until Amile, who has overheard the voice, forces him to acknowledge whom he had been talking with during the night. And the emotion of the lord may be imagined, though he utters it only in the following gentle words—“I would have given to thee my man-servants and my maid-servants and all my goods, and thou feignest that an angel hath spoken to thee that I should slay my two children. But I conjure thee by the faith which there is between me and thee, and by our comradeship, and by the baptism we received together, that thou tell me whether it was man or angel said that to thee.”

Amis declares that it was really an angel, and Amile

never thinks of doubting his friend's word. It would be a pity to tell you the sequel in my own words; let me quote again from the text, translated by Walter Pater. I think you will find it beautiful and touching:

"Then Amile began to weep in secret, and thought within himself: If this man was ready to die before the king for me, shall I not for him slay my children? Shall I not keep faith with him who was faithful to me even unto death? And Amile tarried no longer, but departed to the chamber of his wife, and bade her go hear the Sacred Office. And he took a sword, and went to the bed where the children were lying, and found them asleep. And he lay down over them and began to weep bitterly and said, Hath any man yet heard of a father who of his own will slew his children? Alas, my children! I am no longer your father, but your cruel murderer.

"And the children awoke at the tears of their father, which fell upon them; and they looked up into his face and began to laugh. And as they were of the age of about three years, he said, Your laughing will be turned into tears, for your innocent blood must now be shed; and therewith he cut off their heads. Then he laid them back in the bed, and put the heads upon the bodies, and covered them as though they slept: and with the blood which he had taken he washed his comrade, and said, Lord Jesus Christ! who hast commanded men to keep faith on earth, and didst heal the leper by Thy word! cleanse now my comrade, for whose love I have shed the blood of my children." And of course the leper is immediately and completely cured. But the mother did not know anything about the killing of the children; we have to hear something about her share in the tragedy. Let me again quote, this time giving the real and very beautiful conclusion—

"Now neither the father nor the mother had yet entered where the children were; but the father sighed heavily, because they were dead, and the mother asked for them, that they might rejoice together; but Amile said, Dame! let

the children sleep. And it was already the hour of Tierce. And going in alone to the children to weep over them, he found them at play in the bed; only, in the place of the sword-cuts about their throats was as it were a thread of crimson. And he took them in his arms and carried them to his wife and said, Rejoice greatly, for thy children whom I had slain by the commandment of the angel are alive, and by their blood is Amis healed."

I think you will all see how fine a story this is, and feel the emotional force of the grand moral idea behind it. There is nothing more to tell you, except the curious fact that during the Middle Ages, when it was believed that the story was really true, Amis and Amile—or Amicus and Amelius—were actually considered by the Church as saints, and people used to pray to them. When anybody was anxious for his friend, or feared that he might lose the love of his friend, or was afraid that he might not have strength to perform his duty as friend—then he would go to church to implore help from the good saints Amicus and Amelius. But of course it was all a mistake—a mistake which lasted until the end of the seventeenth century! Then somebody called the attention of the Church to the unmistakable fact that Amicus and Amelius were merely inventions of some mediæval romancer. Then the Church made investigation, and greatly shocked, withdrew from the list of its saints those long-loved names of Amicus and Amelius—a reform in which I cannot help thinking the Church made a very serious mistake. What matter whether those shadowy figures represented original human lives or only human dreams? They were beautiful, and belief in them made men think beautiful thoughts, and the imagined help from them had comforted many thousands of hearts. It would have been better to have left them alone; for that matter, how many of the existent lives of saints are really true? Nevertheless the friends are not dead, though expelled from the heaven of the church. They still live in romance; and everybody who reads about them feels a little better for their acquaintance.

What I read to you was from the French version—that is much the more beautiful of the two. You will find some extracts from the English version in the pages of Ten Brink. But as that great German scholar pointed out, the English story is much rougher than the French. For example, in the English story, the knight rushes out of his castle to beat the leper at the gate, and to accuse him of having stolen the cup. And he does beat him ferociously, and abuses him with very violent terms. In fact, the English writer reflected too much of mediæval English character, in trying to cover, or to improve upon, the French story, which was the first. In the French story all is knightly smooth, refined as well as simple and strong. And where did the mediæval imagination get its material for the story? Partly, perhaps, from the story of Joseph in the Bible, partly from the story of Abraham; but the scriptural material is so admirably worked over that the whole thing appears deliciously original. That was the great art of the Middle Ages—to make old, old things quite new by the magic of spiritual imagination. Men then lived in a world of dreams. And that world still attracts us, for the simple reason that happiness chiefly consists in dreams. Exact science may help us a great deal, no doubt, but mathematics do not make us any happier. Dreams do, if we can believe them. The Middle Ages could believe them; we, at the best, can only try.