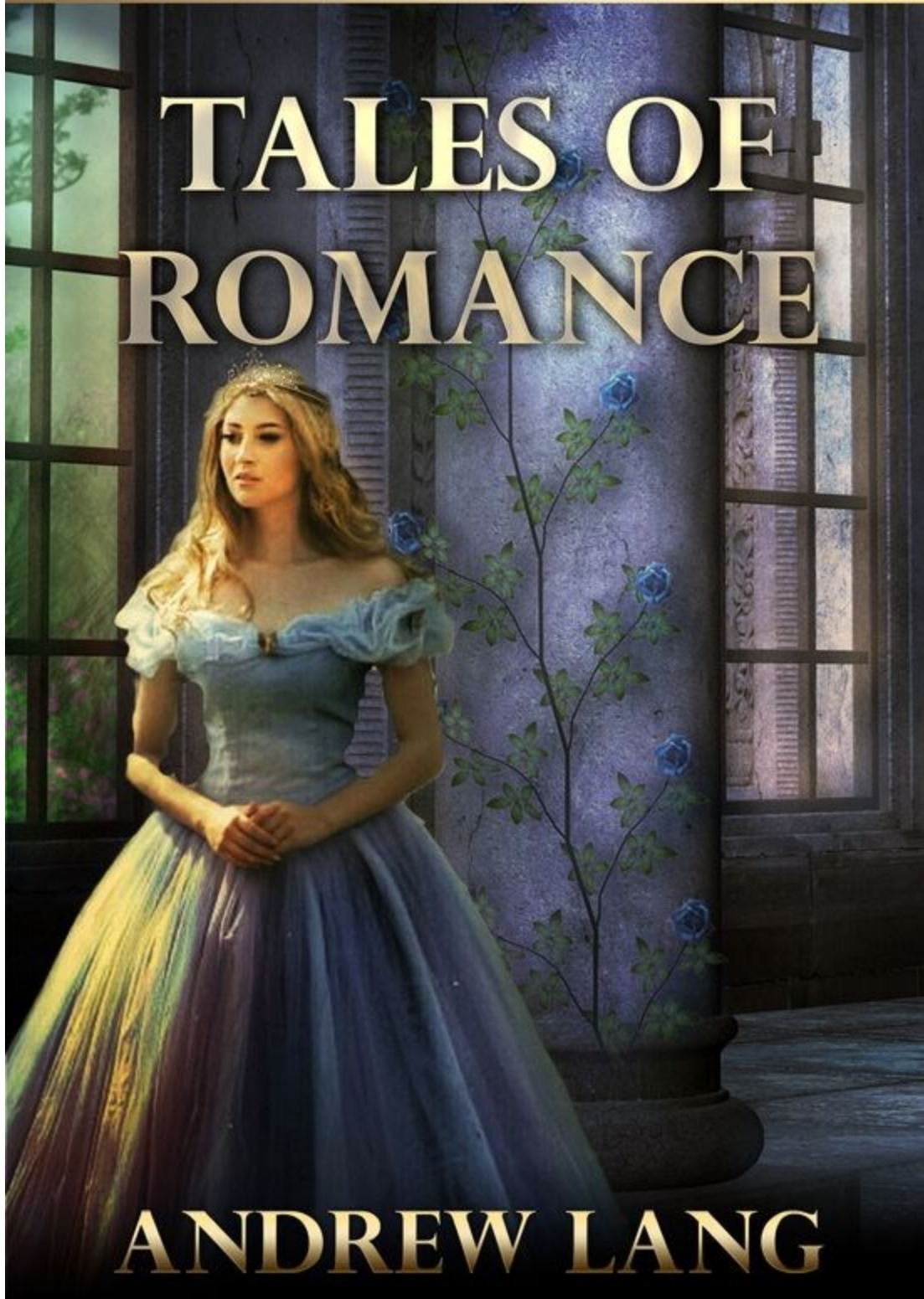


A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

TALES OF ROMANCE



ANDREW LANG

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SOME ADVENTURES OF WILLIAM SHORT NOSE

PART I.

William Short Nose was also styled William of Orange, quite a different man from the one who came to be King of England, although they both took their title from the same small town in the South of France. This William of Orange spent his life battling with the Saracens in the south of France, and a very hard task he had, for their numbers seemed endless, and as fast as one army was beaten another was gathered together.

Now by a great effort the Saracens had been driven back to the south in the year 732, but before a hundred years had passed, they had again crossed the Pyrenees and were streaming over France, south of the Loire, and, what was worse, the men of Gascony were rising too.

Someone had to meet the enemy and crush the rebels, and of all the subjects of King Louis no one was so fit to lead the army of the Franks as William Short Nose, husband of the Lady Gibourc.

It was at the Aliscans that he met them, and a great host they were, spreading over the country till whichever way you looked you saw men flocking round the Golden Dragon, which was the banner of the Saracens.

But it was not Count William's way to think about numbers, and he ordered his trumpeters to sound the charge. Spurring his horse, he dashed from one part of the fight to the other, striking and killing as he went, and heeding as little the wounds that he got as those that he gave, and *they* were many.

The Franks whom he led followed after him, and slew the Saracens as they came on; but the Christians were in comparison but a handful, and their enemies as the sands of the sea.

The young warriors whom William had brought with him were prisoners or dying men, and from far he saw Vivian, whom he loved the best, charging a multitude with his naked sword. "Montjoie! Montjoie!" cried he, "O Bertrand, my cousin, come to my aid!"

Bertrand heard and pressed to his side. "Ride to the river," he said, "and I will protect you with my life"; but Vivian was too weak even to sit on his horse, and fell half fainting at Bertrand's feet.

At this moment there rode at them a large troop of Saracens, headed by their King, Haucebier, and the Christian Knights knew that all was lost. "It is too late now for me to think of life," said Vivian, "but I will die fighting," and again they faced their enemies till Bertrand's horse was killed under him. Then Vivian seized the horse of a dead Saracen,

and thrust the bridle into Bertrand's hand, "Fly, for God's sake, it is your only chance. Where is my uncle? If he is dead, we have lost the battle."

But Bertrand did not fly, though every instant made the danger more deadly. "If I forsake you, if I take flight," he said, "I shall bring eternal shame upon myself."

"No, no," cried Vivian, "seek my uncle down there in the Aliscans, and bring him to my aid."

"Never till my sword breaks," answered Bertrand, and laid about him harder than ever. And to their joy they heard a war cry sounding in their ears, and five Frankish Counts, cousins of Vivian and of Bertrand, galloped up. Fight they did with all their might, but none fought like Vivian. "Heavens! what a warrior!" cried the Counts as they saw his blows, while the Saracens asked themselves if the man whom they had killed at mid-day had been brought back to life by the help of fiends. "If we let them escape now, we shall be covered with shame," said they, "but ere night falls William shall acknowledge that he is conquered."

"Indeed!" said Bertrand, and with his cousins he fell upon them till they fled.

The Counts were victors on this field, but, wounded and weary as they were, another combat lay before them, for a force of twenty thousand Saracens was advancing from the valley.

Their hearts never failed them, but they had no strength left; the young Counts were all taken prisoners, except Vivian, who was left for dead by the side of a fountain where he had been struck down. "O Father in Heaven," he said, feeling his life going from him, "forgive me my sins, and help my uncle, if it is Thy holy will."

William Short Nose was still fighting, though he knew that the victory lay with the Saracens and their hosts. "We are beaten," he said to the fourteen faithful comrades who stood by him. "Listen as you will, no sound of our war cry can be heard. But by the Holy Rood, the Saracens shall know no rest while I am alive. I will give my forefathers no cause for shame, and the minstrels shall not tell in their songs how I fell back before the enemy."

They then gave battle once more, and fought valiantly, till all lay dead upon the ground, save only William himself.

PART II.

Now the Count knew that if the Saracens were ever to be vanquished and beaten out of fair France he must take heed of his own life, for the task was his and no other man's; so, he turned his horse's head towards Orange, and then stopped, for he saw a troop of freshly landed Saracens approaching him along the same road.

"The whole world is full of these Saracens!" he cried in anger, "God alone can save me. My good horse," added he, "you are very tired. If you had had only five days' rest, I would have led you to the charge; but I see plainly that I can get no help from you, and I cannot blame you for it, as you have served me well all day, and for this I thank you greatly. If ever we reach Orange you shall wear no saddle for twenty days, your food shall be the finest corn, and you shall drink out of a golden trough."

And the horse understood; he threw up his head, and pawed the ground, and his strength came back to him as of old. At this sight William Short Nose felt more glad than if he had been given fourteen cities.

No sooner had he entered a valley that led along the road to Orange, than he saw a fresh body of Saracens blocking one end. He turned to escape into another path, but in front of him rode a handful of his enemies. "By the faith that I swore to my dear Lady Gibourc," he said, "I had better die than never strike a blow," and so rode straight at their leader. "William!" cried the Saracen, "this time you will not escape me." But the sun was in his eyes, and his sword missed his aim. Before he could strike another blow, William had borne him from his horse and galloped away.

The mountain that he was climbing now was beset with enemies, like all the rest, and William looked in vain for a way of escape. He jumped from his horse and rubbed his flanks saying to him, "What will you do? Your sides are bleeding, and you can scarcely stand; but remember, if once you fall it means my death."

At these words, the good horse neighed, pricked up his ears and shook himself, and as he did so the blood seemed to flow strongly in his veins, as of old. Then the count rode down into the field of the Aliscans, and found his nephew, Vivian, lying under a tree.

"Ah!" cried William, "what sorrow for me! To the end of my life, I shall mourn this day. Lady Gibourc, await me no longer, for never more shall I return to Orange!"

So, he lamented, grieving sore, till Vivian spoke to him. The Count was full of joy to hear his words, and, kneeling beside the youth, took him in his arms, and bade him confess his sins to him, as to his own father. One by one Vivian remembered them all, then a mist floated before his eyes, and, murmuring a farewell to the Lady Gibourc, his soul left the world.



Vivian's last confession

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William laid him gently down on his shield, took another shield for covering, and turned to mount his horse, but at this his heart failed him.

“Is it you, William, that men look to as their leader, who will do this cowardly deed?” he said to himself, and he went back to his nephew's side, and lifted the body on to his horse, to bury it in his city of Orange.

He had done what he could to give honour to Vivian, but he might as well, after all, have left him where he fell, for in a fierce combat with some Saracens on the road the Count was forced to abandon his nephew's body and fight for his own life. He knew the

two Saracens well as brave men, but he soon slew one, and the other he unhorsed after a struggle.

“Come back, come back,” cried the Saracen; “sell me your horse, for never did I behold his like! I will give you for him twice his weight in gold, and set free besides all your nephews that have been taken prisoners.” But William loved his horse, and would not have parted with him to Charles himself.

At length, after fighting nearly every step of the way, he saw the towers of Orange before him, and his palace, Gloriette, where dwelt his wife, the Lady Gibourc. “Ah, with what joy did I leave these walls,” he said to himself, “and how many noble Knights have I lost since then! Oh, Gibourc, my wife, will you not go mad when you hear the tidings I have brought!” And, overcome with grief, the Count bowed his head on the neck of his horse.

PART III.

When he recovered himself, he rode straight to the City Gate, and commanded the porter to let him in. "Let down the drawbridge," called he, "and be quick, for time presses." But he forgot that he had changed his own arms, and had taken instead those of a Saracen; therefore, the porter, seeing a man with a shield and pennon and helmet that were strange to him, thought he was an enemy, and stood still where he was. "Begone!" he said to William, "if you approach one step nearer, I will deal you a blow that will unhorse you! Begone, I tell you, and as quick as you can, or when William Short Nose returns from the Aliscans it will be the worse for you."

"Fear nothing, friend," replied the Count, "for I am William himself. I went to the Aliscans to fight the Saracens, and to help Vivian; but all my men are dead, and I only am left to bring these evil tidings. So, open the gates, for the Saracens are close behind."

"You must wait a moment," answered the porter, and he quitted the turret and hastened to the Lady Gibourc. "Noble Countess," cried he, "there knocks at the drawbridge a Knight in Pagan armour, who seems fresh from battle, for his arms are bloody. He is tall of stature and bears himself proudly, and he says he is William Short Nose. I pray you, my lady, come with me and see him for yourself."

The face of Gibourc grew red when she heard the porter's words, and she left the Palace and mounted the battlements, where she called, "Warrior, what is your will?"

"Oh, lady," answered he, "open the gate, and that quickly. Twenty thousand Saracens are close upon my track; if they reach me, I am a dead man."

"You cannot enter," replied Gibourc. "I am alone here except for this porter, a priest, a few children, and some ladies whose husbands are all at the war. Neither gate nor wicket will be opened until the return of my beloved lord, William the Count." Then William bowed his head for a moment, and tears ran down his cheeks.

"My lady, I am William himself," said he. "Do you not know me?"

"Saracen, you lie," replied Gibourc. "Take off your helmet and let me see who you are!"

"Noble Countess," cried he, "this is no time to parley. Look round you! Is not every hill covered with enemies?"

"Ah, now I know you are not William," answered she, "for all the Saracens in the world would never have stirred him with fear. By St. Peter! neither gate nor wicket shall be opened till I have seen your face. I am alone and must defend myself. The voices of many men are alike."

Then the Count lifted his helmet: "Lady look and be content. I am William himself. Now let me in."

Gibourc knew that it was indeed the Count who had returned, and was about to order the gates to be opened when there appeared in sight a troop of Saracens escorting two

hundred prisoners, all of them young Knights, and thirty ladies with fair, white faces. Each one was loaded with chains, and cowered under the blows of their captors. Their cries and prayers for mercy reached the ears of Gibourc, and, changing her mind, she said quickly: “There is the proof that you are not William, my husband, whose fame has spread far! For he would never have suffered his brethren to be so shamefully entreated while he was by!”

“Heavens!” cried the Count, “to what hard tests does she put me! But if I lose my head, I will do her bidding, for what is there that I would *not* do for the love of God and of her!”

PART IV.

Without a word more he turned, and spurred his horse at the Saracens. So sudden and fierce was his attack that the foremost riders fell back on those behind, who were thrown into confusion, while William's sword swept him a path to the centre, where the prisoners stood bound. The Saracens expected the city gates to open and a body of Franks to come forth to destroy them, and without waiting another moment they turned and fled.



The Captives—William Short-nose rides to the rescue

“Oh, fair lord,” called Gibourc, who from the battlements had watched the fight, “come back, come back, for now indeed you may enter.” And William heard her voice, and left the Saracens to go where they would while he struck the chains off the prisoners, and led them to the gates of Orange, when he himself rode back to the Saracens.

Not again would the Lady Gibourc have reason to call him coward.

And Gibourc saw, and her heart swelled within her, and she repented her of her words. "It is my fault if he is slain," she wept. "Oh, come back, come back!"

And William came.

Now the drawbridge was let down, and he entered the city followed by the Christians whom he had delivered, and the countess unlaced his helmet, and bathed his wounds, and then stopped, doubting.

"You cannot be William after all," said she, "for William would have brought back the young kinsmen who went with him; and would have been encircled by minstrels singing the great deeds he had done."

"Ah, noble Countess, you speak truth," answered he. "Henceforth my life will be spent in mourning, for my friends and comrades who went to war with me are lying dead at the Aliscan."

Great was the sorrow in the city of Orange and in the palace of her lord, where the ladies of the countess mourned for their husbands. But it was Gibourc who first roused herself from her grief for Vivian and others whom she had loved well. "Noble Count," she said, "do not lose your courage. Remember it is not near Orleans, in safety, that your lands lie, but in the very midst of the Saracens. Orange never will have peace till they are subdued. So, send messengers to King Louis, and to your father, Aimeri, asking for aid."

"Heavens!" cried William, "has the world ever seen so wise a lady?"

"Let no one turn you from your road," she went on. "At the news of your distress all the Barons that are your kin will fly to your help. Their numbers are as the sands of the sea."

"But how shall I make them believe in what has befallen us?" answered William. "If I do not go myself, I will send nobody, and go myself I will not, for I will not leave you alone again for all the gold in Pavia."

"Sir, you must go," said Gibourc, weeping. "I will stay here with my ladies, and each will place a helmet on her head, and hang a shield round her neck, and buckle a sword to her side, and with the help of the Knights whom you have delivered, we shall know how to defend ourselves."

William's heart bounded at her words; he took her in his arms, and promised that he himself would go, and that he would never lie soft till he returned again to Orange.

PART V.

Thus, William Short Nose set forth and the next day passed through Orleans. There he met with his brother Ernaut, who had ridden home from escorting King Louis back to Paris. Ernaut promised his help and that of his father and brothers, but counselled William to go to Laon, where a great feast would be held, and many persons would be assembled. The Count followed Ernaut's counsel, but refused the troop of Knights which Ernaut offered him, liking rather to ride alone.

He made his entrance into Laon, and the people laughed at him and made jests on his tall, thin horse; but William let them laugh, and rode on until he reached the Palace. There he alighted under an olive tree, and, fastening his horse to one of the branches, took off his helmet and unbuckled his breastplate. The people stared as they passed by, but nobody spoke to him.

Someone told the King that a strange man without even a squire was sitting before the Palace under an olive tree. The King's face grew dark as he heard their tale, for he loved to keep his gardens for his own pleasure. "Sanson," he called to one of his guards, "go and find out who this stranger is and whence he comes, but beware of bringing him hither."

Sanson hastened to do his errand, and William answered, "My name is one that is known to France. I am William Short Nose, and I come from Orange. My body is worn out with much riding; I pray you hold my horse until I have spoken to King Louis."

"Noble Count," replied Sanson, "let me first return to the King and tell him who you are. And be not angry, I beseech you, for such are my orders."

"Be quick, then, my friend," said William, "and do not neglect to tell the King that I am in great distress. This is the time to show his love for me; and if he truly does love me, let him come to meet me with the great lords of his Court. If he does not come, I have no other hope."

"I will tell him what you say," said Sanson, "and if it rests with me, you shall be content."

Then Sanson went back to the King. "It is William, the famous William!" he said, "and he wishes you to go out to meet him."

"Never!" answered Louis; "will he always be a thorn in my side! Woe be to him who rejoices at his coming."

So, the King sat still, and on the steps of the Palace there gathered Knights and Nobles in goodly numbers, and hardly one but wore a helmet set with precious stones, a sword or a shield which had been given him by William himself. But now they were rich, and he was poor, so they mocked at him.

“My lords,” said William, “you do ill to treat me so. I have loved you all, and you bear the tokens of my love about you at this moment. If I can give you no more gifts, it is because I have lost all I have in the world at the Aliscans. My men are dead, and my nephews are prisoners in the hands of the Saracens. It is the Lady Gibourc who bade me come here, and it is she who asks for help through me. Have pity on us, and help us.” But without a word, they rose up and went into the Palace, and William knew what their love was worth.

The young men told Louis of the words that the Count had spoken, and the King rose and leaned out of the window. “Sir William,” said he, “go to the inn, and let them bathe your horse. You seem in a sorry plight, without a groom to help you.”

William heard and vowed vengeance. But if the King and the courtiers had no hearts, in his need a friend came to him, Guimard, a citizen of Laon, who took the Count home and offered him rich food. But because of his vow to the Lady Gibourc, he would only eat coarse bread, and drink water from the spring; and as soon as it was light, he rose up from his bed of fresh hay, and dressed himself. “Where are you going,” asked his host.

“To the Palace, to entreat the aid of the King, and woe be to him who tries to stop me.”

“May God protect you, Sir,” answered Guimard. “To-day the King crowns Blanchefleur, your sister, who no doubt loves you well. And he gives her for her dower the richest land in all fair France, but a land that is never at peace.”

“Well,” said William, “I will be present at the ceremony. Indeed, they cannot do without me, for all France is under my care, and it is my right to bear her standard in battle. And let them beware how they move me to wrath, lest I depose the King of France and tear the crown from his head.”

The Count placed a breastplate under his jerkin, and hid his sword under his cloak. The gates of the Palace opened before him, and he entered the vaulted hall. It was filled with the greatest nobles in the land, and ladies with rich garments of silk and gold. Lords and ladies both knew him, but not one gave him welcome—not even his sister, the Queen. His fingers played with his sword, and he had much ado not to use it. But while his wrath was yet kindling the heralds announced that his father, Aimeri, had come.

PART VI.

The Lord of Narbonne stepped on to the grass with his noble countess, his four sons, and many servants. King Louis and the Queen hastened to meet them, and amid cries of joy they mounted the steps into the hall. Aimeri sat beside the King, and the countess was seated next the Queen, while the Knights placed themselves on the floor of the hall. And William sat also, but alone and apart, nursing his anger.

At last, he rose, and, advancing to the middle of the floor, he said with a loud voice: "Heaven protect my mother, my father, my brothers, and my friends; but may His curse alight on my sister and on the King, who have left me to be the butt of all the mockers of the Court. By all the Saints! were not my father sitting next to him, this sword should ere now have cloven his skull." The King listened pale with fright, and the rest whispered to each other, "William is angry, something will happen!"

When Ermengarde and Aimeri saw their son standing before them great joy filled their souls. They left their seats and flung themselves on his neck, and William's brother also ran to greet him. The Count told them how he had been vanquished at the Aliscans, and he himself had fled to Orange, and of the distress in which he had left Gibourc. "It was at her bidding I came here to ask aid from Louis, but from the way he has treated me I see plainly that he has no heart. By St. Peter! he shall repent before I go, and my sister also."

The King heard and again waxed cold with fear; the nobles heard and whispered: "Who is strong enough to compass this matter? No man, be he the bravest in France, ever went to his help and came back to tell the tale."

It was the Lady Ermengarde who broke the silence. "O God," she cried, "to think that the Franks should be such cowards! Have no fear, fair son William, I have still left gold that would fill thirty chariots, and I will give it to those who enrol themselves under your banner."

Aimeri smiled and sighed as he listened to her words, and his sons shed tears.

William answered nothing, but remained standing in the middle of the hall, his eyes fixed on his sister sitting on her throne, with a small golden crown upon her head, and on her husband, King Louis.

"This, then, O King, is the reward of all I have done! When Charlemagne, your father, died, you would have lost your crown if I had not forced the Barons to place it upon your head."

"That is true," answered the King, "and in remembrance of your services I will to-day bestow on you a fief."

"Yes," cried Blanchefleur, "and no doubt will deprive me of one. A nice agreement, truly! Woe to him who dares carry it out."

“Be silent, woman without shame!” said William. “Every word you speak proclaims your baseness! You pass your days eating and drinking, and little you care that we endure heat and cold, hunger and thirst, and suffer wounds and death so that your life may be easy.”

Then he bounded forwards, and, drawing his sword, would have cut off her head had not Ermengarde wrenched the weapon from his hands. Before he could seize it again the Queen darted away and took refuge in her chamber, where she fell fainting on the floor.

PART VII.

It was her daughter Alix, the fair and the wise, who raised her up and then heard with shame the tale she had to tell. "How could you speak so to my uncle, the best man that ever wore a sword?" asked Alix. "It was he who made you Queen of France."

"Yes, my daughter, you say truth," answered the Queen, "I have done ill, I will make peace with my brother;" and she wept over her wicked speech, while Alix, red and white as the roses in May, went down into the hall, where the Franks were still whispering together, and calling curses on the head of William.

They all rose as the maiden entered; Aimeri, her grandfather, took her in his arms, and her four uncles kissed her cheek. Her presence seemed to calm the anger and trouble which before had reigned throughout the hall, and Ermengarde flung herself at William's feet and besought his pardon for the Queen.

William raised his mother from her knees, but his anger was not soothed. "I have no love for the King," he said, "and before night I will break his pride," and he stood, his face red with wrath, leaning on his naked sword.

Not a sound was heard, and the eyes of all were fixed breathlessly upon William. Then in her turn Alix stepped forward and knelt at his feet. "Punish me in my mother's place," said she, "and cut off my head if you will, but let there be peace, I pray you, between you and my father and mother."

At the voice of Alix William's wrath melted, but at first, he would promise nothing. "Fair son William," said Ermengarde again, "be content. The King will do what you desire, and will aid you to the uttermost."

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The Lady Alix stays the wrath of William Shortnose

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“Yes, I will aid you,” answered the King.

So, peace was made, the Queen was fetched, and they all sat down to a great feast. In this manner the pride of the King was broken.

But when one man is shifty and another is hasty, wrath is not apt to slumber long, and treaties of peace are easier made than kept. When the feast was over William pressed King Louis to prepare an army at once; but the King would bind himself to nothing. “We will speak of it again,” said he; “I will tell you to-morrow whether I will go or not.”

At this William grew red with rage, and holding out a wand he said to the King, "I give you back your fief. I will take nothing from you, and henceforth will neither be your friend nor your vassal."

"Keep your fief," said Ernaut to his brother, "and leave the King to do as he will. I will help you and my brothers also, and between us we shall have twenty thousand men to fight with any Saracens we shall find."

"You speak weak words," cried Aimeri; "he is Seneschal of France, and also her Standard Bearer; he has a right to our help." And Alix approved of his saying, and the Queen likewise. The King saw that none were on his side and dared refuse no longer. "Count William, for love of you I will call together my army, and a hundred thousand men shall obey your commands. But I myself will not go with you, for my kingdom needs me badly."

"Remain, Sire," answered William, "I myself will lead the host." And the King sent out his messengers, and soon a vast army was gathered under the walls of Laon.

PART VIII.

It was on one of these days, when the Count stood in the great hall, that there entered from the kitchen a young man whom he had never seen before. The youth, whose name was Rainouart, was tall, strong as a wild boar, and swift as a deer. The scullions and grooms had played off jests upon him during the night, but had since repented them sorely, for he had caught the leaders up in his arms and broken their heads against the walls.

The rest, eager to avenge their comrades' death, prepared to overcome him with numbers, and in spite of his strength it might have gone ill with Rainouart had not Aimeri de Narbonne, hearing the noise, forbade more brawling.

Count William was told of the unseemly scuffle, and asked the King who and what the young man was who could keep at bay so many of his fellows. "I bought him once at sea," said Louis, "and paid a hundred marks for him. They pretend that he is the son of a Saracen, but he will never reveal the name of his father. Not knowing what to do with him, I sent him to the kitchen."

"Give him to me, King Louis," said William, smiling, "I promise you he shall have plenty to eat."

"Willingly," answered the King.

Far off in the kitchen Rainouart was chafing at the sound of the horses' hoofs, and at the scraps of talk let fall by the Knights, who were seeing to the burnishing of their armour before they started to fight the Saracens. "To think," he said to himself, "that I, who am of right King of Spain, should be loitering here, heaping logs on the fire and skimming the pot. But let King Louis look to himself! Before a year is past, I will snatch the crown from his head."

When the army was ready to march, he made up his mind what to do, and it was thus that he sought out William in the great hall. "Noble Count, let me come with you, I implore you. I can help to look after the horses and cook the food, and if at any time blows are needed, I can strike as well as any man."

"Good fellow," answered William, who wished to try what stuff he was made of, "how could you, who have passed your days in the kitchen, sleeping on the hearth when you were not busy turning the spit—how could you bear all the fatigue of war, the long fasts, and the longer watches? Before a month had passed you would be dead by the roadside!"

"Try me," said he, "and if you will not have me I will go alone, and fight barefoot. My only weapon will be an iron-bound staff, and it shall kill as many Saracens as the best sword among you all."

"Come then," answered the Count.

PART IX.

The next morning the army set forth, and Alix and the Queen watched them go from the steps of the Palace. When Alix saw Rainouart stepping proudly along with his heavy staff on his shoulder her heart stirred, and she said to her mother, "See, what a goodly young man! In the whole army there is not one like him! Let me bid him farewell, for nevermore shall I see his match."

"Peace! my daughter," answered the Queen, "I hope indeed that he may never more return to Laon." Alix took no heed of her mother's words, but signed to Rainouart to draw near. Then she put her arms round his neck, and said, "Brother, you have been a long time at Court, and now you are going to fight under my uncle's banner. If ever I have given you pain, I ask your pardon." After that she kissed him, and bade him go.



Alix kisses Rainouart

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At Orleans William took leave of his father and his mother, who returned to their home at Narbonne; and also of his brothers, who promised to return to meet William under the walls of Orange, which they did faithfully.

He pressed on with his army quickly till he came in sight of his native city. But little of it could he see, for a great smoke covered all the land, rising up from the burning towers which the Saracens had that morning set on fire. Enter the city they could not, for Gibourc and her ladies held it firm, and, armed with helmets and breastplates, flung stones upon the enemy.

When William beheld the smoke, and whence it came, he cried: "Orange is burning! Gibourc is carried captive! To arms! To arms!" And he spurred his horse, Rainouart running by his side.

From her tower Gibourc saw through the smoke a thousand banners waving and the sparkle of armour, and heard the sound of the horses' hoofs, and it seemed to her that the Saracens were drawing near anew. "O William!" cried she, "have you really forgotten me? Noble Count, you linger overlong! Never more shall I look upon your face." And so saying she fell fainting on the floor.

But something stirred the pulses of Gibourc, and she soon sat up again, and there at the gate was William, with Rainouart behind him. "Fear nothing, noble lady," said he, "it is the army of France that I have brought with me. Open, and welcome to us!"

The news seemed so good to Gibourc that she could not believe it, and she bade the Count unlace his helmet, so that she might indeed be sure that it was he. William did her bidding, then she ran swiftly to the gate and let down the drawbridge, and William stepped across it and embraced her tenderly. Then he ordered his army to take up its quarters in the city.

PART X.

Gibourc's eyes had fallen upon Rainouart, who had passed her on his way to the kitchen, where he meant to leave his stout wooden staff. "Tell me," said she to the Count, "who is the young man who bears lightly on his shoulder that huge piece of wood which would weigh down a horse? He is handsome and well made. Where did you find him?"

"Lady," answered William, "he was given me by the King."

"My Lord," said Gibourc, "be sure you see that he is honourably treated. He looks to me to be of high birth. Has he been baptised?"

"No, Madam, he is not a Christian. He was brought from Spain as a child, and kept for seven years in the kitchen. But take him, I pray you, under your protection, and do with him as you will."

The Count was hungry, and while waiting for dinner to be served he stood with Gibourc at the windows which looked out beyond the city. An army was drawing near; thousands of men, well mounted and freshly equipped. "Gibourc!" cried the Count joyfully, "here is my brother Ernaut with his vassals. Now all the Saracens in the world shall not prevent Bertrand from being delivered to-morrow."

On all sides warriors began to arrive, led by the fathers of those who had been taken prisoners with Bertrand, and with them came Aimeri and the brothers of William. Glad was the heart of the Count as he bade them welcome to his Palace, and ordered a feast to be made ready, and showed each Knight where he should sit.

It was late before the supper was served, but when every man had his trencher filled Rainouart entered the hall, armed with his staff, and stood leaning against a pillar, watching the noble company. "Sir," said Aimeri, the man whom the Saracens most dreaded, "who is it that I see standing there holding a piece of wood that five peasants could hardly lift? Does he mean to murder us?"

"That youth," replied William, "is a gift to me from King Louis. None living is as strong as he." Then Aimeri called Rainouart, and bade him sit at his side, and eat and drink as he would. "Noble Count," said Aimeri, "such men grow not on every bush. Keep him and cherish him, and bring him with you to the Aliscans. For with his staff, he will slay many Pagans."

"Yes," answered Rainouart, "wherever I appear the Pagans will fall dead at the sight of me." Aimeri and William laughed to hear him, but ere four days were past they had learned what he was worth.

PART XI.

Rainouart went back to the kitchen and slept soundly, but as he had drunk much wine the cooks and scullions thought to play jokes upon him, and lighted some wooden shavings with which to burn his moustache. At the first touch of the flame Rainouart leapt to his feet, seized the head cook by his legs, flung him on to the blazing fire, and turned for another victim, but they had all fled.

At daybreak they went to William to pray for vengeance on the murderer of the cook. If the Count would not forbid him the kitchen, not a morsel of food would they cook. But William only laughed at their threats, and said, "Beware henceforth how you meddle with Rainouart. Did I not forbid anyone to mock at him, and do you dare to disobey my orders? Lady Gibourc, take Rainouart to your chamber, and keep him beside you."

So, the countess went to the kitchen and found Rainouart sitting on a bench, his head leaning against his staff. She sat down by him and said graciously, "Brother, come with me and we will have some talk together."



The Lady Gibourc with Rainouart in the kitchen

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“Willingly,” answered Rainouart, “the more so that I can hardly keep my hands off these scoundrels.”

He followed Gibourc to her room, and then she questioned him about his childhood.

“Have you brothers or sisters?” asked she.

“Yes,” he answered, “beyond the sea I have a brother who is a King, and a sister who is more beautiful than a fairy,” and as he spoke, he bent his head. Something in her heart told Gibourc that this might be her brother, but she only asked again, “Where do you come from?”

“Lady,” he replied, “I will answer that question the day I come back from the battle which William shall have won, thanks to my aid.”

Gibourc kept silence, but she opened a chest and drew from it a white breastplate that had belonged to her uncle, which was so finely wrought that no sword could pierce it; likewise, a helmet of steel and a sword that could cut through iron more easily than a scythe cuts grass. “My friend,” she said, “buckle this sword to your side. It may be useful to you.”

Rainouart took the sword and drew it from its scabbard, but it seemed so light that he threw it down again. “Lady,” he cried, “what good can such a plaything do me? But with my staff between my hands there is not a Pagan that can stand up against me, and if one escapes then let Count William drive me from his door.”

At this Gibourc felt sure this was indeed her brother, but she did not yet like to ask him more questions, and in her joy, she began to weep. “Lady,” said Rainouart, “do not weep. As long as my staff is whole William shall be safe.”

“My friend, may Heaven protect you,” she answered, “but a man without armour is soon cut down; so, take these things and wear them in battle,” and she laced on the helmet, and buckled the breastplate, and fastened the sword on his thigh. “If your staff breaks, it may serve you,” said she.

Rainouart was proud indeed when the armour was girded on him, and he sat himself down well pleased at William’s table. The Knights vied with each other in pouring him out bumpers of wine, and after dinner every man tried to lift his iron-bound staff, but none could raise it from the ground, except William himself, who by putting forth all his strength lifted it the height of a foot.

“Let me aid you,” said Rainouart, and he whirled it round his head, throwing it lightly from hand to hand. “We are wasting time,” he said. “I fear lest the Saracens should fly before we come up with them. If I only have the chance to make them feel the weight of my staff, I will soon sweep the battlefield.” And William embraced him for these words, and ordered the trumpets to be sounded and the army to march.

From her window Gibourc watched them go. She saw the Knights stream out into the plain, their banners floating on the wind, their helmets shining in the sun, their shields

glittering with gold. She heard their horses neigh, and she prayed God to bless all this noble host.

PART XII.

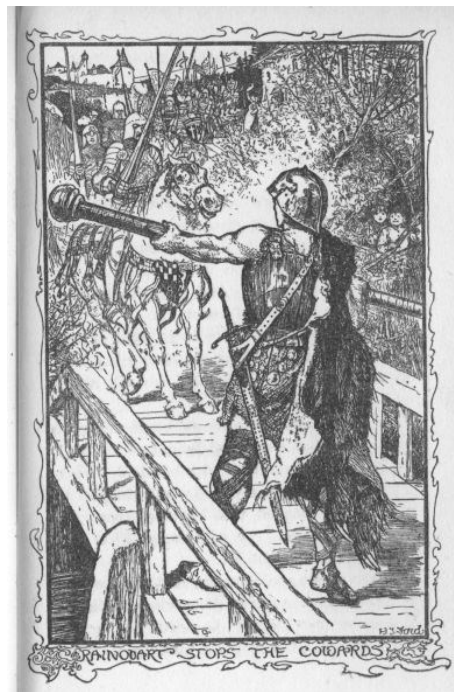
After two days' march they came within sight of the Aliscans, but for five miles round the country was covered by the Saracen army. William saw that some of his men quailed at the number of the foe, so he turned and spoke to his soldiers. "My good lords," he said, "a fearful battle awaits us, and we must not give way an inch. If any man feels afraid let him go back to his own land. This is no place for cowards."

The cowards heard joyfully, and without shame took the road by which they had come. They spurred their horses and thought themselves safe, but they rejoiced too soon.

At the mouth of a bridge Rainouart met them, and when he saw that they were part of the Christian host he raised his staff and barred their passage. "Where are you going?" asked he. "To France, for rest," answered the cowards; "the Count has dismissed us, and when we reach our homes we shall see to the rebuilding of our castles, which have fallen into ill-repair during the wars. Come with us, if you are a wise man."

"Ask someone else," said Rainouart; "Count William has given me the command of the army, and it is to him that I have to render account. Do you think I shall let you run away like hares?" And, swinging his staff round his head, he laid about him.

Struck dumb with terror at the sight of their comrades falling rapidly round them, they cried with one voice, "Sir Rainouart, we will return and fight with you."



Rainouart stops the cowards

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So, they turned their horses' heads and rode the way they had come, and Rainouart followed, keeping guard over them with his staff. When they reached the army he went straight to William, and begged that he might have the command of them. "I will change them into a troop of lions," said he.

Harsh words and gibes greeted the cowards, but Rainouart soon forced the mockers to silence. "Leave my men alone!" he cried, "or by the faith I owe to Gibourc I will make you. I am a King's son, and the time has come to show you what manner of man I am. I have idled long, but I will idle no longer. I am of the blood royal, and the saying is true that good blood cannot lie."

"How well he speaks!" whispered the Franks to each other, for they dared not let their voices be heard.

PART XIII.

Now the battle was to begin, for the two armies were drawn up in fighting array, and Rainouart took his place at the head of his cowards opposite the Saracens, from which race he sprang.

The charge was sounded, and the two armies met with a shock, and many a man fell from his horse and was trampled underfoot. "Narbonne! Narbonne!" shouted Aimeri, advancing within reach of a crossbow shot, and he would have been slain had not his sons dashed to his rescue. Count William did miracles, and the Saracens were driven so far back that Rainouart feared the battle would be ended before he had struck a blow.

Followed by his troop of cowards Rainouart made straight for the enemy, and before him they fell as corn before a sickle. "Strike, soldiers," shouted he; "strike and avenge the noble Vivian."

Rainouart and his cowards pressed on and on, and the Saracens fell back, step by step, till they reached the sea, where their ships were anchored.

Then Rainouart drove his staff in the sand, and by its help swung himself on board a small vessel, which happened to be the very one in which the nephews of William were imprisoned. He laid about him right and left with his staff, till he had slain all the gaolers, and at last he came to a young man whose eyes were bandaged and his feet tied together. "Who are you?" asked Rainouart.

"I am Bertrand, nephew of William Short Nose. Four months ago, I was taken captive by the Saracens, and if, as I think, they carry me into Arabia, then may God have pity on my soul, for it is all over with my body."

"Sir Count," answered Rainouart, "for love of William I will deliver you."

Seizing the weapons of the dead Saracens, they scrambled on shore, and, while fighting for their lives, looked about for their uncle, whom they knew at last by the sweep of his sword, which kept a clear space around him. More than once Rainouart swept back fresh foes that were pressing forwards, till the tide of battle carried him away and brought him opposite Desramé the King. "Who are you?" asked Desramé, struck by his face, for there was nothing royal in his dress or his arms.

"I am Rainouart, vassal of William whom I love, and if you do hurt to him, I will do hurt to you also."

"Rainouart, I am your father," cried Desramé, and he besought him to forswear Christianity and to become a follower of Mahomet; but Rainouart turned a deaf ear, and challenged him to continue the combat. Desramé was no match for his son, and was soon struck from his horse. "Oh, wretch that I am," said Rainouart to himself, "I have slain my brothers and wounded my father—it is my staff which has done all this evil," and he flung it far from him. He would have been wiser to have kept it, for in a moment three giants

surrounded him, and he had only his fists with which to beat them back. Suddenly his hand touched the sword buckled on him by Gibourc, which he had forgotten, and he drew it from its scabbard, and with three blows clove the heads of the giants in twain. Meanwhile King Desramé took refuge in the only ship that had not been sunk by the Christians, and spread its sails. "Come back whenever you like, fair father," called Rainouart after him.

PART XIV.

The fight was over; the Saracens acknowledged that they were beaten, and the booty they had left behind them was immense. The army, wearied with the day's toil, lay down to sleep, but before midnight Rainouart was awake and trumpets called to arms. "Vivian must be buried," said he, "and then the march to Orange will begin."

Rainouart rode at the head, his sword drawn, prouder than a lion; and as he went along a poor peasant threw himself before him, asking for vengeance on some wretches who had torn up a field of beans, which was all he had with which to feed his family. Rainouart ordered the robbers to be brought before him and had them executed. Then he gave to the peasant their horses and their armour in payment of the ruined beans. "Ah, it has turned out a good bargain for me," said the peasant. "Blessed be the hour when I sowed such a crop."

William entered into his Palace, where a great feast was spread for the visitors, but one man only remained outside the walls and that was Rainouart, of whom no one thought in the hour of triumph. His heart swelled with bitterness as he thought of the blows he had given, and the captives he had set free, and, weeping with anger, he turned his face towards the Aliscans.

On the road some Knights met him, and asked him whither he was going and why he looked so sad. Then his wrath and grief burst out, and he told how he mourned that ever he had slain a man in William's cause, and that he was now hastening to serve under the banner of Mahomet, and would shortly return with a hundred thousand men behind him, and would avenge himself on France and her King. Only towards Alix would he show any pity!

In vain the Knights tried to soften his heart, it was too sore to listen. So, they rode on fast to Orange and told the Count what Rainouart had said.

"I have done him grievous wrong," answered William, and ordered twenty Knights to ride after him. But the Knights were received with threats and curses, and came back to Orange faster than they had left it, thinking that Rainouart was at their heels.

William smiled when he heard the tale of his messengers, and bade them bring his horse, and commanded that a hundred Knights should follow him, and prayed Gibourc to ride at his side. They found Rainouart entering a vessel whose sails were already spread, and all William's entreaties would have availed nothing had not Gibourc herself implored his forgiveness.

"I am your brother," cried Rainouart, throwing himself on her neck; "I may confess it now, and for your sake I will pardon the Count's ingratitude, and never more will I remind you of it."

There was great joy in Orange when William rode through the gates with Rainouart beside him, and the next day the Count made him his Seneschal, and he was baptised. Then William sent his brothers on an embassy to the King in Paris, to beg that he would bestow the hand of Princess Alix on Rainouart, son of King Desramé and brother of Lady Gibourc. And when the embassy returned Alix returned with it, and the marriage took place with great splendour; but to the end of his life, whenever Rainouart felt cold, he warmed himself in the kitchen.

THE END



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