

Aucassin and Nicolete eBook

Aucassin and Nicolete

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Contents

Aucassin and Nicolette eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	4
Page 1.....	5
Page 2.....	6
Page 3.....	8
Page 4.....	9
Page 5.....	11
Page 6.....	13
Page 7.....	15
Page 8.....	17
Page 9.....	19
Page 10.....	21
Page 11.....	23
Page 12.....	25
Page 13.....	27
Page 14.....	29
Page 15.....	31
Page 16.....	33
Page 17.....	35
Page 18.....	37
Page 19.....	39
Page 20.....	41
Page 21.....	43
Page 22.....	45

Page 23.....	47
Page 24.....	49
Page 25.....	51
Page 26.....	53

Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
INTRODUCTION		1
BALLADE OF AUCASSIN		4
BALLADE OF NICOLETE		4
GRAHAM R. TOMSON		5
NOTES		24
Footnotes:		26

Page 1

INTRODUCTION

There is nothing in artistic poetry quite akin to “Aucassin and Nicolete.”

By a rare piece of good fortune the one manuscript of the Song-Story has escaped those waves of time, which have wrecked the bark of Menander, and left of Sappho but a few floating fragments. The very form of the tale is peculiar; we have nothing else from the twelfth or thirteenth century in the alternate prose and verse of the *cante-fable*. {1} We have fabliaux in verse, and prose Arthurian romances. We have *Chansons de Geste*, heroic poems like “Roland,” unrhymed assonant *laisses*, but we have not the alternations of prose with *laisses* in seven-syllabled lines. It cannot be certainly known whether the form of “Aucassin and Nicolete” was a familiar form—used by many *jogleors*, or wandering minstrels and story-tellers such as Nicolete, in the tale, feigned herself to be,—or whether this is a solitary experiment by “the old captive” its author, a contemporary, as M. Gaston Paris thinks him, of Louis *vii* (1130). He was original enough to have invented, or adopted from popular tradition, a form for himself; his originality declares itself everywhere in his one surviving masterpiece. True, he uses certain traditional formulae, that have survived in his time, as they survived in Homer’s, from the manner of purely popular poetry, of *Volkslieder*. Thus he repeats snatches of conversation always in the same, or very nearly the same words. He has a stereotyped form, like Homer, for saying that one person addressed another, “ains traist au visconte de la vile si l’apela” [Greek text] . . . Like Homer, and like popular song, he deals in recurrent epithets, and changeless courtesies. To Aucassin the hideous plough-man is “Biax frere,” “fair brother,” just as the treacherous Aegisthus is [Greek text] in Homer; these are complimentary terms, with no moral sense in particular. The *jogleor* is not more curious than Homer, or than the poets of the old ballads, about giving novel descriptions of his characters. As Homer’s ladies are “fair-tressed,” so Nicolete and Aucassin have, each of them, close yellow curls, eyes of vair (whatever that may mean), and red lips. War cannot be mentioned except as war “where knights do smite and are smitten,” and so forth. The author is absolutely conventional in such matters, according to the convention of his age and profession.

Nor is his matter more original. He tells a story of thwarted and finally fortunate love, and his hero is “a Christened knight”—like Tamlane,—his heroine a Paynim lady. To be sure, Nicolete was baptized before the tale begins, and it is she who is a captive among Christians, not her lover, as usual, who is a captive among Saracens. The author has reversed the common arrangement, and he appears to have cared little more than his reckless hero, about creeds and differences of faith. He is not much interested in the recognition of Nicolete by her great Paynim kindred, nor indeed in any of the “business” of the narrative, the fighting, the storms and tempests, and the burlesque of the kingdom of Torelore.

Page 2

What the nameless author does care for, is his telling of the love-story, the passion of Aucassin and Nicolette. His originality lies in his charming medley of sentiment and humour, of a smiling compassion and sympathy with a touch of mocking mirth. The love of Aucassin and Nicolette—

“Des grans paines qu’il souffri,”

that is the one thing serious to him in the whole matter, and that is not so very serious. {2} The story-teller is no Mimnermus, Love and Youth are the best things he knew,—“deport du viel caitif,”—and now he has “come to forty years,” and now they are with him no longer. But he does not lament like Mimnermus, like Alcman, like Llwyarch Hen. “What is Life, what is delight without golden Aphrodite? May I die!” says Mimnermus, “when I am no more conversant with these, with secret love, and gracious gifts, and the bed of desire.” And Alcman, when his limbs waver beneath him, is only saddened by the faces and voices of girls, and would change his lot for the sea-birds. {3}

“Maidens with voices like honey for sweetness that breathe desire,
Would that I were a sea-bird with limbs that never could tire,
Over the foam-flowers flying with halcyons ever on wing,
Keeping a careless heart, a sea-blue bird of the spring.”

But our old captive, having said farewell to love, has yet a kindly smiling interest in its fever and folly. Nothing better has he met, even now that he knows “a lad is an ass.” He tells a love story, a story of love overmastering, without conscience or care of aught but the beloved. And the *viel caitif* tells it with sympathy, and with a smile. “Oh folly of fondness,” he seems to cry, “oh merry days of desolation”

“When I was young as you are young,
When lutes were touched and songs were sung,
And love lamps in the windows hung.”

It is the very tone of Thackeray, when Thackeray is tender, and the world heard it first from this elderly, nameless minstrel, strolling with his viol and his singing boys, perhaps, like a blameless d’Assoucy, from castle to castle in “the happy poplar land.” One seems to see him and hear him in the twilight, in the court of some chateau of Picardy, while the ladies on silken cushions sit around him listening, and their lovers, fettered with silver chains, lie at their feet. They listen, and look, and do not think of the minstrel with his grey head and his green heart, but we think of him. It is an old man’s work, and a weary man’s work. You can easily tell the places where he has lingered, and been pleased as he wrote. They are marked, like the bower Nicolette built, with flowers and broken branches wet with dew. Such a passage is the description of Nicolette at her window, in the strangely painted chamber,



“ki faite est par grant devisse
panturee a miramie.”

Thence

“she saw the roses blow,
Heard the birds sing loud and low.”

Page 3

Again, the minstrel speaks out what many must have thought, in those incredulous ages of Faith, about Heaven and Hell, Hell where the gallant company makes up for everything. When he comes to a battle-piece he makes Aucassin "mightily and knightly hurl through the press," like one of Malory's men. His hero must be a man of his hands, no mere sighing youth incapable of arms. But the minstrel's heart is in other things, for example, in the verses where Aucassin transfers to Beauty the wonder-working powers of Holiness, and makes the sight of his lady heal the palmer, as the shadow of the Apostle, falling on the sick people, healed them by the Gate Beautiful. The Flight of Nicolette is a familiar and beautiful picture, the daisy flowers look black in the ivory moonlight against her feet, fair as Bombyca's "feet of carven ivory" in the Sicilian idyll, long ago. {4} It is characteristic of the poet that the two lovers begin to wrangle about which loves best, in the very mouth of danger, while Aucassin is yet in prison, and the patrol go down the moonlit street, with swords in their hands, sworn to slay Nicolette. That is the place and time chosen for this ancient controversy. Aucassin's threat that if he loses Nicolette he will not wait for sword or knife, but will dash his head against a wall, is in the very temper of the prisoned warrior-poet, who actually chose this way of death. Then the night scene, with its fantasy, and shadow, and moonlight on flowers and street, yields to a picture of the day, with the birds singing, and the shepherds laughing, in the green links between wood and water. There the shepherds take Nicolette for a fairy, so bright a beauty shines about her. Their mockery, their independence, may make us consider again our ideas of early Feudalism. Probably they were in the service of townsmen, whose good town treated the Count as no more than an equal of its corporate dignity. The bower of branches built by Nicolette is certainly one of the places where the minstrel himself has rested and been pleased with his work. One can feel it still, the cool of that clear summer night, the sweet smell of broken boughs, and trodden grass, and deep dew, and the shining of the star that Aucassin deemed was the translated spirit of his lady. Romance has touched the book here with her magic, as she has touched the lines where we read how Consuelo came by moonlight to the Canon's garden and the white flowers. The pleasure here is the keener for contrast with the luckless hind whom Aucassin encountered in the forest: the man who had lost his master's ox, the ungainly man who wept, because his mother's bed had been taken from under her to pay his debt. This man was in that estate which Achilles, in Hades, preferred above the kingship of the dead outworn. He was hind and hireling to a villein,

[Greek text]

It is an unexpected touch of pity for the people, and for other than love-sorrows, in a poem intended for the great and courtly people of chivalry.

Page 4

At last the lovers meet, in the lodge of flowers beneath the stars. Here the story should end, though one could ill spare the pretty lecture the girl reads her lover as they ride at adventure, and the picture of Nicolete, with her brown stain, and jogleor's attire, and her viol, playing before Aucassin in his own castle of Biaucaire. The burlesque interlude of the country of Torelore is like a page out of Rabelais, stitched into the *cante-fable* by mistake. At such lands as Torelore Pantagruel and Panurge touched many a time in their vague voyaging. Nobody, perhaps, can care very much about Nicolete's adventures in Carthage, and her recognition by her Paynim kindred. If the old captive had been a prisoner among the Saracens, he was too indolent or incurious to make use of his knowledge. He hurries on to his journey's end;

"Journeys end in lovers meeting."

So he finishes the tale. What lives in it, what makes it live, is the touch of poetry, of tender heart, of humorous resignation. The old captive says the story will gladden sad men:-

"Nus hom n'est si esbahis,
tant dolans ni entrepris,
de grant mal amaladis,
se il l'oït, ne soit garis,
et de joie resbaudis,
tant par est douce."

This service it did for M. Bida, the painter, as he tells us when he translated Aucassin in 1870. In dark and darkening days, *patriai tempore iniquo*, we too have turned to *Aucassin et Nicolete*. {5}

BALLADE OF AUCASSIN

Where smooth the Southern waters run
Through rustling leagues of poplars gray,
Beneath a veiled soft Southern sun,
We wandered out of Yesterday;
Went Maying in that ancient May
Whose fallen flowers are fragrant yet,
And lingered by the fountain spray
With Aucassin and Nicolete.

The grassgrown paths are trod of none
Where through the woods they went astray;
The spider's trceries are spun
Across the darkling forest way;



There come no Knights that ride to slay,
No Pilgrims through the grasses wet,
No shepherd lads that sang their say
With Aucassin and Nicolete.

'Twas here by Nicolete begun
Her lodge of boughs and blossoms gay;
'Scaped from the cell of marble dun
'Twas here the lover found the Fay;
O lovers fond, O foolish play!
How hard we find it to forget,
Who fain would dwell with them as they,
With Aucassin and Nicolete.

ENVOY.

Prince, 'tis a melancholy lay!
For Youth, for Life we both regret:
How fair they seem; how far away,
With Aucassin and Nicolete.

A. L.

BALLADE OF NICOLETE

All bathed in pearl and amber light
She rose to fling the lattice wide,
And leaned into the fragrant night,
Where brown birds sang of summertime;
('Twas Love's own voice that called and cried)
"Ah, Sweet!" she said, "I'll seek thee yet,
Though thorniest pathways should betide
The fair white feet of Nicolete."



Page 5

They slept, who would have stayed her flight;
(Full fain were they the maid had died!)
She dropped adown her prison's height
On strands of linen featly tied.
And so she passed the garden-side
With loose-leaved roses sweetly set,
And dainty daisies, dark beside
The fair white feet of Nicolete!

Her lover lay in evil plight
(So many lovers yet abide!)
I would my tongue could praise aright
Her name, that should be glorified.
Those lovers now, whom foes divide
A little weep,—and soon forget.
How far from these faint lovers glide
The fair white feet of Nicolete.

ENVOY.

My Princess, doff thy frozen pride,
Nor scorn to pay Love's golden debt,
Through his dim woodland take for guide
The fair white feet of Nicolete.

GRAHAM R. TOMSON

THE SONG-STORY OF AUCASSIN AND NICOLETE

'Tis of Aucassin and Nicolete.

Who would list to the good lay
Gladness of the captive grey?
'Tis how two young lovers met,
Aucassin and Nicolete,
Of the pains the lover bore
And the sorrows he outwore,
For the goodness and the grace,
Of his love, so fair of face.

Sweet the song, the story sweet,
There is no man hearkens it,
No man living 'neath the sun,



So outwearied, so foredone,
Sick and woful, worn and sad,
But is healed, but is glad
'Tis so sweet.

So say they, speak they, tell they the Tale:

How the Count Bougars de Valence made war on Count Garin de Biaucaire, war so great, and so marvellous, and so mortal that never a day dawned but alway he was there, by the gates and walls, and barriers of the town with a hundred knights, and ten thousand men at arms, horsemen and footmen: so burned he the Count's land, and spoiled his country, and slew his men. Now the Count Garin de Biaucaire was old and frail, and his good days were gone over. No heir had he, neither son nor daughter, save one young man only; such an one as I shall tell you. Aucassin was the name of the damoiseau: fair was he, goodly, and great, and featly fashioned of his body, and limbs. His hair was yellow, in little curls, his eyes blue and laughing, his face beautiful and shapely, his nose high and well set, and so richly seen was he in all things good, that in him was none evil at all. But so suddenly overtaken was he of Love, who is a great master, that he would not, of his will, be dubbed knight, nor take arms, nor follow tourneys, nor do whatsoever him beseemed. Therefore his father and mother said to him;

"Son, go take thine arms, mount thy horse, and hold thy land, and help thy men, for if they see thee among them, more stoutly will they keep in battle their lives, and lands, and thine, and mine."

"Father," said Aucassin, "I marvel that you will be speaking. Never may God give me aught of my desire if I be made knight, or mount my horse, or face stour and battle wherein knights smite and are smitten again, unless thou give me Nicolete, my true love, that I love so well."

Page 6

"Son," said the father, "this may not be. Let Nicolete go, a slave girl she is, out of a strange land, and the captain of this town bought her of the Saracens, and carried her hither, and hath reared her and let christen the maid, and took her for his daughter in God, and one day will find a young man for her, to win her bread honourably. Herein hast thou naught to make or mend, but if a wife thou wilt have, I will give thee the daughter of a King, or a Count. There is no man so rich in France, but if thou desire his daughter, thou shalt have her."

"Faith! my father," said Aucassin, "tell me where is the place so high in all the world, that Nicolete, my sweet lady and love, would not grace it well? If she were Empress of Constantinople or of Germany, or Queen of France or England, it were little enough for her; so gentle is she and courteous, and debonaire, and compact of all good qualities."

Here singeth one:

Aucassin was of Biaucaire
Of a goodly castle there,
But from Nicolete the fair
None might win his heart away
Though his father, many a day,
And his mother said him nay,
"Ha! fond child, what wouldst thou?
Nicolete is glad enow!
Was from Carthage cast away,
Paynims sold her on a day!
Wouldst thou win a lady fair
Choose a maid of high degree
Such an one is meet for thee."
"Nay of these I have no care,
Nicolete is debonaire,
Her body sweet and the face of her
Take my heart as in a snare,
Loyal love is but her share
That is so sweet."

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

When the Count Garin de Biaucaire knew that he would avail not to withdraw Aucassin his son from the love of Nicolete, he went to the Captain of the city, who was his man, and spake to him, saying:

"Sir Count; away with Nicolete thy daughter in God; cursed be the land whence she was brought into this country, for by reason of her do I lose Aucassin, that will neither be dubbed knight, nor do aught of the things that fall to him to be done. And wit ye well,"

he said, "that if I might have her at my will, I would burn her in a fire, and yourself might well be sore adread."

"Sir," said the Captain, "this is grievous to me that he comes and goes and hath speech with her. I had bought the maiden at mine own charges, and nourished her, and baptized, and made her my daughter in God. Yea, I would have given her to a young man that should win her bread honourably. With this had Aucassin thy son naught to make or mend. But, sith it is thy will and thy pleasure, I will send her into that land and that country where never will he see her with his eyes."

"Have a heed to thyself," said the Count Garin, "thence might great evil come on thee."

So parted they each from other. Now the Captain was a right rich man: so had he a rich palace with a garden in face of it; in an upper chamber thereof he let place Nicolete, with one old woman to keep her company, and in that chamber put bread and meat and wine and such things as were needful. Then he let seal the door, that none might come in or go forth, save that there was one window, over against the garden, and strait enough, where through came to them a little air.

Page 7

Here singeth one:

Nicolete as ye heard tell
Prisoned is within a cell
That is painted wondrously
With colours of a far countrie,
And the window of marble wrought,
There the maiden stood in thought,
With straight brows and yellow hair
Never saw ye fairer fair!
On the wood she gazed below,
And she saw the roses blow,
Heard the birds sing loud and low,
Therefore spoke she wofully:
“Ah me, wherefore do I lie
Here in prison wrongfully:
Aucassin, my love, my knight,
Am I not thy heart’s delight,
Thou that lovest me aright!
'Tis for thee that I must dwell
In the vaulted chamber cell,
Hard beset and all alone!
By our Lady Mary’s Son
Here no longer will I wonn,
If I may flee!

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

Nicolete was in prison, as ye have heard soothly, in the chamber. And the noise and bruit of it went through all the country and all the land, how that Nicolete was lost. Some said she had fled the country, and some that the Count Garin de Biaucaire had let slay her. Whosoever had joy thereof, Aucassin had none, so he went to the Captain of the town and spoke to him, saying:

“Sir Captain, what hast thou made of Nicolete, my sweet lady and love, the thing that best I love in all the world? Hast thou carried her off or ravished her away from me? Know well that if I die of it, the price shall be demanded of thee, and that will be well done, for it shall be even as if thou hadst slain me with thy two hands, for thou hast taken from me the thing that in this world I loved the best.”

“Fair Sir,” said the Captain, “let these things be. Nicolete is a captive that I did bring from a strange country. Yea, I bought her at my own charges of the Saracens, and I bred her up and baptized her, and made her my daughter in God. And I have cherished her, and one of these days I would have given her a young man, to win her bread

honourably. With this hast thou naught to make, but do thou take the daughter of a King or a Count. Nay more, what wouldst thou deem thee to have gained, hadst thou made her thy leman, and taken her to thy bed? Plentiful lack of comfort hadst thou got thereby, for in Hell would thy soul have lain while the world endures, and into Paradise wouldst thou have entered never.”

“In Paradise what have I to win? Therein I seek not to enter, but only to have Nicolete, my sweet lady that I love so well. For into Paradise go none but such folk as I shall tell thee now: Thither go these same old priests, and halt old men and maimed, who all day and night cower continually before the altars, and in the crypts; and such folk as wear old amices and old clouted frocks, and naked folk and shoeless, and covered with sores, perishing of hunger and thirst, and of cold, and of little ease.

Page 8

These be they that go into Paradise, with them have I naught to make. But into Hell would I fain go; for into Hell fare the goodly clerks, and goodly knights that fall in tourneys and great wars, and stout men at arms, and all men noble. With these would I liefly go. And thither pass the sweet ladies and courteous that have two lovers, or three, and their lords also thereto. Thither goes the gold, and the silver, and cloth of vair, and cloth of gris, and harpers, and makers, and the prince of this world. With these I would gladly go, let me but have with me, Nicolete, my sweetest lady.”

“Certes,” quoth the Captain, “in vain wilt thou speak thereof, for never shalt thou see her; and if thou hadst word with her, and thy father knew it, he would let burn in a fire both her and me, and thyself might well be sore adread.”

“That is even what irketh me,” quoth Aucassin. So he went from the Captain sorrowing.

Here singeth one:

Aucassin did so depart
Much in dole and heavy at heart
For his love so bright and dear,
None might bring him any cheer,
None might give good words to hear,
To the palace doth he fare
Climbeth up the palace-stair,
Passeth to a chamber there,
Thus great sorrow doth he bear,
For his lady and love so fair.

“Nicolete how fair art thou,
Sweet thy foot-fall, sweet thine eyes,
Sweet the mirth of thy replies,
Sweet thy laughter, sweet thy face,
Sweet thy lips and sweet thy brow,
And the touch of thine embrace,
All for thee I sorrow now,
Captive in an evil place,
Whence I ne’er may go my ways
Sister, sweet friend!”

So say they, speak they, tell they the Tale:

While Aucassin was in the chamber sorrowing for Nicolete his love, even then the Count Bougars de Valence, that had his war to wage, forgot it no whit, but had called up his

horsemen and his footmen, so made he for the castle to storm it. And the cry of battle arose, and the din, and knights and men at arms busked them, and ran to walls and gates to hold the keep. And the towns-folk mounted to the battlements, and cast down bolts and pikes. Then while the assault was great, and even at its height, the Count Garin de Biaucaire came into the chamber where Aucassin was making lament, sorrowing for Nicolete, his sweet lady that he loved so well.

“Ha! son,” quoth he, “how caitiff art thou, and cowardly, that canst see men assail thy goodliest castle and strongest. Know thou that if thou lose it, thou lovest all. Son, go to, take arms, and mount thy horse, and defend thy land, and help thy men, and fare into the stour. Thou needst not smite nor be smitten. If they do but see thee among them, better will they guard their substance, and their lives, and thy land and mine. And thou art so great, and hardy of thy hands, that well mightst thou do this thing, and to do it is thy devoir.”

Page 9

"Father," said Aucassin, "what is this thou sayest now? God grant me never aught of my desire, if I be dubbed knight, or mount steed, or go into the stour where knights do smite and are smitten, if thou givest me not Nicolete, my sweet lady, whom I love so well."

"Son," quoth his father, "this may never be: rather would I be quite disinherited and lose all that is mine, than that thou shouldst have her to thy wife, or to love *par amours*."

So he turned him about. But when Aucassin saw him going he called to him again, saying,

"Father, go to now, I will make with thee fair covenant."

"What covenant, fair son?"

"I will take up arms, and go into the stour, on this covenant, that, if God bring me back sound and safe, thou wilt let me see Nicolete my sweet lady, even so long that I may have of her two words or three, and one kiss."

"That will I grant," said his father.

At this was Aucassin glad.

Here one singeth:

Of the kiss heard Aucassin
That returning he shall win.
None so glad would he have been
Of a myriad marks of gold
Of a hundred thousand told.
Called for raiment brave of steel,
Then they clad him, head to heel,
Twyfold hauberk doth he don,
Firmly braced the helmet on.
Girt the sword with hilt of gold,
Horse doth mount, and lance doth wield,
Looks to stirrups and to shield,
Wondrous brave he rode to field.
Dreaming of his lady dear
Setteth spurs to the destrere,
Rideth forward without fear,
Through the gate and forth away
To the fray.

So speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:



Aucassin was armed and mounted as ye have heard tell. God! how goodly sat the shield on his shoulder, the helm on his head, and the baldric on his left haunch! And the damoiseau was tall, fair, featly fashioned, and hardy of his hands, and the horse whereon he rode swift and keen, and straight had he spurred him forth of the gate. Now believe ye not that his mind was on kine, nor cattle of the booty, nor thought he how he might strike a knight, nor be stricken again: nor no such thing. Nay, no memory had Aucassin of aught of these; rather he so dreamed of Nicolete, his sweet lady, that he dropped his reins, forgetting all there was to do, and his horse that had felt the spur, bore him into the press and hurled among the foe, and they laid hands on him all about, and took him captive, and seized away his spear and shield, and straightway they led him off a prisoner, and were even now discoursing of what death he should die.

And when Aucassin heard them,

“Ha! God,” said he, “sweet Saviour. Be these my deadly enemies that have taken me, and will soon cut off my head? And once my head is off, no more shall I speak with Nicolete, my sweet lady, that I love so well. Natheless have I here a good sword, and sit a good horse unwearied. If now I keep not my head for her sake, God help her never, if she love me more!”

Page 10

The damoiseau was tall and strong, and the horse whereon he sat was right eager. And he laid hand to sword, and fell a-smiting to right and left, and smote through helm and *nasal*, and arm and clenched hand, making a murder about him, like a wild boar when hounds fall on him in the forest, even till he struck down ten knights, and seven be hurt, and straightway he hurled out of the press, and rode back again at full speed, sword in hand. The Count Bougars de Valence heard say they were about hanging Aucassin, his enemy, so he came into that place, and Aucassin was ware of him, and gat his sword into his hand, and lashed at his helm with such a stroke that he drave it down on his head, and he being stunned, fell grovelling. And Aucassin laid hands on him, and caught him by the *nasal* of his helmet, and gave him to his father.

"Father," quoth Aucassin, "lo here is your mortal foe, who hath so warred on you with all malengin. Full twenty years did this war endure, and might not be ended by man."

"Fair son," said his father, "thy feats of youth shouldst thou do, and not seek after folly."

"Father," saith Aucassin, "sermon me no sermons, but fulfil my covenant."

"Ha! what covenant, fair son?"

"What, father, hast thou forgotten it? By mine own head, whosoever forgets, will I not forget it, so much it hath me at heart. Didst thou not covenant with me when I took up arms, and went into the stour, that if God brought me back safe and sound, thou wouldst let me see Nicolete, my sweet lady, even so long that I may have of her two words or three, and one kiss? So didst thou covenant, and my mind is that thou keep thy word."

"I!" quoth the father, "God forsake me when I keep this covenant! Nay, if she were here, I would let burn her in the fire, and thyself shouldst be sore adread."

"Is this thy last word?" quoth Aucassin.

"So help me God," quoth his father, "yea!"

"Certes," quoth Aucassin, "this is a sorry thing meseems, when a man of thine age lies!"

"Count of Valence," quoth Aucassin, "I took thee?"

"In sooth, Sir, didst thou," saith the Count.

"Give me thy hand," saith Aucassin.

"Sir, with good will."

So he set his hand in the other's.



“Now givest thou me thy word,” saith Aucassin, “that never whiles thou art living man wilt thou avail to do my father dishonour, or harm him in body, or in goods, but do it thou wilt?”

“Sir, in God’s name,” saith he, “mock me not, but put me to my ransom; ye cannot ask of me gold nor silver, horses nor palfreys, *vair* nor *gris*, hawks nor hounds, but I will give you them.”

“What?” quoth Aucassin. “Ha, knowest thou not it was I that took thee?”

“Yea, sir,” quoth the Count Bougars.

“God help me never, but I will make thy head fly from thy shoulders, if thou makest not troth,” said Aucassin.

Page 11

“In God’s name,” said he, “I make what promise thou wilt.”

So they did the oath, and Aucassin let mount him on a horse, and took another and so led him back till he was all in safety.

Here one singeth:

When the Count Garin doth know
That his child would ne’er forego
Love of her that loved him so,
Nicolete, the bright of brow,
In a dungeon deep below
Childe Aucassin did he throw.
Even there the Childe must dwell
In a dun-walled marble cell.
There he wailleth in his woe
Crying thus as ye shall know.

“Nicolete, thou lily white,
My sweet lady, bright of brow,
Sweeter than the grape art thou,
Sweeter than sack posset good
In a cup of maple wood!
Was it not but yesterday
That a palmer came this way,
Out of Limousin came he,
And at ease he might not be,
For a passion him possessed
That upon his bed he lay,
Lay, and tossed, and knew not rest
In his pain discomforted.
But thou camest by the bed,
Where he tossed amid his pain,
Holding high thy sweeping train,
And thy kirtle of ermine,
And thy smock of linen fine,
Then these fair white limbs of thine,
Did he look on, and it fell
That the palmer straight was well,
Straight was hale—and comforted,
And he rose up from his bed,
And went back to his own place,
Sound and strong, and full of face!
My sweet lady, lily white,



Sweet thy footfall, sweet thine eyes,
And the mirth of thy replies.
Sweet thy laughter, sweet thy face,
Sweet thy lips and sweet thy brow,
And the touch of thine embrace.
Who but doth in thee delight?
I for love of thee am bound
In this dungeon underground,
All for loving thee must lie
Here where loud on thee I cry,
Here for loving thee must die
For thee, my love.”

Then say they, speak they, tell they the Tale:

Aucassin was cast into prison as ye have heard tell, and Nicolete, of her part, was in the chamber. Now it was summer time, the month of May, when days are warm, and long, and clear, and the night still and serene. Nicolete lay one night on her bed, and saw the moon shine clear through a window, yea, and heard the nightingale sing in the garden, so she minded her of Aucassin her lover whom she loved so well. Then fell she to thoughts of Count Garin de Biaucaire, that hated her to the death; therefore deemed she that there she would no longer abide, for that, if she were told of, and the Count knew whereas she lay, an ill death would he make her die. Now she knew that the old woman slept who held her company. Then she arose, and clad her in a mantle of silk she had by her, very goodly, and took napkins, and sheets of the bed, and knotted one to the other, and made therewith a cord as long as she might, so knitted it to a pillar in the window, and let herself slip down into the garden, then caught up her raiment in both hands, behind and before, and kilted up her kirtle, because of the dew that she saw lying deep on the grass, and so went her way down through the garden.

Page 12

Her locks were yellow and curled, her eyes blue and smiling, her face featly fashioned, the nose high and fairly set, the lips more red than cherry or rose in time of summer, her teeth white and small; her breasts so firm that they bore up the folds of her bodice as they had been two apples; so slim she was in the waist that your two hands might have clipped her, and the daisy flowers that brake beneath her as she went tip-toe, and that bent above her instep, seemed black against her feet, so white was the maiden. She came to the postern gate, and unbarred it, and went out through the streets of Biaucaire, keeping always on the shadowy side, for the moon was shining right clear, and so wandered she till she came to the tower where her lover lay. The tower was flanked with buttresses, and she cowered under one of them, wrapped in her mantle. Then thrust she her head through a crevice of the tower that was old and worn, and so heard she Aucassin wailing within, and making dole and lament for the sweet lady he loved so well. And when she had listened to him she began to say:

Here one singeth:

Nicolete the bright of brow
On a pillar leanest thou,
All Aucassin's wail dost hear
For his love that is so dear,
Then thou spakest, shrill and clear,
"Gentle knight withouten fear
Little good befalleth thee,
Little help of sigh or tear,
Ne'er shalt thou have joy of me.
Never shalt thou win me; still
Am I held in evil will
Of thy father and thy kin,
Therefore must I cross the sea,
And another land must win."
Then she cut her curls of gold,
Cast them in the dungeon hold,
Aucassin doth clasp them there,
Kissed the curls that were so fair,
Them doth in his bosom bear,
Then he wept, even as of old,
All for his love!

Then say they, speak they, tell they the Tale:

When Aucassin heard Nicolete say that she would pass into a far country, he was all in wrath.

“Fair sweet friend,” quoth he, “thou shalt not go, for then wouldst thou be my death. And the first man that saw thee and had the might withal, would take thee straightway into his bed to be his leman. And once thou camest into a man’s bed, and that bed not mine, wit ye well that I would not tarry till I had found a knife to pierce my heart and slay myself. Nay, verily, wait so long I would not: but would hurl myself on it so soon as I could find a wall, or a black stone, thereon would I dash my head so mightily, that the eyes would start, and my brain burst. Rather would I die even such a death, than know thou hadst lain in a man’s bed, and that bed not mine.”

“Aucassin,” she said, “I trow thou lovest me not as much as thou sayest, but I love thee more than thou lovest me.”

“Ah, fair sweet friend,” said Aucassin, “it may not be that thou shouldst love me even as I love thee. Woman may not love man as man loves woman, for a woman’s love lies in the glance of her eye, and the bud of her breast, and her foot’s tip-toe, but the love of man is in his heart planted, whence it can never issue forth and pass away.”

Page 13

Now while Aucassin and Nicolete held this parley together, the town's guards came down a street, with swords drawn beneath their cloaks, for the Count Garin had charged them that if they could take her they should slay her. But the sentinel that was on the tower saw them coming, and heard them speaking of Nicolete as they went, and threatening to slay her.

"God!" quoth he, "this were great pity to slay so fair a maid! Right great charity it were if I could say aught to her, and they perceive it not, and she should be on her guard against them, for if they slay her, then were Aucassin, my damoiseau, dead, and that were great pity."

Here one singeth:

Valiant was the sentinel,
Courteous, kind, and practised well,
So a song did sing and tell
Of the peril that befell.
"Maiden fair that lingerest here,
Gentle maid of merry cheer,
Hair of gold, and eyes as clear
As the water in a mere,
Thou, meseems, hast spoken word
To thy lover and thy lord,
That would die for thee, his dear;
Now beware the ill accord,
Of the cloaked men of the sword,
These have sworn and keep their word,
They will put thee to the sword
Save thou take heed!"

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

"Ha!" quoth Nicolete, "be the soul of thy father and the soul of thy mother in the rest of Paradise, so fairly and so courteously hast thou spoken me! Please God, I will be right ware of them, God keep me out of their hands."

So she shrank under her mantle into the shadow of the pillar till they had passed by, and then took she farewell of Aucassin, and so fared till she came unto the castle wall. Now that wall was wasted and broken, and some deal mended, so she clomb thereon till she came between wall and fosse, and so looked down, and saw that the fosse was deep and steep, whereat she was sore adread.

“Ah God,” saith she, “sweet Saviour! If I let myself fall hence, I shall break my neck, and if here I abide, to-morrow they will take me and burn me in a fire. Yet liefer would I perish here than that to-morrow the folk should stare on me for a gazing-stock.”

Then she crossed herself, and so let herself slip into the fosse, and when she had come to the bottom, her fair feet, and fair hands that had not custom thereof, were bruised and frayed, and the blood springing from a dozen places, yet felt she no pain nor hurt, by reason of the great dread wherein she went. But if she were in cumber to win there, in worse was she to win out. But she deemed that there to abide was of none avail, and she found a pike sharpened, that they of the city had thrown out to keep the hold. Therewith made she one stepping place after another, till, with much travail, she climbed the wall. Now the forest lay within two crossbow shots, and the forest was of thirty leagues this way and that. Therein also were wild beasts, and beasts serpentine, and she feared that if she entered there they would slay her. But anon she deemed that if men found her there they would hale her back into the town to burn her.

Page 14

Here one singeth:

Nicolete, the fair of face,
Climbed upon the coping stone,
There made she lament and moan
Calling on our Lord alone
For his mercy and his grace.

“Father, king of Majesty,
Listen, for I nothing know
Where to flee or whither go.
If within the wood I fare,
Lo, the wolves will slay me there,
Boars and lions terrible,
Many in the wild wood dwell,
But if I abide the day,
Surely worse will come of it,
Surely will the fire be lit
That shall burn my body away,
Jesus, lord of Majesty,
Better seemeth it to me,
That within the wood I fare,
Though the wolves devour me there
Than within the town to go,
Ne'er be it so!”

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

Nicolete made great moan, as ye have heard; then commended she herself to God, and anon fared till she came unto the forest. But to go deep in it she dared not, by reason of the wild beasts, and beasts serpentine. Anon crept she into a little thicket, where sleep came upon her, and she slept till prime next day, when the shepherds issued forth from the town and drove their bestial between wood and water. Anon came they all into one place by a fair fountain which was on the fringe of the forest, thereby spread they a mantle, and thereon set bread. So while they were eating, Nicolete wakened, with the sound of the singing birds, and the shepherds, and she went unto them, saying, “Fair boys, our Lord keep you!”

“God bless thee,” quoth he that had more words to his tongue than the rest.

“Fair boys,” quoth she, “know ye Aucassin, the son of Count Garin de Biaucaire?”

“Yea, well we know him.”



“So may God help you, fair boys,” quoth she, “tell him there is a beast in this forest, and bid him come chase it, and if he can take it, he would not give one limb thereof for a hundred marks of gold, nay, nor for five hundred, nor for any ransom.”

Then looked they on her, and saw her so fair that they were all astonished.

“Will I tell him thereof?” quoth he that had more words to his tongue than the rest; “foul fall him who speaks of the thing or tells him the tidings. These are but visions ye tell of, for there is no beast so great in this forest, stag, nor lion, nor boar, that one of his limbs is worth more than two deniers, or three at the most, and ye speak of such great ransom. Foul fall him that believes your word, and him that telleth Aucassin. Ye be a Fairy, and we have none liking for your company, nay, hold on your road.”

“Nay, fair boys,” quoth she, “nay, ye will do my bidding. For this beast is so mighty of medicine that thereby will Aucassin be healed of his torment. And lo! I have five sols in my purse, take them, and tell him: for within three days must he come hunting it hither, and if within three days he find it not, never will he be healed of his torment.”

Page 15

“My faith,” quoth he, “the money will we take, and if he come hither we will tell him, but seek him we will not.”

“In God’s name,” quoth she; and so took farewell of the shepherds, and went her way.

Here singeth one:

Nicolete the bright of brow
From the shepherds doth she pass
All below the blossomed bough
Where an ancient way there was,
Overgrown and choked with grass,
Till she found the cross-roads where
Seven paths do all way fare,
Then she deemeth she will try,
Should her lover pass thereby,
If he love her loyally.
So she gathered white lilies,
Oak-leaf, that in green wood is,
Leaves of many a branch I wis,
Therewith built a lodge of green,
Goodlier was never seen,
Swore by God who may not lie,
“If my love the lodge should spy,
He will rest awhile thereby
If he love me loyally.”
Thus his faith she deemed to try,
“Or I love him not, not I,
Nor he loves me!”

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

Nicolete built her lodge of boughs, as ye have heard, right fair and feteously, and wove it well, within and without, of flowers and leaves. So lay she hard by the lodge in a deep coppice to know what Aucassin will do. And the cry and the bruit went abroad through all the country and all the land, that Nicolete was lost. Some told that she had fled, and some that the Count Garin had let slay her. Whosoever had joy thereof, no joy had Aucassin. And the Count Garin, his father, had taken him out of prison, and had sent for the knights of that land, and the ladies, and let make a right great feast, for the comforting of Aucassin his son. Now at the high time of the feast, was Aucassin leaning from a gallery, all woful and discomforted. Whatsoever men might devise of mirth, Aucassin had no joy thereof, nor no desire, for he saw not her that he loved. Then a knight looked on him, and came to him, and said:

“Aucassin, of that sickness of thine have I been sick, and good counsel will I give thee, if thou wilt hearken to me—”

“Sir,” said Aucassin, “gramercy, good counsel would I fain hear.”

“Mount thy horse,” quoth he, “and go take thy pastime in yonder forest, there wilt thou see the good flowers and grass, and hear the sweet birds sing. Perchance thou shalt hear some word, whereby thou shalt be the better.”

“Sir,” quoth Aucassin, “gramercy, that will I do.”

He passed out of the hall, and went down the stairs, and came to the stable where his horse was. He let saddle and bridle him, and mounted, and rode forth from the castle, and wandered till he came to the forest, so rode till he came to the fountain and found the shepherds at point of noon. And they had a mantle stretched on the grass, and were eating bread, and making great joy.

Here one singeth:

Page 16

There were gathered shepherds all,
Martin, Esmeric, and Hal,
Aubrey, Robin, great and small.
Saith the one, "Good fellows all,
God keep Aucassin the fair,
And the maid with yellow hair,
Bright of brow and eyes of vair.
She that gave us gold to ware.
Cakes therewith to buy ye know,
Goodly knives and sheaths also.
Flutes to play, and pipes to blow,
May God him heal!"

Here speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

When Aucassin heard the shepherds, anon he bethought him of Nicolete, his sweet lady he loved so well, and he deemed that she had passed thereby; then set he spurs to his horse, and so came to the shepherds.

"Fair boys, God be with you."

"God bless you," quoth he that had more words to his tongue than the rest.

"Fair boys," quoth Aucassin, "say the song again that anon ye sang."

"Say it we will not," quoth he that had more words to his tongue than the rest, "foul fall him who will sing it again for you, fair sir!"

"Fair boys," quoth Aucassin, "know ye me not?"

"Yea, we know well that you are Aucassin, out damoiseau, natheless we be not your men, but the Count's."

"Fair boys, yet sing it again, I pray you."

"Hearken! by the Holy Heart," quoth he, "wherefore should I sing for you, if it likes me not? Lo, there is no such rich man in this country, saving the body of Garin the Count, that dare drive forth my oxen, or my cows, or my sheep, if he finds them in his fields, or his corn, lest he lose his eyes for it, and wherefore should I sing for you, if it likes me not?"

"God be your aid, fair boys, sing it ye will, and take ye these ten sols I have here in a purse."

“Sir, the money will we take, but never a note will I sing, for I have given my oath, but I will tell thee a plain tale, if thou wilt.”

“By God,” saith Aucassin, “I love a plain tale better than naught.”

“Sir, we were in this place, a little time ago, between prime and tierce, and were eating our bread by this fountain, even as now we do, and a maid came past, the fairest thing in the world, whereby we deemed that she should be a fay, and all the wood shone round about her. Anon she gave us of that she had, whereby we made covenant with her, that if ye came hither we would bid you hunt in this forest, wherein is such a beast that, an ye might take him, ye would not give one limb of him for five hundred marks of silver, nor for no ransom; for this beast is so mighty of medicine, that, an ye could take him, ye should be healed of your torment, and within three days must ye take him, and if ye take him not then, never will ye look on him. So chase ye the beast, an ye will, or an ye will let be, for my promise have I kept with her.”

“Fair boys,” quoth Aucassin, “ye have said enough. God grant me to find this quarry.”

Page 17

Here one singeth:

Aucassin when he had heard,
Sore within his heart was stirred,
Left the shepherds on that word,
Far into the forest spurred
Rode into the wood; and fleet
Fled his horse through paths of it,
Three words spake he of his sweet,
"Nicolete the fair, the dear,
'Tis for thee I follow here
Track of boar, nor slot of deer,
But thy sweet body and eyes so clear,
All thy mirth and merry cheer,
That my very heart have slain,
So please God to me maintain
I shall see my love again,
Sweet sister, friend!"

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

Aucassin fared through the forest from path to path after Nicolete, and his horse bare him furiously. Think ye not that the thorns him spared, nor the briars, nay, not so, but tare his raiment, that scarce a knot might be tied with the soundest part thereof, and the blood sprang from his arms, and flanks, and legs, in forty places, or thirty, so that behind the Childe men might follow on the track of his blood in the grass. But so much he went in thoughts of Nicolete, his lady sweet, that he felt no pain nor torment, and all the day hurled through the forest in this fashion nor heard no word of her. And when he saw Vespers draw nigh, he began to weep for that he found her not. All down an old road, and grassgrown he fared, when anon, looking along the way before him, he saw such an one as I shall tell you. Tall was he, and great of growth, laidly and marvellous to look upon: his head huge, and black as charcoal, and more than the breadth of a hand between his two eyes, and great cheeks, and a big nose and broad, big nostrils and ugly, and thick lips redder than a collop, and great teeth yellow and ugly, and he was shod with hosen and shoon of bull's hide, bound with cords of bark over the knee, and all about him a great cloak twy-fold, and he leaned on a grievous cudgel, and Aucassin came unto him, and was afraid when he beheld him.

"Fair brother, God aid thee."

"God bless you," quoth he.

"As God he helpeth thee, what makest thou here?"

“What is that to thee?”

“Nay, naught, naught,” saith Aucassin, “I ask but out of courtesy.”

“But for whom weepest thou,” quoth he, “and makest such heavy lament? Certes, were I as rich a man as thou, the whole world should not make me weep.”

“Ha! know ye me?” saith Aucassin.

“Yea, I know well that ye be Aucassin, the son of the Count, and if ye tell me for why ye weep, then will I tell you what I make here.”

“Certes,” quoth Aucassin, “I will tell you right gladly. Hither came I this morning to hunt in this forest; and with me a white hound, the fairest in the world; him have I lost, and for him I weep.”

“By the Heart our Lord bare in his breast,” quoth he, “are ye weeping for a stinking hound? Foul fall him that holds thee high henceforth! for there is no such rich man in the land, but if thy father asked it of him, he would give thee ten, or fifteen, or twenty, and be the gladder for it. But I have cause to weep and make dole.”

Page 18

"Wherefore so, brother?"

"Sir, I will tell thee. I was hireling to a rich villain, and drove his plough; four oxen had he. But three days since came on me great misadventure, whereby I lost the best of mine oxen, Roger, the best of my team. Him go I seeking, and have neither eaten nor drunken these three days, nor may I go to the town, lest they cast me into prison, seeing that I have not wherewithal to pay. Out of all the wealth of the world have I no more than ye see on my body. A poor mother bare me, that had no more but one wretched bed; this have they taken from under her, and she lies in the very straw. This ails me more than mine own case, for wealth comes and goes; if now I have lost, another tide will I gain, and will pay for mine ox whenas I may; never for that will I weep. But you weep for a stinking hound. Foul fall whoso thinks well of thee!"

"Certes thou art a good comforter, brother, blessed be thou! And of what price was thine ox?"

"Sir, they ask me twenty sols for him, whereof I cannot abate one doit."

"Nay, then," quoth Aucassin, "take these twenty sols I have in my purse, and pay for thine ox."

"Sir," saith he, "gramercy. And God give thee to find that thou seekest."

So they parted each from other, and Aucassin rode on: the night was fair and still, and so long he went that he came to the lodge of boughs, that Nicolete had builded and woven within and without, over and under, with flowers, and it was the fairest lodge that might be seen. When Aucassin was ware of it, he stopped suddenly, and the light of the moon fell therein.

"God!" quoth Aucassin, "here was Nicolete, my sweet lady, and this lodge builded she with her fair hands. For the sweetness of it, and for love of her, will I alight, and rest here this night long."

He drew forth his foot from the stirrup to alight, and the steed was great and tall. He dreamed so much on Nicolete his right sweet lady, that he slipped on a stone, and drave his shoulder out of his place. Then knew he that he was hurt sore, natheless he bore him with what force he might, and fastened with the other hand the mare's son to a thorn. Then turned he on his side, and crept backwise into the lodge of boughs. And he looked through a gap in the lodge and saw the stars in heaven, and one that was brighter than the rest; so began he to say:

Here one singeth:

"Star, that I from far behold,
Star, the Moon calls to her fold,



Nicolete with thee doth dwell,
My sweet love with locks of gold,
God would have her dwell afar,
Dwell with him for evening star,
Would to God, whate'er befell,
Would that with her I might dwell.
I would clip her close and strait,
Nay, were I of much estate,
Some king's son desirable,
Worthy she to be my mate,
Me to kiss and clip me well,
Sister, sweet friend!"

Page 19

So speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

When Nicolete heard Aucassin, right so came she unto him, for she was not far away. She passed within the lodge, and threw her arms about his neck, and clipped and kissed him.

“Fair sweet friend, welcome be thou.”

“And thou, fair sweet love, be thou welcome.”

So either kissed and clipped the other, and fair joy was them between.

“Ha! sweet love,” quoth Aucassin, “but now was I sore hurt, and my shoulder wried, but I take no force of it, nor have no hurt therefrom since I have thee.”

Right so felt she his shoulder and found it was wried from its place. And she so handled it with her white hands, and so wrought in her surgery, that by God’s will who loveth lovers, it went back into its place. Then took she flowers, and fresh grass, and leaves green, and bound these herbs on the hurt with a strip of her smock, and he was all healed.

“Aucassin,” saith she, “fair sweet love, take counsel what thou wilt do. If thy father let search this forest to-morrow, and men find me here, they will slay me, come to thee what will.”

“Certes, fair sweet love, therefore should I sorrow heavily, but, an if I may, never shall they take thee.”

Anon gat he on his horse, and his lady before him, kissing and clipping her, and so rode they at adventure.

Here one singeth:

Aucassin the frank, the fair,
Aucassin of the yellow hair,
Gentle knight, and true lover,
From the forest doth he fare,
Holds his love before him there,
Kissing cheek, and chin, and eyes,
But she spake in sober wise,
“Aucassin, true love and fair,
To what land do we repair?”
Sweet my love, I take no care,
Thou art with me everywhere!
So they pass the woods and downs,



Pass the villages and towns,
Hills and dales and open land,
Came at dawn to the sea sand,
Lighted down upon the strand,
Beside the sea.

Then say they, speak they, tell they the Tale:

Aucassin lighted down and his love, as ye have heard sing. He held his horse by the bridle, and his lady by the hands; so went they along the sea shore, and on the sea they saw a ship, and he called unto the sailors, and they came to him. Then held he such speech with them, that he and his lady were brought aboard that ship, and when they were on the high sea, behold a mighty wind and tyrannous arose, marvellous and great, and drave them from land to land, till they came unto a strange country, and won the haven of the castle of Torelore. Then asked they what this land might be, and men told them that it was the country of the King of Torelore. Then he asked what manner of man was he, and was there war afoot, and men said,

“Yea, and mighty!”

Therewith took he farewell of the merchants, and they commended him to God. Anon Aucassin mounted his horse, with his sword girt, and his lady before him, and rode at adventure till he was come to the castle. Then asked he where the King was, and they said that he was in childbed.

Page 20

"Then where is his wife?"

And they told him she was with the host, and had led with her all the force of that country.

Now when Aucassin heard that saying, he made great marvel, and came into the castle, and lighted down, he and his lady, and his lady held his horse. Right so went he up into the castle, with his sword girt, and fared hither and thither till he came to the chamber where the King was lying.

Here one singeth:

Aucassin the courteous knight
To the chamber went forthright,
To the bed with linen dight
Even where the King was laid.
There he stood by him and said:
"Fool, what mak'st thou here abed?"
Quoth the King: "I am brought to bed
Of a fair son, and anon
When my month is over and gone,
And my healing fairly done,
To the Minster will I fare
And will do my churching there,
As my father did repair.
Then will sally forth to war,
Then will drive my foes afar
From my countrie!"

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

When Aucassin heard the King speak on this wise, he took all the sheets that covered him, and threw them all abroad about the chamber. Then saw he behind him a cudgel, and caught it into his hand, and turned, and took the King, and beat him till he was well-nigh dead.

"Ha! fair sir," quoth the King, "what would you with me? Art thou beside thyself, that beatest me in mine own house?"

"By God's heart," quoth Aucassin, "thou ill son of an ill wench, I will slay thee if thou swear not that never shall any man in all thy land lie in of child henceforth for ever."

So he did that oath, and when he had done it,

"Sir," said Aucassin, "bring me now where thy wife is with the host."



“Sir, with good will,” quoth the King.

He mounted his horse, and Aucassin gat on his own, and Nicolete abode in the Queen’s chamber. Anon rode Aucassin and the King even till they came to that place where the Queen was, and lo! men were warring with baked apples, and with eggs, and with fresh cheeses, and Aucassin began to look on them, and made great marvel.

Here one singeth:

Aucassin his horse doth stay,
From the saddle watched the fray,
All the stour and fierce array;
Right fresh cheeses carried they,
Apples baked, and mushrooms grey,
Whoso splasheth most the ford
He is master called and lord.
Aucassin doth gaze awhile,
Then began to laugh and smile
And made game.

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

When Aucassin beheld these marvels, he came to the King, and said, “Sir, be these thine enemies?”

“Yea, Sir,” quoth the King.

“And will ye that I should avenge you of them?”

“Yea,” quoth he, “with all my heart.”

Page 21

Then Aucassin put hand to sword, and hurled among them, and began to smite to the right hand and the left, and slew many of them. And when the King saw that he slew them, he caught at his bridle and said,

“Ha! fair sir, slay them not in such wise.”

“How,” quoth Aucassin, “will ye not that I should avenge you of them?”

“Sir,” quoth the King, “overmuch already hast thou avenged me. It is nowise our custom to slay each other.”

Anon turned they and fled. Then the King and Aucassin betook them again to the castle of Torelore, and the folk of that land counselled the King to put Aucassin forth, and keep Nicolete for his son’s wife, for that she seemed a lady high of lineage. And Nicolete heard them, and had no joy of it, so began to say:

Here singeth one:

Thus she spake the bright of brow:

“Lord of Torelore and king,
Thy folk deem me a light thing,
When my love doth me embrace,
Fair he finds me, in good case,
Then am I in such derray,
Neither harp, nor lyre, nor lay,
Dance nor game, nor rebeck play
Were so sweet.”

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

Aucassin dwelt in the castle of Torelore, in great ease and great delight, for that he had with him Nicolete his sweet love, whom he loved so well. Now while he was in such pleasure and such delight, came a troop of Saracens by sea, and laid siege to the castle and took it by main strength. Anon took they the substance that was therein and carried off the men and maidens captives. They seized Nicolete and Aucassin, and bound Aucassin hand and foot, and cast him into one ship, and Nicolete into another. Then rose there a mighty wind over sea, and scattered the ships. Now that ship wherein was Aucassin, went wandering on the sea, till it came to the castle of Biaucaire, and the folk of the country ran together to wreck her, and there found they Aucassin, and they knew him again. So when they of Biaucaire saw their damoiseau, they made great joy of him, for Aucassin had dwelt full three years in the castle of Torelore, and his father and mother were dead. So the people took him to the castle of Biaucaire, and there were they all his men. And he held the land in peace.

Here singeth one:

Lo ye, Aucassin hath gone
To Biaucaire that is his own,
Dwelleth there in joy and ease
And the kingdom is at peace.
Swears he by the Majesty
Of our Lord that is most high,
Rather would he they should die
All his kin and parentry,
So that Nicolete were nigh.
“Ah sweet love, and fair of brow,
I know not where to seek thee now,
God made never that countrie,
Not by land, and not by sea,
Where I would not search for thee,
If that might be!”

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

Page 22

Now leave we Aucassin, and speak we of Nicolete. The ship wherein she was cast pertained to the King of Carthage, and he was her father, and she had twelve brothers, all princes or kings. When they beheld Nicolete, how fair she was, they did her great worship, and made much joy of her, and many times asked her who she was, for surely seemed she a lady of noble line and high parentry. But she might not tell them of her lineage, for she was but a child when men stole her away. So sailed they till they won the City of Carthage, and when Nicolete saw the walls of the castle, and the countryside, she knew that there had she been nourished and thence stolen away, being but a child. Yet was she not so young a child but that well she knew she had been daughter of the King of Carthage; and of her nurture in that city.

Here singeth one:

Nicolete the good and true
To the land hath come anew,
Sees the palaces and walls,
And the houses and the halls!
Then she spake and said, "Alas!
That of birth so great I was,
Cousin of the Amiral
And the very child of him
Carthage counts King of Paynim,
Wild folk hold me here withal;
Nay Aucassin, love of thee
Gentle knight, and true, and free,
Burns and wastes the heart of me.
Ah God grant it of his grace,
That thou hold me, and embrace,
That thou kiss me on the face
Love and lord!"

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

When the King of Carthage heard Nicolete speak in this wise, he cast his arms about her neck.

"Fair sweet love," saith he, "tell me who thou art, and be not adread of me."

"Sir," said she, "I am daughter to the King of Carthage, and was taken, being then a little child, it is now fifteen years gone."

When all they of the court heard her speak thus, they knew well that she spake sooth: so made they great joy of her, and led her to the castle in great honour, as the King's daughter. And they would have given her to her lord a King of Paynim, but she had no



mind to marry. There dwelt she three days or four. And she considered by what means she might seek for Aucassin. Then she got her a viol, and learned to play on it, till they would have married her on a day to a great King of Paynim, and she stole forth by night, and came to the sea-port, and dwelt with a poor woman thereby. Then took she a certain herb, and therewith smeared her head and her face, till she was all brown and stained. And she let make coat, and mantle, and smock, and hose, and attired herself as if she had been a harper. So took she the viol and went to a mariner, and so wrought on him that he took her aboard his vessel. Then hoisted they sail, and fared on the high seas even till they came to the land of Provence. And Nicolete went forth and took the viol, and went playing through all that country, even till she came to the castle of Biaucaire, where Aucassin lay.

Page 23

Here singeth one:

At Biaucaire below the tower
Sat Aucassin, on an hour,
Heard the bird, and watched the flower,
With his barons him beside,
Then came on him in that tide,
The sweet influence of love
And the memory thereof;
Thought of Nicolete the fair,
And the dainty face of her
He had loved so many years,
Then was he in dule and tears!
Even then came Nicolete
On the stair a foot she set,
And she drew the viol bow
Through the strings and chanted so;
“Listen, lords and knights, to me,
Lords of high or low degree,
To my story list will ye
All of Aucassin and her
That was Nicolete the fair?
And their love was long to tell
Deep woods through he sought her well,
Paynims took them on a day
In Torelore and bound they lay.
Of Aucassin nought know we,
But fair Nicolete the free
Now in Carthage doth she dwell,
There her father loves her well,
Who is king of that countrie.
Her a husband hath he found,
Paynim lord that serves Mahound!
Ne’er with him the maid will go,
For she loves a damoiseau,
Aucassin, that ye may know,
Swears to God that never mo
With a lover will she go
Save with him she loveth so
In long desire.”

So speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

When Aucassin heard Nicolete speak in this wise, he was right joyful, and drew her on one side, and spoke, saying:

“Sweet fair friend, know ye nothing of this Nicolete, of whom ye have thus sung?”

“Yea, Sir, I know her for the noblest creature, and the most gentle, and the best that ever was born on ground. She is daughter to the King of Carthage that took her there where Aucassin was taken, and brought her into the city of Carthage, till he knew that verily she was his own daughter, whereon he made right great mirth. Anon wished he to give her for her lord one of the greatest kings of all Spain, but she would rather let herself be hanged or burned, than take any lord, how great soever.”

“Ha! fair sweet friend,” quoth the Count Aucassin, “if thou wilt go into that land again, and bid her come and speak to me, I will give thee of my substance, more than thou wouldst dare to ask or take. And know ye, that for the sake of her, I have no will to take a wife, howsoever high her lineage. So wait I for her, and never will I have a wife, but her only. And if I knew where to find her, no need would I have to seek her.”

“Sir,” quoth she, “if ye promise me that, I will go in quest of her for your sake, and for hers, that I love much.”

So he sware to her, and anon let give her twenty livres, and she departed from him, and he wept for the sweetness of Nicolete. And when she saw him weeping, she said:

“Sir, trouble not thyself so much withal. For in a little while shall I have brought her into this city, and ye shall see her.”

Page 24

When Aucassin heard that, he was right glad thereof. And she departed from him, and went into the city to the house of the Captain's wife, for the Captain her father in God was dead. So she dwelt there, and told all her tale; and the Captain's wife knew her, and knew well that she was Nicolete that she herself had nourished. Then she let wash and bathe her, and there rested she eight full days. Then took she an herb that was named *Eyebright* and anointed herself therewith, and was as fair as ever she had been all the days of her life. Then she clothed herself in rich robes of silk whereof the lady had great store, and then sat herself in the chamber on a silken coverlet, and called the lady and bade her go and bring Aucassin her love, and she did even so. And when she came to the Palace she found Aucassin weeping, and making lament for Nicolete his love, for that she delayed so long. And the lady spake unto him and said:

"Aucassin, sorrow no more, but come thou on with me, and I will shew thee the thing in the world that thou lovest best; even Nicolete thy dear love, who from far lands hath come to seek of thee." And Aucassin was right glad.

Here singeth one:

When Aucassin heareth now
That his lady bright of brow
Dwelleth in his own countrie,
Never man was glad as he.
To her castle doth he hie
With the lady speedily,
Passeth to the chamber high,
Findeth Nicolete thereby.
Of her true love found again
Never maid was half so fain.
Straight she leaped upon her feet:
When his love he saw at last,
Arms about her did he cast,
Kissed her often, kissed her sweet
Kissed her lips and brows and eyes.
Thus all night do they devise,
Even till the morning white.
Then Aucassin wedded her,
Made her Lady of Biaucaire.
Many years abode they there,
Many years in shade or sun,
In great gladness and delight
Ne'er hath Aucassin regret
Nor his lady Nicolete.
Now my story all is done,
Said and sung!

NOTES

“THE BLENDING”—of alternate prose and verse—“is not unknown in various countries.” Thus in Dr. Steere’s *Swahili Tales* (London, 1870), p. vii. we read: “It is a constant characteristic of popular native tales to have a sort of burden, which all join in singing. Frequently the skeleton of the story seems to be contained in these snatches of singing, which the story-teller connects by an extemporized account of the intervening history . . . Almost all these stories had sung parts, and of some of these, even those who sung them could scarcely explain the meaning . . . I have heard stories partly told, in which the verse parts were in the Yao and Nyamwezi languages.” The examples given (*Sultan Majnun*) are only verses supposed to be chanted by the characters in the tale. It is improbable that the Yaos and Nyamwezis borrowed the custom of inserting verse into prose tales from Arab literature, where the intercalated verse is usually of a moral and reflective character.

Page 25

Mr. Jamieson, in *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities* (p. 379), preserved a *cante-fable* called *Rosmer Halfman*, or *The Merman Rosmer*. Mr. Motherwell remarks (*Minstrelsy*, Glasgow, 1827, p. xv.): “Thus I have heard the ancient ballad of *Young Beichan and Susy Pye* dilated by a story-teller into a tale of remarkable dimensions—a paragraph of prose and then a *screed* of rhyme alternately given.” The example published by Mr. Motherwell gives us the very form of *Aucassin and Nicolette*, surviving in Scotch folk lore:-

“Well ye must know that in the Moor’s Castle, there was a mafsymore, which is a dark deep dungeon for keeping prisoners. It was twenty feet below the ground, and into this hole they closed poor Beichan. There he stood, night and day, up to his waist in puddle-water; but night or day it was all one to him, for no ae styme of light ever got in. So he lay there a lang and weary while, and thinking on his heavy weird, he made a murnfu’ sang to pass the time—and this was the sang that he made, and grat when he sang it, for he never thought of escaping from the mafsymore, or of seeing his ain countrie again:

“My hounds they all run masterless,
My hawks they flee from tree to tree;
My youngest brother will heir my lands,
And fair England again I’ll never see.

“O were I free as I hae been,
And my ship swimming once more on sea,
I’d turn my face to fair England,
And sail no more to a strange countrie.”

“Now the cruel Moor had a beautiful daughter called Susy Pye, who was accustomed to take a walk every morning in her garden, and as she was walking ae day she heard the sough o’ Beichan’s sang, coming as it were from below the ground.”

All this is clearly analogous in form no less than in matter to our *cante-fable*. Mr. Motherwell speaks of *fabliaux*, intended partly for recitation, and partly for being sung; but does not refer by name to *Aucassin and Nicolette*. If we may judge by analogy, then, the form of the *cante-fable* is probably an early artistic adaptation of a popular narrative method.

STOUR; an ungainly word enough, familiar in Scotch with the sense of wind-driven dust, it may be dust of battle. The French is *Estor*.

BIAUCAIRE, opposite Tarascon, also celebrated for its local hero, the deathless Tartarin. There is a great deal of learning about Biaucaire; probably the author of the *cante-fable* never saw the place, but he need not have thought it was on the sea-shore, as (p. 39) he seems to do. There he makes the people of Beaucaire set out to wreck a

ship. Ships do not go up the Rhone, and get wrecked there, after escaping the perils of the deep.

On p. 42, the poet clearly thinks that Nicolette, after landing from her barque, had to travel a considerable distance before reaching Biaucaire. The fact is that the poet is perfectly reckless of geography, like him who wrote of the set-shore of Bohemia.

Page 26

PAINTED WONDROUSLY. No one knows what is really meant by a *miramie*.

PLENTIFUL LACK OF COMFORT: rather freely for *Mout i aries peu conquis*.

MALENGIN: a favourite word of Sir Thomas Malory: "mischievous intent."

FEATS OF YOUTH: ENFANCES, the regular term for the romance of a knight's early prowess.

TWO APPLES; nois gauges in the original. But *walnuts* sound inadequate.

Here the MS. has a *lacuna*.

There is much useless learning about the realm of *Torelore*. It is somewhere between Kor and Laputa. The custom of the *Couvade* was dimly known to the poet. The feigned lying-in of the father may have been either a recognition of paternity (as in the sham birth whereby Hera adopted Heracles) or may have been caused by the belief that the health of the father at the time of the child's birth affected that of the child. Either origin of the *Couvade* is consistent with early beliefs and customs.

EYEBRIGHT. This is a purely fanciful rendering of *Esclaire*.

Footnotes:

{1} Gaston Paris, in M. Bida's edition, p. xii. Paris, 1878. The blending is not unknown in various countries. See note at end of Translation.

{2} I know not if I unconsciously transferred this criticism from M. Gaston Paris.

{3} "Love in Idleness." London, 1883, p. 169.

{4} Theocritus, x. 37.

{5} I have not thought it necessary to discuss the conjectures,—they are no more,—about the Greek or Arabic origin of the cante-fable, about the derivation of Aucassin's name, the supposed copying of *Floire et Blancheflor*, the longitude and latitude of the land of Torelore, and so forth. In truth "we are in Love's land to-day," where the ships sail without wind or compass, like the barques of the Phaeacians. Brunner and Suchier add nothing positive to our knowledge, and M. Gaston Paris pretends to cast but little light on questions which it is too curious to consider at all. In revising the translation I have used with profit the versions of M. Bida, of Mr. Bourdillon, the glossary of Suchier, and Mr. Bourdillon's glossary. As for the style I have attempted, if not Old English, at least English which is elderly, with a memory of Malory.