

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

**Translated from the Old French
by Francis William Bourdillon**

Sample



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by Francis William Bourdillon

First published 1887

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A Dunyazad Digital Library book
Selected, edited and typeset by Robert Schaechter
First published December 2016
Release 1.1 · January 2017

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aucassin and Nicolette was written in Old French in the late 12th or early 13th century; only one manuscript survived which was discovered in 1752 by medievalist Jean-Baptiste de La Curne de Sainte-Palaye. About the author nothing is known.

Francis William Bourdillon (1852–1921) was a British poet, novelist, scholar, tutor, and writer of essays published by the Religious Tract Society. One short poem, in particular, has brought him lasting fame: *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes*.

The night has a thousand eyes,
And the day but one;
Yet the light of the bright world dies
With the dying sun.

The mind has a thousand eyes,
And the heart but one:
Yet the light of a whole life dies
When love is done.

While largely forgotten today, much of his poetry is worth being noted. In 1917 he published the poem *Russia Reborn*, where he hails the revolution in Russia from a Christian point of view with Old Testament vigor — here a short excerpt:

Tremble ye, tremble ye, Tyrannies, Opressions,
Slaveries, Terrors, Powers of the sword!
Who now will plead for you, who make intercessions,
When the wrath of the People is the judgment of the Lord?

Make strong your fortresses, high your fenced cities!
Marshal by millions your unrebelling slaves!
There are more against you, sorrows, sanctions, pities,
Souls of the slain arising from their graves.

Fling your crowns from you! That shall not avail you.
Flee from your thrones! No help shall lie that way.
Though ye fall to prayer, the gods ye serve shall fail you,
What time the trumpet sounds proclaiming Judgment Day.

History has tragically proven wrong this confidence in an impending end to tyranny, but the sentiment, coming from a Christian scholar, who as a young man had been tutor to the sons of Prince Christian of Schleswig-Holstein, still deserves respect.

Bourdillon's last published work, in 1921, was *Gerard and Isabel*, a "Romance in Form of Cantefable" strongly inspired by *Aucassin and Nicolette* but set in a religious context.

Andrew Lang (1844–1912) was a Scottish poet, novelist, literary critic, journalist, translator, and scholar who published on folklore, mythology, and religion.

Bruno Paulin Gaston Paris (1839–1903), not an author here but referred to in Lang's Foreword, was a French writer and, as his father Alexis Paulin Paris, an important scholar of medieval French literature; it was Gaston Paris who first popularized the term "courtly love."

Rosamund Marriott Watson (1860–1911), born Rosamund Ball, was an English poet and writer. In Andrew Lang's *Aucassin and Nicolette* her *Ballade to Nicolette* is credited to Graham R. Tomson, which was the pen name she used at that time.

ABOUT THIS EDITION

Francis William Bourdillon and Andrew Lang independently published their translations of *Aucassin and Nicolette* in 1887. For purely subjective reasons I have chosen Bourdillon's, but have added Lang's *Introduction* (including one poem by himself and one by Rosamund Marriott Watson) as an appendix, with one footnote omitted.

The indentation of lines of verse is taken from the original. I have added indentation in a few instances where, towards the end of the tale, its absence in the edition at my disposal clearly seems inconsistent. The page breaks between verse and prose sections are mine.

The spelling *Nicolette* used by Lang in his translation has been retained in the Appendix.

I thank Harry and Margrit Joelson-Strohbach for their help with the identification and translation of the Greek quotes in Andrew Lang's *Introduction*.

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INTRODUCTION

The story of Love, that simple theme with variations *ad libitum*, *ad infinitum*, is never old, never stale, never out-of-date. And as we sometimes seek rest from the brilliant audacities and complex passions of Wagner or Tschaikowsky in the tender simplicity of some ancient English air, so we occasionally turn with relief from the wit and insight and subtlety of our modern novelists to the old uncomplicated tales of faerie or romance, and find them after all more moving, more tender, even more real, than all the laboured realism of these photographic days. And here before us is of all pretty love-stories perhaps the prettiest. Idyllic as Daphnis and Chloe, romantic as Romeo and Juliet, tender as Undine, remote as Cupid and Psyche, yet with perpetual touches of actual life, and words that raise pictures; and lightened all through with a dainty playfulness, as if Ariel himself had hovered near all the time of its writing, and Puck now and again shot a whisper of suggestion.

Yet it is only of late years that the charm of this story has been truly appreciated. Composed probably in Northern France, about the close of the twelfth century — the time of our own Angevin kings and the most brilliant period of Old-French literature — it has survived only in a single manuscript of later date, where it is found hidden among a number of tales in verse less pleasing in subject and far less delightful in form. There it had lain unknown till discovered by M. de Sainte-Palaye, and printed by him in modernised French in 1752, one hundred and fifty years ago. There is no space here to follow its fortunes since. Even after this revival it was not till more than one hundred years later

that it began to attain to any wide recognition. And in England this recognition has been mainly due to Mr Pater's delightful essay in his early work "Studies in the History of the Renaissance." Since the publication of this book in 1873, the story of Aucassin and Nicolette has had an ever-growing train of admirers both in England and America, and various translations have appeared on both sides of the Atlantic. It has also been translated into several other European languages, besides versions in modern French.

The story, so far as the simple old-world plot is concerned, is very probably not the original invention of whoever gave it this particular form, any more than were the plots of Shakespeare's plays of his own devising. It seems likely that in origin it is Arabian or Moorish, and its birthplace not Provence but Spain. Possibly it sprung, as so much of the best poetry and story has sprung, from the touching of two races, and the part friction part fusion of two religions, in this case of the Moor and the Christian. There was in 1019 a Moorish king of Cordova named Alcazin. Turn this name into French and we have Aucassin. And to reverse the roles of Christian and heathen is a very usual device for a story-teller transplanting a story from another country to his own. Though the scene is nominally laid in Provence there are a good many signs of a Spanish origin in the places mentioned. By Carthage is meant, not the city of Dido, but Carthagen; and thus the husband devised for Nicolette is "one of the greatest kings in all Spain." Valence again might originally have been not the Valence on the Rhone, but Valence le grand, or Valentia. And it is curious to observe that Beaucaire is closely connected with Tarascon — a bridge across the Rhone unites them — and that this latter name nearly resembles Tarragona, a place which in other French romances is actually called Terrascoigne. The shipwreck which in the story takes place, impos-

sibly, at Beaucaire, may have originally happened, quite naturally, at Tarragona. Even the nonsense-name, Torelore, might easily have had its rise in Torello. Again, though it has been shown that all modern reports of the *Couvade* as existing in Biscay have been founded only on the ancient assertion of Strabo, it is still remarkable that it is in this part of Europe alone that the custom has ever been found.

If the composer of Aucassin derived his story from such a source, it is easy to see also whence he got the idea of the special form he has given it; for a narrative in prose mingled with interludes of verse, though strange to European literature, is common in Arabian.

And yet, whatever his sources or his models, one feels that his debt to them is trifling compared to the worth of his own work. All that he describes he has seen with his own eyes; and all that he tells, be it borrowed or invented, is quickened and heightened and made immortal by his own touch upon it.

All who can should read this story in its own language — the simple easy-flowing Old-French, with its infantile syntax, and naive but effective efforts at distinction and what we now call style. There are various editions of the old French text; but the two easiest to get and also to read are that of Professor Suchier, and my own. Those in search of learning will always turn to Germany, and Suchier is a very learned man. But I can honestly advise all English readers to get my edition (Macmillan, 1897) in which the text is given as pure as I could draw it from the fountain head, the original MS. at Paris; where the music to the verse sections will be found printed in its proper notation; and which contains also a literal translation, full notes, and a glossary.

The present translation varies a good deal from that I printed with the Old-French text. I have to some extent relaxed the restrictions I imposed on myself there, and have given freer turns, even verging

occasionally on paraphrase, to bring out the full meaning, which it is often possible to miss in the original, especially in the very condensed style of the verses. These changes will, I hope, make this version easy and pleasant to read even by those who have no leisure or no inclination to attempt the study of the Old-French itself.

'TIS OF AUCASSIN AND OF NICOLETTE

Who would list a pleasant lay,
Pastime of the old and grey?
Of two lovers, children yet,
Aucassin and Nicolette;
Of the sorrows he went through,
Of the great things he did do,
All for his bright favoured may.
Sweet the song is, fair the say,
Full of art and full of grace.
There is none in such ill case,
Sad with sorrow, waste with care,
Sick with sadness, if he hear,
But shall in the hearing be
Whole again and glad with glee,
So sweet the story.

Here they speak and tell the story.

How Bulgarius Count of Valence made war upon Warren Count of Beaucaire. And this war was so great, so marvellous, and so mortal, that not a day dawned but there he was before the city, at the gates, at the walls, at the fences, with knights a hundred and men-at-arms ten thousand on foot and on horse; and he burned his land, laid waste his country, and slew his liegemen. Warren, Count of Beaucaire, was an old man and feeble, who had overlived his term. He had none to succeed him, neither son nor daughter, save one only boy; and what he was like, I will tell you. Aucassin was the young lord's name, and a pretty lad he was. He had golden hair in little curls, and laughing blue eyes, a face fair of colour and fine of curve, and a proud shapely nose. Aye, so endued was he with good conditions that there was none bad in him, but good only. But so overcome was he of Love, who masters all, that he refused knighthood, abjured arms, shunned the tourney, and left undone all his devoir.

His father and his mother would say to him: "Son! come, take thine arms and to horse! Fight for thy land and succour thy liegemen! If they see thee in the midst of them, they will fight the better for their lives and their havings and for thy land and mine!"

"Father," said Aucassin, "to what purpose is this oration? Never God give me ought that I ask of Him, if I take knighthood or mount horse, if I face fight or battlefield to smite knight or be myself smitten, if you give me not Nicolette, my sweet friend whom I love so well!"

"My son," said his father, "it cannot be. Have done with Nicolette! She is a slave-girl, carried captive from a foreign land. The Viscount of this place bought her of the heathen, and brought her here. He held her at the font, and christened her, and stood godfather to her. Some

day he will give her a young fellow to win bread for her in wedlock. What is this to you? If you want a wife, I will give you a king's daughter or a count's. There is never so rich a man in France but you shall have his daughter, if you want her."

"Alack, father!" said Aucassin. "Where now is honour on earth so high, which Nicolette my sweet friend would not grace if it were hers? Were she Empress of Constantinople or of Germany, were she Queen of France or of England, there were but little in it, so noble is she and gracious and debonair and endued with all good conditions."

Here they sing.

Aucassin was of Beaucaire;
His was the fine castle there;
But on slender Nicolette
Past man's moving is he set,
Whom his father doth refuse;
Menace did his mother use:

 “Out upon thee, foolish boy!
Nicolette is but a toy,
Castaway from Carthagen,
Bought a slave of heathen men.
If for marrying thou be,
Take a wife of high degree!”

 “Mother, I will none but her.
Hath she not the gentle air,
Grace of limb, and beauty bright?
I am snared in her delight.
If I love her 'tis but meet,
 So passing sweet!”

Here they speak and tell the story.

When Warren Count of Beaucaire perceived that Aucassin his son was not to be moved from his love of Nicolette, he betook him to the Viscount of the place, who was his liegeman; and addressed him thus:

“Sir Viscount, come, rid me of Nicolette your god-daughter! A curse on the land whence ever she was fetched to this country! Now Aucassin is lost to me, and all because of her. He refuses knight-hood and leaves undone all his devoir. Rest assured that if I can get hold of her I will burn her in a fire; and for yourself too you may fear the worst.”

“Sir,” said the Viscount, “’tis grief to me that he go to her, or come to her, or speak to her. I had bought her with my poor pieces. I had held her at the font, and christened her, and stood god-father to her; and I would have given her a young fellow to win bread for her in wedlock. What is this to Aucassin your son? But seeing your will is so and your good pleasure, I will send her to such a land and to such a country that he shall never set eyes on her more.”

“See you do so!” said Count Warren. “Else it might go ill with you.”

Thus they parted. Now the Viscount was a very rich man, and had a fine palace with a garden before it. He had Nicolette put in a room there, on an upper storey, with an old woman for company; and he had bread put there, and meat and wine and all they needed. Then he had the door locked, so that there was no way to get in or out. Only there was a window of no great size which looked on the garden and gave them a little fresh air.

**End of
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