

Octavian

anon

*a fourteenth century Middle English verse romance, based upon
a mid-thirteenth century French romance*

Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This tale has been translated and retold from: Harriet Hudson, 2006. Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Tryamour. Second edition. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. Taken from Lincoln Cathedral Library Thornton MS, 91 dated to the mid-fifteenth century, with missing lines supplied by Cambridge University Library MS Ff.2.38, also of the mid-fifteenth century.

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Octavian

anon

thirteenth century Old French, retold in fourteenth century Middle English

Mekyll and littill, olde and yyngre · Herkyns all to my talkynge – Great and small, old and young, listen to what I have to say! Once there was an Emperor of Rome, as we read in romance. His name was Octavian; he had earned great honour and there was no knight who did not fear for his own safety when pitted against him in battle or tournament! Jesus, King of Heaven, give us all your blessing while I relate a true story.

Octavian had a wife, a very beautiful woman so we are told. They had been married for seven years and had a healthy sex life; but although all these years had passed, no child had been born to them. They had no heir to pass their lands to when they grew old, and this made them both very sad.

One day, as the empress sat with her lord alone in their chamber, she leaned over to kiss him and could see that he was crying, this noble knight! She sighed, fell to her knees and begged her husband to tell her what was troubling him.

‘We have been married for seven years and have no children,’ he sobbed, ‘and I fear that our dynasty will die with us and that our land shall be plunged into war when we are gone. It is this that troubles me – this is the reason why I cannot sleep at night.’

‘Sir,’ the lady replied, ‘I have the solution if you will not think it impertinent of me. Build a fine abbey, dedicate it to the Virgin Mary, endow it with lands, and she will persuade her son to give us a worthy heir.’

So the emperor ordered that an abbey be built, provided the funds, and very shortly afterwards, through God’s grace, the empress was pregnant with twins!

The empress suffered many pains, grew very large and had to rest a lot, this noble lady. But in due course she gave birth to two healthy boys. The news was brought to the emperor and he was delighted. Two maidens brought the tidings and they did not leave empty-handed, I assure you! Each was given three towns to rule over.

The emperor went to his private rooms and gave thanks to God. Early that same morn-

The romance of Octavian derives from an Old French work dating from the middle of the thirteenth century. It was reworked, considerably abridged and translated into the Middle English version retold here about a century later, perhaps at the time when Geoffrey Chaucer was a young man. It contains all the usual motifs expected in such a work, including a giant, a case of concealed identity and a baby that is snatched from its mother and reared, if only for a short while, by an animal – in this case a lioness.

This same Middle English version is found in the Thornton Manuscript lying in the library of Lincoln Cathedral, in which also is found the tale of Sir Eglamour of Artois and the only Middle English version of the tale of Sir Perceval.

ing he instructed a priest to sing Mass and then went briefly to find his mother.

‘Son,’ she said, ‘I am so pleased that the empress has not died in childbirth. But it is a source of great sorrow to me that Rome shall be wronged with a false heir and placed one day into the hands of an impostor.’

‘Mother, what do you mean?’ asked the emperor, stunned. ‘Have I not got two healthy baby boys, thanks be to God?’



‘No, my son,’ she said. ‘They are not yours and this grieves me terribly. Because you were unable to give your wife any children she has taken one of the kitchen scullions as her lover, and I can prove this to you.’

The emperor was shattered to the very core by this hateful news. Rendered almost speechless, he crept away in shock.

He went to his chapel and heard Mass like a man destroyed. Meanwhile, his mother called a boy and offered him a huge reward, a thousand pounds or more, if he would do as she

instructed him. They made their way to the room where the empress lay in her bed, sleeping soundly, for she had been awake all night in great pain and anxiety.

‘If you want to earn your gold,’ said the emperor’s mother to the boy, ‘go quickly, take all your clothes off and climb softly into the bed beside the empress. She is sound asleep, so be careful not to wake her.’

With mixed feelings, the boy stole into the bed and did as the old lady told him. The silken sheets felt very unfamiliar to him as he lay uncomfortably at the very edge, as far from the empress as he could manage.

The emperor’s mother hurried away to find her son, and found him still in the chapel.

‘Son,’ she cried. ‘If you do not believe me, come now and you shall see the truth for yourself!’

The emperor followed her to the chamber where his wife lay in bed, and when he saw the terrible sight that greeted him he could not speak. He cried out in anger, drew a sharp knife and killed the boy. The bed was covered in blood.

The lady woke up, a dream still fresh in her memory; a dragon, bright with flames, had snatched up her two children in its claws and carried them away across the sea. As she roused herself, the emperor grasped the boy’s severed head by the hair and held it in front of her face. The lady saw it – saw that the bedclothes were covered in blood and shrieked! She screamed in horror and fainted!

No words were exchanged, nothing was said, until it was time for the empress to receive spiritual purification following the birth of her babies, as was the law. The emperor arranged a fine banquet for the occasion and invited dukes and noblemen from all over the empire. The King of Calabria, the empress's father, was sent for. And so they all gathered in great joy and in anticipation of a fine festival as the lady made her way to the church.

Afterwards, they all sat down for a feast. There were games and hilarious stories, music from the harp and the fiddle, songs both religious and bawdy; it lasted for seven nights. There was a wealth of fine entertainment and fine music. Never did such a rich gathering end so badly!

Listen if you dare.

The emperor went to his wife's room accompanied by all his lords. They were laughing and joking, thinking that they were in for a pleasant few moments with the empress and the new arrivals. 'I have learned,' said the emperor just before they reached the door, 'that a dreadful thing has happened in this land, to a lady this year. She has succumbed to treason. I ask you all to pass judgement in this case,' and the emperor told his story. The King of Calabria was quick to answer. He had no idea what he was being led into!



'A fire should be made outside the city,' he declared indignantly, 'and when it is burning fiercely, she and her two children should be thrown into it and burnt to death!'

'I have been speaking of your own daughter,' cried the emperor, 'and I shall take your advice!'

A fire was made outside the walls of Rome with huge branches blackening in the flames. They led the lady towards the conflagration. Two squires carried her babies. She was dressed in a robe of scarlet, ready to be thrown into the fire. The King of Calabria was so upset he could not bring himself to witness the proceedings.

The lady fell to her knees before her lord and held up her hands in supplication. 'My lord, for Jesus' sake, let me make one prayer, to he who has power over us all, and then you may do with me as you wish. I shall yield myself to the end that you have ordained for me.'

The emperor granted this.

'Lord Jesus,' she prayed, 'help me this day, grant me your strength and your guidance.'

And of your mother, gentle Mary, I ask on behalf of my two children, whom she allowed to be born into this world, let them be christened before they die!

Lords that were nearby, and ladies who heard this, began fainting for grief. Knights stood weeping quite openly. Tears began to trickle down the emperor's face. He seemed hardly able to remain standing.

'I cannot watch you die!' he cried suddenly. 'Not at my own command, nor at anybody else's.' And he gave her leave to go. She and her two children. 'Go! Begone!' She was to be thrown into exile.

This lady was taken into a wilderness, a forest full of wild creatures, and here she was given some gold, forty pounds worth of florins as we read in romance, two squires passed her her children and a path was pointed out to her. She was urged to take it, and not to wander into the thick woodland in case she met with some dangerous wild animals.

She was in a terrible state and so distressed that she lost her way and stumbled into a dense part of the forest, a thick woodland with cliffs and rocky outcrops above a deep valley. In a small clearing at the foot of a hill she came upon a spring of clear water surrounded by some lush vegetation and shady trees. The lady sat down beside this spring and wept, too frightened to go a step further.

'Lord,' she sobbed, 'if it is your will, don't let me die here in the open! Mary, Queen of Heaven, please hear my prayer! I have not eaten for three days!'

She stayed beside this spring with her babies until darkness fell, and then she lay down in the soft grass and tried to get some sleep.

Morning arrived and the birds started to sing and yell their dawn chorus. Then an ape came to the clearing and carried off one of the empress's children. As she lay paralysed with fear and distress, a lioness came running into the clearing, caught up her other child in her jaws and ran off to feed it to her cubs!

Both her children have been taken!



A bird appeared from out of the sky, a griffin, says the book, soaring over the forest. It was so large that it could easily carry off a knight in full armour. It snatched up the lioness and carried her across the sea to an isle. The child slept in the lioness's mouth and knew nothing of the journey, through the grace of God.

When the lioness was dropped upon the land, she reared up ferociously as the wild beast that she was, and through God's grace, she killed

the griffin and ate it, then lay down beside the child. The infant sucked the lioness, as God willed, when it felt its milky teats near to its face. The lioness cared for the baby as though it was one of her own cubs, and was very protective of the infant. She made a den with her paws, placed the child in it and looked after it day and night.

And so the lioness remains, caring for this beautiful child. But the lady who has been cast into solitude cries her sorrow to Christ and cannot be solaced. 'Jesus, King of all,' she wails, 'with a heavy heart I call to you, help me! I was the daughter of a king and have been the Empress of Rome, but through the untruths that have been told of me I am reduced to this sorrow and disgrace. I have lost all hope of happiness! My two children have been taken from me. I cannot go on! I know that it is because of my sin, Lord, and I shall go to serve you while I live, in the Holy Land.'

So she travelled and came at last to the Aegean Sea. She walked upon the shore and in front of her was a harbour and a great city with high towers. It was no great task to reach this city.

She found a ship ready to sail, filled with pilgrims, offered the sailors gold in return for a space on the ship and they sent a small boat out to fetch her. When she had climbed aboard they set her against the mast; and here she stayed, out of sight and with her tears unseen.

The ship came close to an isle and the captain instructed that the vessel heave to: 'for we need to take on fresh water,' he told them. Within sight was a high rock and beneath it a spring welling out over the stones. Two sailors were sent ashore. They climbed up to the spring, and were instantly set upon by a lioness.

The ship lay for a long while at anchor, waiting for the men to return, until the sun was at its highest point in the sky. Then twelve marines were sent out, with shining breastplates and spears, to see what had happened to the expedition. They found a lioness in her den with a little baby boy sucking milk from her. He wriggled playfully against the animal. Sometimes the child sucked milk, at other times he would play with the lioness.

The marines fled away in terror!

They described what they had seen on the rock – a lioness in her den, and a child with her. And both their sailors dead. Then the lady spoke up: 'Have mercy, Sirs! That is my child! Let me go ashore.'

They launched the tender once more and rowed the lady to the beach. She ran to the rock, and when the lioness saw her approaching, through the grace of Mary, she allowed the lady to take the child and then followed her as she walked back to the boat. When the sailors saw the lioness they were nearly frightened to death. Some grasped oars, others poles, to defend themselves and their ship.

They brought the lady back into the vessel, but no man dared carry the lioness, so she jumped thirty feet into the ship! There was little joy and many sailors jumped into the

sea. But the lioness lay down beside the lady and began to suckle the child.

The wind blew, they hauled up sail and sped over the dark sea until they sighted land; it was a city with high towers called Jerusalem. Everybody was as delighted to see this as birds are to see the dawn. When the tide was right, the lady was brought ashore.

Word soon spread that a lady with a lioness had arrived in that rich city and the king sent for her; and when the king saw her he knew her to be the Empress of Rome and took her by the hand. He asked her what had happened, and she told him everything. He had the child christened Octavian.

The lioness stayed with the lady and the child, and everybody did their utmost to bring pleasure to the empress, until she had fully recovered from her ordeal. And so she lived in Jerusalem.

But what of her other child – the one who was taken by the ape?

As the wild ape crossed a path through the woodland, carrying the child, she met with an armed knight. They fought a hard battle together – so hard that the knight broke his sword in the struggle, but the ape abandoned the child and ran off. The knight took up the baby and carried it with him as he continued his journey. But soon he was set upon by ten outlaws. The knight was terrified, for his sword was now broken and he could not defend himself; and for all his courage and prowess, the outlaws soon won the lovely little child and wounded the knight so badly that he scarcely managed to escape with his life.

The outlaws went to a clearing, set the child down and began to play with it. The chief of the outlaws said: 'It is a great shame for strong men like us to kill a child. I suggest that we do it no harm but take it to the seashore and see if we can sell it. It seems to be quite a noble baby and we might be able to exchange it for quite a lot of gold and silver.'

Two outlaws readied themselves and made their way to the Aegean Sea. The baby was so handsome that no man could look upon it and not cry with joy. A Paris merchant approached them; his name was Clement the Villain.

'Sirs,' he said, 'If you like, I will exchange some shining new gold florins for this child!'

They told him they were asking forty pounds for the little boy.

'Then he will remain with you for quite a long while,' observed Clement, shrewdly. So they settled for twenty pounds and gave the child to Clement. Clement the Villain purchased a pannier to carry the baby in, and a nurse as well, to feed the infant. Then he made his way into France. He headed for Paris as quickly as he could and when he arrived at his hall he was received with great joy. His wife was delighted to see him and asked all his news and how he had come across the child.

'I found him in the Holy Land and could not abandon him, in all truth,' he lied.

His wife seemed pleased. 'He shall be my own child,' she said, and kissed the infant many times.

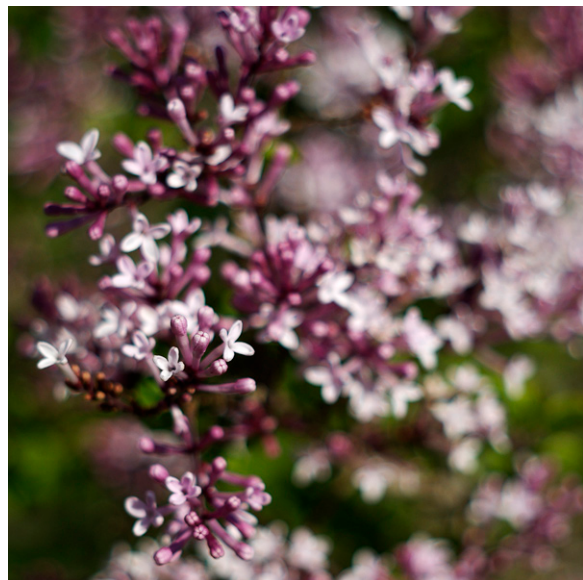
They named the child Florent and by the time this little boy was seven years old he was handsome, intelligent and afraid of nothing. The merchant and his wife loved him as much as they loved their own lives. And when Florent was twelve, Clement deemed his other son ready to serve an apprenticeship and sent him to a candlemaker, and to Florent he gave two oxen and instructed him to drive them over the Seine to a butcher and to learn this trade. But it was not in the boy's nature to be a tradesman!

As Florent drove the cattle over the bridge he saw a marvellous sight; a squire with a handsome falcon on his arm. Florent went up to the young man and offered him the two oxen for the hawk. The squire was delighted with the bargain, took the oxen, and Florent, too, was overjoyed. The squire hurried away and Florent was keen to depart as well, in case the squire might soon realise the disparity of the bargain and wish to have

his hawk back! He ran all the way home to Clement's house, rushed in, gave the falcon some food and began to smooth and arrange its feathers.

Clement soon arrived in the hall.

'What have you done with the oxen I gave you?' he shouted. There was a terrible uproar as Clement beat the child mercilessly. 'You shall receive no food from now on other than what this hawk can catch for you!' he threatened.



Sorely bruised though he was, Florent went over to the falcon and stroked its feathers. He could not understand why his father was so angry with him. 'Sir,' he said, 'for Christ's sake, stop hitting me! Can you not see why I bought this falcon? If you would only look to see how beautifully his feathers lie, you would pray to God that you might give half your wealth to acquire another like him!'

A little while later, Clement put forty pounds in a bag and gave it to Florent to take to his brother across the bridge. As the child walked through the city of Paris, he caught sight of a beautiful white horse. Florent walked up to the steed. He had never before seen such a fine animal and without any hesitation or shyness at all he asked if it was for sale.

'Thirty pounds,' came the reply, 'and not a penny less.'

'This is too little, and you shall have more,' replied Florent, and he counted out forty pounds. The merchant was delighted, grabbed the money and disappeared with it. Child Florent leaped upon the horse's back and rode to Clement's house, bursting with pride. He sought no stable but led it right into the hall. After feeding it some wheat and hay

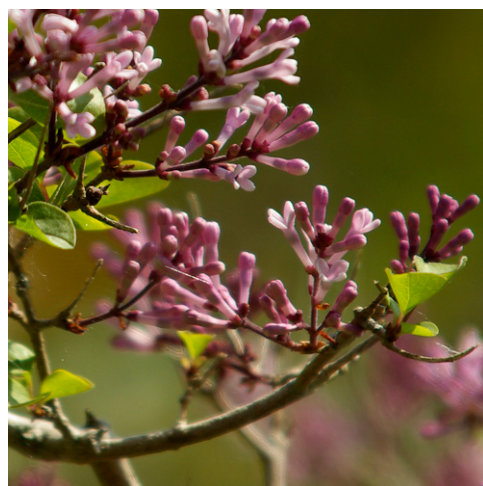
he groomed the animal and combed its mane and its tail, so that not a hair was out of place.

It was not long before Clement arrived home. ‘What have you done?’ he screamed. ‘What have you brought into my house?’

‘For God’s pity!’ replied Florent.

Not long after this, war erupted in France. An army a hundred thousand strong rampaged through the country, destroying castles, burning towns – there was no wall that could keep them out.

Octavian, the Emperor of Rome, soon arrived in Paris with a large contingent of knights. Other Christian kings converged upon this city, fully armed and ready for war. This host remained in Paris for a month, unable to advance against the sultan’s might. For the sultan had a giant.



The sultan also had a beautiful daughter, Mirabelle, a very pretty young lady whom the King of France had invited to stay at Montmartre to watch the fighting. She was the most beautiful young lady in the whole of Christendom, both Heathendom and Christendom combined.

‘I cannot understand why your men have not taken Paris yet,’ said the giant, condescendingly, to the sultan. ‘It is a marvel to me that they are taking so long. If you and all your men will stop, I will undertake to capture Paris single-handedly. But you must promise me Mirabelle’s hand in marriage if I do.’

‘I agree to these terms,’ said the sultan, approvingly.

The giant took the road to Paris, that very day. He stood twenty-two feet tall, between his forehead and his toes! No horse could carry him. He leaned over the outer wall and spoke to the people within, urging them to send out a knight to face him or he would destroy the land thereabouts, burn the city and kill everybody inside.

All the people ran to get a glimpse of the giant, but as soon as they did so they ran twice as quickly in the opposite direction! Five knights sallied out, saying they would trust to God and to Fortune. The giant was pleased to see them, and quickly killed them. Not one escaped alive.

When the giant had slain these five knights, he went back to the city wall and leaned over again.

‘King Dagobert of France!’ he cried, ‘come out yourself and fight! I have promised the

sultan's beautiful daughter that I will give her your head, and in return for your head, she has promised to marry me! If you will not come out, I shall destroy this city and you shall all die like dogs.'

Great fear then gripped the population. And while the panic grew, the giant knocked huge great lumps out of the wall with his club. All the people cried to God, and to his mother Mary, with tear-filled eyes and voices hoarse with terror.

'Father!' exclaimed Florent, 'I have a horse! All I lack is some armour! Ah, lord! Why is everybody so weak? I could do all that is required if I was armed properly!'

'If you carry on like this I shall clout you around the head!' replied his father.

'Do not take offence, father,' replied Florent, 'but I shall go and fight this giant whether I am armed or not. You cannot stop me!'

'Well, if this is the case,' replied his father in exasperation, 'I have some armour, such as it is, and I can lend it to you. But it hasn't seen the light of day for many years, I warn you.'

'Father! I don't care. Victory is ours! Quickly, let me put it on before somebody else goes and kills the giant first.'

But Clement's heart nearly burst for sorrow when he cast a padded undergarment over Florent. Then he placed a coat of chain mail over Florent's head and let the rusty links fall about his body. He brought a shield and a lance and they were both in somewhat less than perfect condition. He gave the child a sword that had not been drawn from its scabbard in seven years, and this was obvious to see.

Clement tried to draw it, but it would not pull out. Gladwyn his wife took hold while Clement tugged. It came out suddenly and they both fell over backwards! Clement landed awkwardly and hit his nose on the ground. Florent stood laughing.

So Florent in his unsightly armour has mounted his horse and brandishes his rusty sword! He enclosed his head in a very dirty and rusty helmet and both Clement and his wife wept as he rode off, for they loved the child as their own lives. They prayed to Christ: 'Give him grace to make a good account of himself.' It was all they could do.

The king and all his knights saw a horseman approaching in rusty armour and wondered who he was. Many a scornful word was cast at Florent as he rode through the city, but he took no notice. Everybody ran to the walls to see the fight, when it became obvious what was going on. His father, Clement, could hardly bear to watch.

Florent soon came to the gates and asked the porter to open them wide. Everyone nearby burst out laughing in anxious derision, and began shouting abuse. They all said to the person next to them: 'Here comes a mighty bachelor, magnificent in his saddle! You can see by his shining armour that he is going to save us from this giant!'

The giant stood with his steel club in his hand as Florent rode out and gave the child

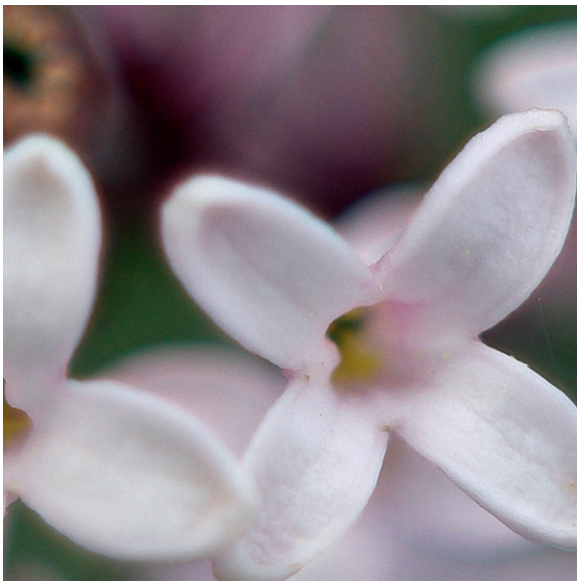
such a blow that Florent's shield split at once into two pieces. The child was crestfallen, but he had no thoughts of running away. He gave the giant a heavy blow in return, with his rusty sword. The giant's arm fell off and blood started pouring from the wound. Clement jumped up onto the city wall and shouted joyously: 'Well done! Well done!'

Florent, in his ridiculous armour, sprung like the spark from a spitting coal and galloped up to the giant. This was no child's play! The giant struck Florent again and both horse and rider fell to the ground. Florent's horse struggled to its knees.

'Give him another blow like the one before!' encouraged Clement, from the safety of the walls.

As badly off as he was, lying there on the ground, the child took heart from Clement's cries. He took up his sword and struck the giant on the shoulder, cutting down almost to his breast! The giant fell dead to the earth.

And so it came to pass, through God's grace, that Florent killed the giant, as the book of romance tells us. All the kings and noblemen stood upon the walls and cheered when the giant fell. Everybody laughed for joy when Florent cut off the giant's head! But the child took no notice of them – instead, he remounted and galloped away towards the castle at Montmartre, where the sultan's daughter was staying, carrying the head.



When he arrived at the hall of the castle, he found all the tables laid and everybody preparing to eat. The maiden was ready to sit down.

'Damsel,' said Florent, 'your giant greets you and brings you a severed head. It is not the head of the King of France, however, for that was too difficult for him to obtain.'

When the maiden saw the head, she recognised it.

'He was always true to his word!' she exclaimed in shock.

'Damsel!' said Florent. 'beautiful maiden! I would request that you now give to me what you promised to him!' and he leaned over and kissed her. Then he caught her up into his saddle as if to carry her away, but all the gates of the castle were quickly barred to him. A hue and cry was raised and very soon some armed knights appeared, with long spears and sharp swords. Florent put the maiden down and prepared himself for a fight. He tore off her sleeve and cried: 'You will know me by this when we next meet!'

Child Florent, in his rusty and unpolished armour, made many a Saracen bleed, I tell you! He made many heathens lie upon the ground! And when he had defended himself against all his attackers, without sustaining a single wound, he rode back to Paris. The

Saracens took the maiden and fled to Clermont, where the sultan was waiting.

They took the young girl into her father's pavilion and, kneeling, they put her down. The sultan walked over, kissed his daughter and with great solemnity led her up to the royal platform. She told her father how his giant, Agillous, had been killed and how she herself was nearly captured. Her father was very upset. He bit his lip and pulled at his beard, took on a terrible appearance and vowed that he would hang the King of France and cause all of Christendom to be burnt to ashes! Man, woman and child. Nothing would be left!

'Daughter,' he said, 'go to your private quarters and be happy, for you shall shortly be avenged.'

His daughter's pavilion was readied and she was led in with all her maidens. Soft seats were placed for her comfort, but she could neither eat nor drink for the turmoil that raged in her heart. She thought about his face, his complexion, his manner – she could not get him out of her mind!

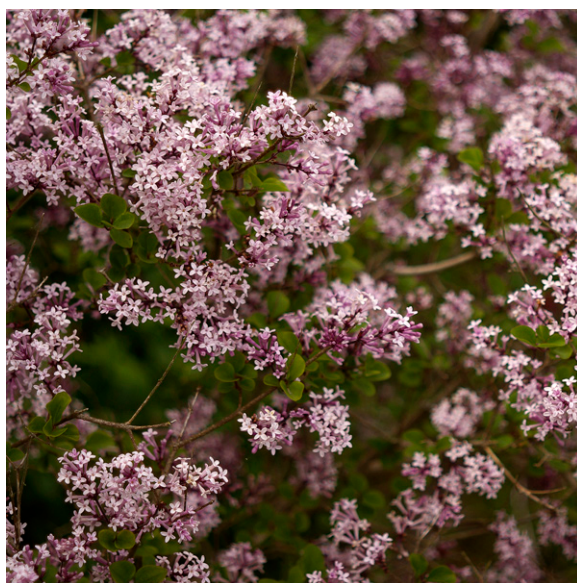
'If only he had taken me, and I was with him now,' she sighed.

The Christians were delighted when they saw Florent alive, for they imagined that he must have been killed. When he approached the city, three kings rode out to meet him, headed by the Emperor of Rome. They led him to the palace, clothed him in some fine and costly garments and he was given the title 'Florent of Paris' as we are told in romance, although he was not born there.

And for this child's sake they gave Clement some expensive clothes and invited him to the royal court. He was given a plush chair to sit on, the company of some fine noblemen, and some lovely food to eat. The child was seated with great honour between the King of France and the Emperor of Rome, who carved his meat for him. Florent was so courteous and of such noble bearing that all loved him.

The very next day the child was knighted. He wore a gown of cloth-of-gold and was brought before the emperor with a king on either side of him. The King of France walked in front of Florent with many fine minstrels and led him with pride.

Clement, however, had no idea how to behave. He went up to the musicians and gave some a clout on the head, and others two; he was worried he might have to foot the bill for all this music. He was near to weeping! And while the kings danced in the hall, Clement removed their coats to the safety of his own house, to stand as surety for the



expense. The kings realised that their coats were missing and asked where they were.

‘By God’s deity, you will pay for your meal or never see your coats again!’ cried Clement.

All the knights laughed at this.

‘Clement, fetch back the coats,’ said the King of France. ‘This banquet is on me.’

The boards were set down and covered with cloths, and child Florent was brought into the hall amidst a throng of noblemen. He was seated between the King of France and the Emperor of Rome. The emperor looked closely at the child, who seemed such a courteous young man, but did not know who he really was.

When everybody had eaten, Clement knew his manners. He opened his purse and cast thirty florins across the table. ‘Have this for my son and myself,’ he said. Clement was intelligent and worldly, but gave everything a price tag. He was a merchant, a man of commerce. All the knights laughed at Clement, and so did all the kings. Florent blushed for shame.

The emperor spoke. ‘Young knight,’ he asked Florent, ‘tell me, is this man your father?’

‘I have never loved him as much as a son should a father,’ admitted Florent.

As Florent lay in bed that night, he thought of the lovely Mirabelle and sighed. He could get no sleep, as he tried to plan how he could see her again. And he decided to send a message to the sultan, and to deliver it himself.

The next morning Florent saddled his horse and rode out in full armour, carrying an olive branch; for in those days it was customary for a messenger to carry one, so that he would not be molested or challenged along the way. Florent took the road to Clermont, where the sultan was staying, reined in his steed at the hall door and walked in on foot, like a messenger.

‘The King of France commands you to leave his land,’ said Florent boldly before the mighty sultan. ‘You are in the wrong, and the king will bring an army of sixty thousand heavily armed knights against you if you do not go at once. And each knight will have thirty squires and each squire a page who is the equal of any knight of yours!’

‘The King of France is welcome,’ replied the Sultan as he sat eating, ‘and tell him from me that against his every knight I shall position three of my own, as keen to fight as birds are to see the dawn. I would welcome an opportunity to demonstrate the truth of this tomorrow.’

Mirabelle spoke up. ‘Messenger,’ she called. ‘I would ask you to tell me who it was that killed my father’s giant and tried to carry me away from Montmartre.’

‘Lady,’ replied Florent, ‘it was none other than myself!’

At once, every knight leaped up from the table and drew swords and knives. Florent saw that his best course was to try to fight them off, so he weighed in to where the press of men was thickest. He hewed off arms at the shoulder and struck other knights so hard that their heads fell off and rolled across the floor. When his sword broke he seized a board from one of the tables and knocked dozens of heathen knights to the ground with it. Florent fought his way to his horse, mounted and galloped back to Paris.

‘Lords,’ he cried, ‘I warn you, make yourselves ready to fight!’

The next morning, when the sun was up, the Christian forces assembled. There were shining helmets and some gruesome weapons glinting in the sun. And as the trumpets sounded they rode out of the city into a broad expanse. Soon, each side stood gazing at the other across the battlefield.

Mirabelle, the beautiful maiden, had been brought up again to Montmartre to see the battle. Florent attached her sleeve to his lance and rode forwards so that everybody could see that it was he who had killed the giant. Mirabelle could see it and was delighted.

There was anger, pain and grief when the battle started. Many a horrible wound was inflicted, and received. The battle lasted from morning until dusk. Florent gave a fine account of himself throughout the day, and men were killed in such numbers that horses had to wade through the blood! The Christian forces became so depleted they stood in danger of losing the battle, but Florent wrought such carnage with his sword that he redressed the balance and gave new heart to the Christian knights.

Both armies retired from the battlefield as darkness descended. Florent rode to Montmartre beside the river Seine to see what might transpire. Mirabelle sat in a window of a tower and saw Florent on the field below her. She recognised him by the sleeve he wore on his lance. She spoke to her maid, who was standing beside her: ‘How can I speak with this knight, do you suggest?’ she asked. ‘I would love to do so.’

‘Lady,’ replied her maid, ‘let us go for a walk beside the river, where he will be able to see us in the last of the light; and if he truly loves you, the water will prove no barrier to him, since he has a fine horse.’

So these two maidens went out of the castle and walked beside the river. When Florent saw the beautiful maiden he galloped as fast as a bird in flight, plunged into the water and crossed to the other bank. Their meeting was truly joyful; they kissed and embraced: ‘Lady,’ said Florent, ‘you are so lovely! May I speak a few words with you? Of all the women in this world you are the most beautiful and if only you would become a Christian, my joy would be complete.’



‘Sir, I would gladly renounce my faith! If you would marry me, I would live a Christian life!’

The next morning at dawn, Clement disguised himself as a Saracen and made his way to the most crowded part of the enemy camp. He made his way fearlessly to the sultan’s pavilion and asked for alms, for he could speak their language very well. The sultan himself heard the exchange, took great pity upon him and asked that he be brought into his presence. Clement explained that he was a Saracen warrior who had been in the sultan’s army for a long time and was starving hungry. ‘Sir, there is no man in heathen lands who can look after horses better than I.’

‘If you can ride well, come with me,’ said the sultan.

They mounted Clement upon a horse; he sprung into the saddle and galloped off like the spark out of a coal. Everybody standing outside the sultan’s pavilion took pleasure in watching Clement ride. And when he had galloped three times around the field, he dismounted and was given an even better horse to ride. The Sultan had great joy watching him and commanded that his own horse be brought and given to Clement. And when Clement was on this horse, he rode away with all haste – he had no intention of returning! ‘Farewell!’ he cried, as he joyfully took the main road back to Paris.

‘Where are you, Florent?’ he called, when he arrived back. ‘I have brought you the sultan’s finest horse to ride!’

‘Father!’ exclaimed Florent, proudly. ‘I shall reward you for this handsomely. But I urge you, present the horse to the Emperor of Rome instead, on my behalf.’

Trumpets sounded and all the Christian knights sallied out of the city once more. Florent’s thoughts were on Mirabelle and he did not ride into battle but made arrangements to acquire a boat. And under a cloak of secrecy, he brought Mirabelle back from Montmartre into the city of Paris without a soul knowing anything about it.

Meanwhile, the battle was hard and soon many lay dead and injured. Before Florent could take to the field, both the Emperor of Rome and the King of France had been captured, and many other noblemen as well.

Sir Florent fought as though he was about to lose his mind! But when his horse was killed from under him, he was forced to sustain the battle on foot and it was not long before he, too, was taken; captured along with the emperor, the King of France and many other Christian kings and knights.

The Saracens quickly abandoned the siege and carried their prisoners back with them: Sir Florent, the Emperor of Rome, the King of France and many other lords and noblemen. A large number were badly wounded. They were led in chains, each forced to ride with his feet tied together beneath his horse’s belly. It is awful to have to relate.

Word spread to Jerusalem that the sultan had been campaigning in France and had captured the Emperor of Rome. Octavian spoke with great force and maturity to his guardian, the King of Jerusalem. 'Lord,' he said, 'if it were your desire, I would like to seek out my father and try to rescue him.'

The Christian forces, with Octavian at their head, spotted the heathen banners of the sultan's army and waited for the enemy to approach. A terrible conflict ensued. Flesh was torn from bone! Octavian, by the grace of God Almighty, very quickly forced the smile from their faces and through God's grace, the Christians gained the upper hand and defeated this heathen force.

There was a handsome French city nearby and here, in a castle, they found plenty to eat and everybody was very happy. When they had all finished eating, Octavian came before the emperor, his father. And what he told the emperor gladdened the hearts of all the knights and noblemen in the hall.

'Lord,' he said, 'I have brought my mother, and she wishes to make her peace with you.'

The emperor was overjoyed when he saw his wife again!

'Lord,' she told the emperor, 'I have brought you your son. All happens through God's will, and I can see from his face and from his bearing that that young knight over there is our other son!'

Then there was joy enough! Hugging and kissing!

Mirabelle was sent for and travelled from Paris. There has never been such a wedding as the one that took place between she and Florent, and they were then led into Rome, accompanied by princes.

The emperor explained what he had been told just after the birth of his two sons, and judgement was passed by all that his mother should be burnt in a brass tub. As soon as she heard this, she collapsed unconscious, tearing at her hair, and very shortly afterwards she took her own life. All the kings laughed at this and thought it a good joke.

And so ends the story of Octavian, or more properly of Florent; but perhaps this error is intentional. Now Lord Jesus, King of Heaven, give us your blessing. Amen.

Amen, for charity!