

Amis and Amiloun

anon

a fourteenth century tale in Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This tale has been translated and retold from: Edward E Foster, 1997. Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. Taken from Advocates Library, Edinburgh MS Advocates 19.2.1, the Auchinleck Manuscript, dated to c. 1330, with a beginning and ending supplied by British Library MS MB Egerton 2862, dated to c. 1400.

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Amis and Amiloun

anon

early fourteenth century

For Goddes love in Trinyté · Al that ben hend herkenith to me · I pray yow, par amouré · What sumtyme fel beyond the see · Of two Barons of grete bounté · And men of grete honoure – For God’s love, all you who are of gentle birth, listen, I pray you, to what once took place beyond the sea; there were two noblemen of great honour and worth, in Lombardy, I understand. Their fathers were married to two fine ladies and each lady had born a child who grew to be brave and deserving. To hear of these two sons, however, and to learn how their lives unfolded, requires mental courage!

Both were conceived on the same night and born on the same day. By the age of five they were well-behaved and liked by everybody. By the age of seven they were a joy to be with and by the age of twelve, no two other boys of that age were held in such high regard.

Around this time, the Duke of Lombardy sent messengers here, there and everywhere to announce a feast. The two noblemen each brought his son with him to the gathering and it was noticed how strong and handsome the boys were. All agreed that they had never seen a more likely couple of lads. And in addition to this, there was nobody in the entire court who could tell them apart, except by their clothes! This, despite their having been born to separate parents in different parts of the duchy.

The feasting lasted for fourteen nights, with food and drink in plenty, to gladden the hearts of the warriors. There was music and revelry, and on the fifteenth day all the guests thanked the duke warmly, many times, and began to make their way home.

When the two noblemen came to say their goodbyes, the duke invited them to stay a little longer and entreated them to let him keep their sons with him and to let him bring them up at court; he would knight them when the time came, and provide for them until then.

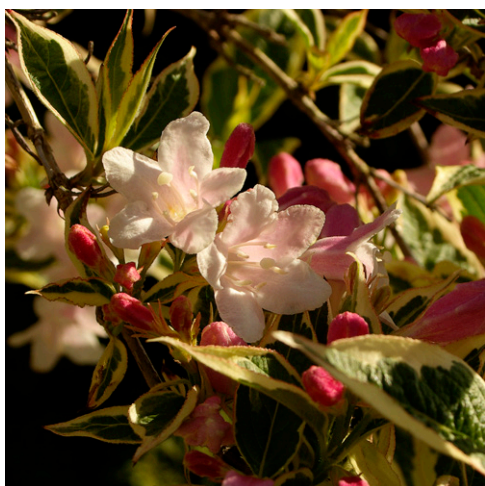
The story of Amis and Amiloun is found throughout Europe during the late Middle Ages, in various forms, and this Middle English version is found in four other manuscripts. The tale poses a number of moral dilemmas to the characters which are not found in other romances, and has a very disturbing ending. But at its heart, and the cause of all the ensuing grief, is an exchange of identity between Amis and Amiloun that is similar to one found in the Welsh Mabinogion tale of Pwyll Lord of Dyved. And at the end of the tale, Sir Amiloun can only be cured of leprosy through the blood of Sir Amis’s children. The meaning of this is up to the reader to decide, but the narrative as a whole seems too well-constructed to be devoid of all deeper meaning.

Amis and Amiloun is one of those romances contained in the Auchinleck Manuscript, lying in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, a book dating to about 1330–40 and although that volume is missing both the beginning and ending of the tale due to damage, these survive in another manuscript, BM Egerton 2862, at the British Library.

The noblemen replied, and their wives also, that they would be happy that their children should be honoured in this way, so they gave them their blessing and prayed that Jesus Christ would protect them, thanked the duke the whole day, then took their leave and went away, each of these noblemen with his wife to his own country.

So these two elevated and courteous children, Amis and Amiloun, were brought up at court, where they learned to hunt and learned also the value of a growing friendship, until nothing would part them and they became inseparable friends. One day, they made a pact with each other, that both by day and by night, for as long as they might live and breathe, in good fortune and in bad, be they in the right or in the wrong, they would stand by each other, solidly, at the hour of need, wherever they happened to be; and from that day forwards they swore not to fail one another and held up their hands in a binding oath.

Thus they lived with the duke, who was happy to have them, and they both became very dear to him and rode about by his side. And when they were fifteen winters old, he knighted them and gave them all the equipment they needed, horses, weapons and armour, so that they looked like princes.



The duke loved them so much that there was nothing he would not provide them with, so that wherever they went they were remarked upon; and they won themselves great renown on the jousting field.

The duke was so impressed by their prowess and by their intelligence that he promoted them quickly into high office. Sir Amis he put in charge of his wine cellars and Sir Amiloun he put at the head of his domestic administration, to organise his staff.

They lost no time in performing these duties with skill and attention; and for their fairness and equity towards all they earned the love of many. They were so energetic and good-humoured that they won friends throughout the land, and the duke came to love them best of all his men.

Two years passed, and then one day Amiloun received a message informing him that his mother and father had died. Amiloun was very upset and went to the duke to explain how things stood and to ask if he could return home, to settle his parents' affairs and to receive and administer his inheritance.

The duke of course agreed, though he was very sorry to lose him. And he assured Amiloun that if he ever needed any help in war, he had only to send word and help would be forthcoming.

Amiloun was terribly upset to leave Amis and went to a goldsmith where he bought a couple of identical goblets for three hundred pounds.

When it was time for Amiloun to leave, they rode off together. Their parting was very emotional. Listen, my audience, it is no shame that two knights should feel such grief at parting from one another. When it was time for Sir Amis to turn back, they both dismounted.

‘Let us vow to continue as we have in the past,’ said Sir Amiloun, ‘to be true to each other and to be ready at a moment’s notice to help one another in word or in deed, without fail. Swear this and I shall swear it also, so God help me. And my blood brother, for Christ’s love, never go against the duke, or you are lost. Always be true in your dealings with others and act with honour; think of me, and above all, beware of the steward, for he is no friend of ours and will try to destroy you.’

Amiloun produced the two identical gold cups and asked Amis to choose one of them. ‘My dear blood brother,’ he said, ‘keep that one and I shall keep the other; and never let it part from you but think of me when you drink from it.’

They wept and made great sorrow as they embraced each other for the last time and commended each other to God, then they sprang onto their horses and went their separate ways.

Sir Amiloun claimed his birthright and took control of his lands; and a little later he brought a beautiful woman home with great celebration. But we must leave him in the arms of his new wife and wish them farewell for the time being.

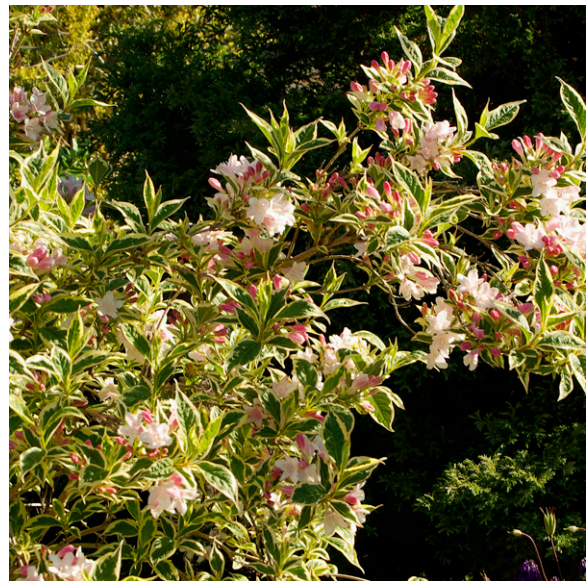
When Amis returned to the duke’s court everybody was very happy to see him and everyone blessed the couple who had raised him up to be such a fine young man; all, that is, except the steward.

One day, Amis met with the steward and greeted him amicably enough. ‘Sir,’ replied the steward, ‘you are sad that Amiloun has left, and so indeed am I. But do not take his departure so hard. I could be a better friend to you than ever he was. Take my advice and let us swear brotherhood together. Be true to me and I shall be true to you.’

‘I have pledged my fidelity to Sir Amiloun,’ said Amis, ‘the finest man I know, so you can go to hell!’

The steward was taken aback at this and became very angry, swearing by Christ: ‘You will pay for this insult! I warn you, I shall be your enemy from now on!’

‘Sir, I couldn’t care less,’ retorted Amis.



Following this incident, the steward never ceased from slandering Amis and the hatred between them became open and intense. Things continued in this way for six months and more, until the steward was given an opportunity to do some real damage.

It all began, as the story goes, when the duke put on another feast, with many a dainty dish to put before his distinguished guests. There was revelry in excess on that summer's day, and the walls echoed to the jollity of it all.

Now the duke had a daughter, a very attractive and well-developed girl in her mid-teens. Her name was Belissant and she attended the feast with all her ladies and maidens. Amis, of course, was there supervising the wine, and he was widely reckoned to be the most splendid young knight in the hall.

Belissant, observing Amis, asked her maidens who was the most handsome and the most valiant knight in the room, and receiving the answer she had hoped for and expected, she fell deeply in love with him at once. From that moment on, whenever she saw Sir Amis her heart throbbed, her knees went all wobbly and she all but lost her powers of speech. And thus she lived her days, and wept at night for thinking of him. She could find no courage enough to speak to him but lay on her bed as though sick. Her mother came one day to ask what was wrong with her and to see how she could help, and Belissant told her she thought she was dying.

That morning the duke had taken a great many lords and noblemen off hunting with him, but Sir Amis was not feeling too well and had stayed behind. And while the knights and huntsmen were busy flushing deer out of the ancient woodland, Sir Amis took himself into a garden to listen to the birds and to give his headache a chance to subside. Now, listen everyone – the duke's daughter lay nearby and her mother was beside her, sadly trying to bring comfort to the poor girl.

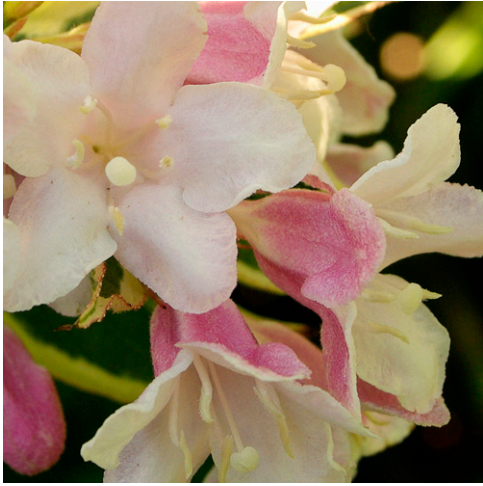
'Get up, my daughter!' she cajoled. 'Go into the garden. It is a beautiful sunny day, all the birds are singing and it will do you the world of good to be out in the fresh air.'

So the girl got up and went into the garden with her maidens. The sun was shining brightly, the birds were singing sweetly and Belissant could even hear a nightingale chanting a delightful melody on a branch somewhere, although it was all but lost on her as she sat moping over Sir Amis. She went into the orchard to try to find some comfort there and who should she see but Sir Amis sitting beneath an apple tree! Her heart leapt for joy at the sight of him, although she dared not tell anyone the reason why. But at last seizing her courage along with her opportunity, she walked towards him.

Seeing this delectable creature approaching, Sir Amis got to his feet to greet her. Belissant instructed her maidens to retire and to leave her with the knight. And when they were alone she said to him: 'Sir knight, my heart reaches out to you. Night and day my thoughts are on you alone and on the love that I feel towards you. Unless you agree to be my lover I know that my heart will break and that I will surely die. You are a gentle knight and I am not unattractive. I have wealth enough and am of good standing, and

I think about you so much that I have made myself ill because of it. If you promise to be faithful to me and to take no other woman, I shall promise you my everlasting love in return.'

This honourable knight was somewhat taken aback and said: 'By he who died for us on the cross, you are the heir of this land! You could choose any king's son to be your lover! Think of your honour. It is not right for you to give your love to a mere knight such as



I; and besides, if any of your family were to find out they would kill us both. I would be a traitor in the eyes of my lord, and indeed to God himself! Perish the thought! Dear lady, take my advice, think carefully of the consequences of what you propose, for they could well prove to be awful.'

'Sir knight,' answered Belissant, indignantly, 'I can see no tonsure on your head. You are not a monk or a clergyman, so why do you give me a sermon? You should have been made a friar, not a knight! Whoever taught you to preach like this can go to hell! But in the name of Christ, all your preaching will be wasted, however long you try to hold out against me. I will bring you to grief if you do not do as I wish. I shall tear all my clothes and swear that you have attacked and raped me; and be in no doubt that if I do, you will be hanged for it.'

Amis stood in anguish, but though his tongue remained motionless his mind raced. Unless I do as she wants, he thought, she will denounce me and have me killed. But if I do so dishonour my lord by complying with her wishes, and if I am found out, I shall be torn apart by wild horses and think myself lucky to suffer such a lenient death.

Amis was frightened to comply with her demands but less inclined still to risk losing his life to her impetuosity. His heart sank within him. Then he thought: I will try playing for time. So he said to the young maiden: 'For God's love, listen to me! Think how often we regret something we have done on the spur of the moment. Leave things as they are for seven days and if at the end of that time you still feel the same way about me, then I shall do as you wish.'

But Belissant was in no mood to be fobbed off. 'By Jesus,' she said, 'you do not escape so easily! Swear by your knighthood that you will honour a day, seven days hence, that we shall become lovers.' And Amis gave her his word and she accepted it, and they kissed each other.

Belissant went back to her chamber and experienced the most indescribable joy. Amis went back into the hall to await his lord's return, with some trepidation.

When the duke came back from the deer-hunting, he immediately asked after his daughter and was told that she seemed to be in very much better spirits. So she was summoned

into the hall to eat and everybody was pleased to see that she was very much happier than she had been, and they thanked God for it. The tables were set, and Belissant, from her seat amongst the ladies, cast a thousand glances in the direction of Sir Amis.

She gazed at Sir Amis constantly, and the steward noticed this. Perceiving that there may be some romance developing between them, he saw his opportunity.

One day, shortly afterwards, the duke took all his retinue hunting, and Belissant made her way, as she was able to, unseen, to the room where Sir Amis lay unwell. And through a further twist of bad luck, the steward happened to be in the chamber next door and he saw Belissant go into the room and quickly rushed out to listen at the door.

When this attractive teenager found Sir Amis alone: 'Greetings,' she said, 'Sir Amis, the seven days are up and now you must make love to me as you promised, and vow to be mine forever.'

'Madam,' said Sir Amis, 'I would gladly marry you! But if your father were to learn what we were doing he would drive me out of the country at the very least. If I were a king with more wealth than five other kings put together, I would marry you in an instant. But unfortunately, I am but a poor man, damn it!' and he shrugged, hopefully.

'Sir knight,' said Belissant, 'why do you always pour cold water over everything? However poor you may be, I will give you riches enough, both day and night!' Sir Amis's defences crumbled. The girl's beauty got the better of him and he took Belissant in his arms, kissed her, and they began to play sweet games together in such a manner that when she left his room, she was no longer a virgin.

All this while, the steward had been listening at the door, and worse still, there had been a chink through which he had been able to see everything that was going on. Incensed, he rushed off to tell someone.

When the duke returned from the deer forest, the steward hurried up to him.

'My lord,' he cried. 'I must warn you, there is a criminal in your midst who – I can hardly bring myself to say it – who has defiled your daughter.'

'Who?' cried the duke. 'Who has done me this shame? Tell me at once!'

'I shall,' said the steward, 'and I suggest that you hang him. It is Sir Amis who has proved to be a traitor to you. He has gone to bed with your daughter. I saw them lying together with my own eyes and can assure you there was very little sleeping going on! I will swear the truth of this before them both. They will not be able to deny it.'

The duke shot off towards the hall like a madman, stopping for nobody, grabbed a sharp sword and made a swing for Sir Amis, missing him by a whisker. Sir Amis ran to a chamber and slammed the door behind him in a futile attempt to hide. The duke slashed at the door so hard that the sword went right through it.

Everyone tried to pacify the duke, from the earls down to the pageboys, but the duke

swore that nothing would stop him from seeing that traitor killed.

‘I have honoured him by taking him into my household,’ he cried, ‘and he repays me by sleeping with my own daughter!’ I would reject the world’s wealth for the chance of killing him with my own two hands!’

‘Sir!’ implored Sir Amis. ‘Calm down, for the love of God! If you can prove that I have done such a thing, by all means hang me. But whoever has given you this idea is lying, and I will prove this in combat. Whoever has spread these lies about me, I am willing to fight a trial with him to clear my name.

‘Are you now?’ replied the duke. ‘Are you willing to fight a trial by combat to prove your innocence?’

‘Certainly!’ said Sir Amis. ‘And here is my glove upon which I swear that I have never defiled your daughter.’

‘You liar!’ cried the steward. ‘I saw you with her this very morning, in your own room, and neither of you can deny it!’

The two of them embarked upon a slanging match while the duke called his daughter into the hall and, weeping, she listened to the accusation levelled against her, denying it vehemently and ringing her hands.

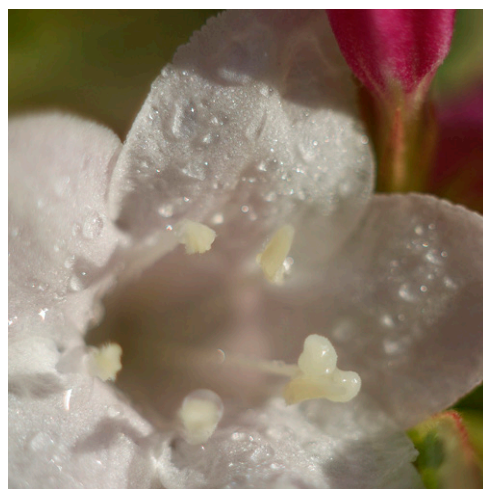
‘Then,’ said the duke, ‘it shall be decided in combat, and the outcome will be seen by all.’

The fight was arranged to take place a fortnight later. The steward was known to be a doughty warrior and nobody was prepared to act as Sir Amis’s guarantor, though twenty would no doubt have come forward had the steward not been so strong. But in the absence of a guarantor, there was no alternative but to put Sir Amis into prison to be sure that he did not flee.

Belissant spoke up, pointing to the injustice of this:

‘I shall be his guarantor,’ she cried. ‘Put me into prison if he doesn’t show up to attend his battle with the steward, and then you can take me out and hang me, as the law demands!’ And Belissant’s mother spoke up in support of her daughter, offering herself also as Sir Amis’s guarantor. Thus the two women put their lives on the line for Sir Amis, and the date of the combat was confirmed.

When all this was done, Sir Amis went away to bemoan his fate. Night and day, he could think of nothing but that the steward was in the right and he in the wrong. And besides, the steward was a good fighter. He was not so concerned for his own sake but for the girl’s. And it worried him that he would have to swear that he was guiltless of the charge



laid against him before the combat could take place – swear it before God. Would he not rather hang than do this?

He prayed many times to Jesus to save him from a fate that seemed inevitable.

One day, Belissant and Sir Amis met in the orchard. ‘Sir Amis,’ said the lovely damsel, ‘why do you look so glum? Tell me, for there is no need; I shall arm you so well against the steward that you will have nothing to fear from him.’

‘Madam,’ said Sir Amis, ‘do not be angry with me, but I am in the wrong and he is in the right, and so the combat is troubling me greatly. For I will have to swear that his accusation is false, and if I swear this, I will be perjuring myself before your father and before God. But I can see no other way.’

‘Is there really no other way in which we can bring this traitor to grief?’ asked Belissant. ‘Some way, I mean, of you avoiding that oath?’



‘Yes, there is!’ exclaimed Amis, suddenly. ‘My blood brother Amiloun!’

‘Then go to him!’ said Belissant. ‘Set out at first light tomorrow morning. I shall say that you have gone into your own country to see your father and mother. And when you reach Sir Amiloun, try to persuade him that by taking on this fight he will be saving all three of us from the steward.’

So the next morning at dawn, Sir Amis set out. He galloped through the day and into the night, over dale and down, so hard that at last his horse dropped dead from exhaustion. And a very forlorn Sir Amis continued his journey on foot, since he could see no other way. He hurried onwards all the next day until as the evening closed in he came to a forest, and the desire to sleep became so strong that nothing could prevent him from resting. So he lay down beneath a tree and slept until dawn. Sir Amiloun was lord over all these lands; he was held in high regard and lived no more than half a day’s journey away.

That night, Sir Amiloun had a dream that his blood brother, Sir Amis, was beset by dangers, harassed by a wild bear and other wild animals who were intent upon killing him. Amis stood alone amongst them, in great distress, he dreamed.

When Sir Amiloun awoke, he told his wife about the nightmare. ‘I know that Amis is in peril,’ he said, ‘and I shall be able to get no rest until I have found out what is wrong.’ He quickly got up and dressed for a journey, although it was still dark, and all his retainers assembled and prepared to ride with him. But he commanded them, for God’s love, to let him go by himself. And, dressed in his finest robes, he mounted his horse and made

off, leaving instructions that nobody was to follow him.

He rode through the growing light of early morning until, as the sun arose, he came across Sir Amis lying beneath a tree. The knight was in a sorry state.

‘Get up, good fellow; it is light and time for you to be on your way!’ said Amiloun. Then he jumped down off his horse and they both embraced. ‘My good friend!’ said Amiloun. ‘Why are you lying here in such distress? What has brought you to this?’

‘I have not been in so much trouble in all my life,’ replied Amis. ‘When you left me I served my lord happily and faithfully, but the steward has brought me to grief and unless you can help me, I am a dead man.’

‘What is it all about?’ asked Amiloun, and Amis told him about the duke’s daughter and how the duke himself had tried to kill him. And he told him about the trial by combat he was now compelled to undergo, and how nobody had offered to stand as his guarantor until the duchess and her daughter had come forward, and how he would soon have to swear that the steward’s accusation was false. ‘And a liar will never prosper!’ he cried. ‘I can see no way out. I am done for!’

When Amiloun had heard all this he cried: ‘By Jesus, the steward shall have his plans thwarted, for I will take the battle on in your stead! And with luck, I will, with the aid of my sword, see a little of his blood before I have finished!’

‘Take my clothes, all of them,’ he said, ‘and I shall dress myself in yours, as though I am you. And I shall swear at the proper time that I am guiltless of that deed with which you are charged.’

The two knights changed clothes. ‘Go home now to that beautiful lady my wife,’ said Sir Amiloun, ‘and do as I shall tell you. You are to lie in bed with her every night until I return, and tell her that you have sent your horse to Sir Amis. Everyone will be very glad and will think it is me they are speaking with. No one will guess the deception, we are so alike.’

Now listen, gentlefolk, and I shall tell you how Sir Amiloun got on! He spurred his horse and made such haste that he arrived at the duke’s court in record time; but not before the duchess and her daughter had been seized because of Sir Amis’s absence. It was the day of the battle, and they were distraught. The steward was waiting around on horseback, armed and equipped with shield and lance, blowing great boasts to anyone who would listen. He rode up to the duke and said: ‘Sir, listen to me! The traitor has run away. If he could be found now he should be hung, drawn and quartered. Therefore, in his absence I request that his guarantors be taken and burnt alive, as is the law.’

In great anger and sadness, the Duke commanded the ladies to be brought forth; a fire was made and a barrel obtained into which they would be placed and put on the fire. And as this was being done, they saw a knight galloping towards them, bearing a shield and a lance. And everyone cried: ‘Here comes Sir Amis!’ and urged delay.

Sir Amiloun did not stop but rode straight up to the duke.

‘My lord duke,’ he said. ‘For shame! Let these ladies go! It is not right to hold them in this way. There is no honour to be had in burning ladies!’

Belissant and her mother were very pleased to see him. They went to a chamber to arm this knight in the finest steel and polished plate that money could buy. And when he was mounted again, many wished him the best of luck in the contest.

But as he rode towards the tournament field, a voice came from heaven that only he could hear: ‘You! Sir Amiloun!’ it said. ‘Christ wishes you to know through me that you will pay for this deception.’

Amiloun stood as still as a stone as he listened to this. He did not know whether to flee or to proceed. But he thought: ‘If I reveal this deceit, Amis will be shamed and will surely be killed. Therefore I will press on regardless, and let God do as he wishes.’

Everyone thought that it was Sir Amis, as Sir Amiloun and the steward were brought forwards, each to swear to his version of events. The steward swore that he spoke the truth, so God help him, and Sir Amiloun swore that he had never so much as touched Belissant, so help him Mary the mother of God. When this was done, they both eagerly took their positions and waited on horseback. Everybody prayed that Sir Amis might gain the upper hand.

Their warhorses galloped together and their lances splintered as they passed, then the knights drew their swords and came together like madmen, hacking at each other’s armour. Steel rang against steel so grimly that sparks leapt away from the blows and blood began to flow freely as the battle raged through the midmorning and on towards noon.

Sir Amiloun swung a mighty blow at the steward that missed, but caught the steward’s horse on the head, killing it instantly. Then the steward feared for his life; but Sir Amiloun got off his horse and helped the steward back onto his feet.

‘Get up, steward’ he said, ‘and fight on foot. For it is demeaning to kill a man who is lying on his back,’ and he pulled the steward up by the hand.

They fought hand to hand with swords until their armour was bright red. The steward gave Amiloun a stroke that wounded him deeply in the shoulder; Amiloun was aggrieved to see his white armour stained so badly with his own blood and gave the steward such a mighty blow in return that it cut through his chest and into his heart. The man fell dead. Amiloun cut at his neck, in order to take a fitting trophy.

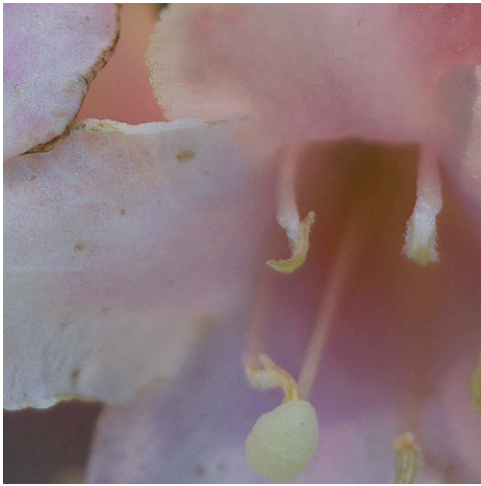
The head was placed on a spear and all the people, overjoyed at Amiloun’s victory, paraded it through the town towards the duke’s residence. All who were there thought that Sir Amis was the victor and when Sir Amiloun approached the duke, Belissant’s father cried: ‘Sir Amis! Before all the lords here assembled I formally exonerate you from any blame in this matter. And as a token of my appreciation for having saved my daughter’s life, I offer her to you in marriage, and all my lands as well.’

Sir Amiloun was very happy and thanked the duke profusely. No one in the court suspected anything other than that it was Sir Amis who had saved the two ladies from burning. Doctors were sent for to examine and treat Sir Amiloun's wound, and when they announced that it was not life-threatening, everybody rejoiced and celebrated the victory.

A week or so later, Sir Amiloun got himself ready and declared that he intended to travel to his own country to show all his friends and relations that he was still alive. The duke agreed to let him go and offered knights and rich trappings to accompany him, but Amiloun refused, insisting that he wanted to go alone.

So Sir Amiloun set off and took no rest until he arrived, instead, in his own land. Sir Amis, meanwhile, had been waiting for him every day out in the forest; and when they met, Amiloun delightedly explained to Sir Amis how he had defeated the steward in

battle and had won the hand of the duke's beautiful daughter as his reward. He dismounted and they began to exchange their clothes as they had done once before.



'Go home now, my brother,' said Amiloun, and Amis thanked his friend a thousand times for the danger he had put himself into on his behalf.

'My friend,' said Sir Amis, 'if ever you should find yourself in need of help, come to me or send a messenger and I shall not fail you; whatever the peril, in right or in wrong, I will give my life for you.'

And so they parted and Amiloun went back to his wife, who seemed curiously perplexed. And that night, he took his wife in his arms and made love to her, and as they caressed, she asked him why for the past fortnight he had laid a sword between them and had not allowed her to touch him. And Amiloun recognised that Amis had been a true brother to him.

'Darling, I will tell you the truth,' he said, and he explained everything. But the lady was not happy when she heard what had happened, and they argued together long into the night.

'You have put yourself in the wrong,' she said, 'to kill a man whose legal claim was true and to conceal a crime by committing another!'

'Madam,' he said, 'I did it for no other reason than to save my good friend from harm, and I hope and believe that he would have done the same for me.'

Sir Amis made his way back to the duke's court and when he arrived, he was greeted by everyone as a hero. The duke took him by the hand and formally transferred all his lands over to him. And shortly afterwards, Sir Amis was married to Belissant with much honour and celebration, and all were invited to the feast which followed the ceremony. Throughout all the land, Sir Amis was held in the highest regard.

Before two years had passed, as God's grace would have it, the old duke was dead, and his lady also, they lay cold in their graves. Sir Amis was duke and lord of all the land, a man of great power, and he had two children by his wife Belissant, the fairest two children one could wish to see. And so it came about that Amis acquired great riches and extensive lands and much honour and renown, while Amiloun, who had once been so happy, was driven down by pain and grief. For leprosy struck him. Just as the angel had said it would. It is pitiful to learn of the sorrow he reaped for his fidelity to Amis, in the three years following the combat. When these three years had passed, he had no idea where he could go or what he could do, for all his friends had shunned him and even his family were now his enemies. He was treated by his wife no better than by anyone else, perhaps worse, and it was impossible to find a man with fewer friends than he had.

His wife knew how to injure him by words alone. 'You wretch!' she would say. 'You have killed an innocent man and this is your reward. I curse anyone who has any pity on you.' Amiloun would wring his hands, wishing he could die.



Alas, that such a gentle knight should come to be in such a pitiful state! His wife banished him from their bedroom, his household made him eat at the end of the lowest table in the hall, away from everybody else. When this had gone on for six months or more, his wife said: 'Word is going round that I feed a foul leper at my table. It is a great slur on all my family and it will have to stop.' Amiloun wept and pleaded with her: 'Do what you wish with me; put me in a shed if you like, where nobody can see me, but give me a little food each day!'

The lady ordered carpenters to build a shed half a mile away from the manor, and when it was completed, Amiloun was banished into it, clutching only his gold cup. And the only member of the household who would have any contact with him at all was a young lad by the name of Owen, the son of Amiloun's sister, who would bring Amiloun his food every day. The boy's name was Owen, but when he was twelve years old he became known as Amoraun, and would sleep in the shed with Sir Amiloun, and every day he fetched food for them both. And he would happily shun the merriment in the hall for the gloom of his lord's shed. And thus Amoraun, as I have said, came to the manor for

food every day, and every day the household would try to persuade him to leave that filthy leper alone for the sake of his health. And he would answer mildly and swear by he who had suffered and died for us on the cross that he would not abandon his lord for all the riches in the world.

A year passed, and still Amoraun visited and cared for Sir Amiloun. His wife grew angry at this and instructed her men to drive the child away from his uncle by force. She told the boy that even if it meant that her husband would die from the cold that very night, she forbade him from taking any more food to the shed. The child wept, and evading the curfew that evening he went to see Sir Amiloun as usual. The knight asked him to say why he was so upset.

‘Your wife has forbidden us any food,’ said the boy. ‘How shall we eat?’

‘Oh, God help us!’ said Sir Amiloun. ‘Once I was a powerful enough man, with food and clothes to distribute, and now I am reduced to this. Nephew, you must stop your weeping for this is serious. We shall have to resort to begging to keep body and soul together.’

So early the next morning they left the shed and took to the road to beg, for they had nothing to eat. And at last they came to a market town and went around from door to door, begging, although it did not come easily to them.

Luckily, the country at that time was awash with food and drink and they found no difficulty in obtaining enough to eat; and because the leper had a child with him people were happy to give, and so the young lad became quite cheerful in his new life.

But after a while, Amiloun could not go on, so the boy built a shack by the roadside. And every day, as folk went to market, food would be left for them at the door; and when this was not enough, Amoraun would go into town to beg.

For three years they lived like this, supported by the friendship and generosity of the people going to and fro from the market; but in the fourth year the harvests failed and the price of bread rose alarmingly, and however much they begged now, there was little food to spare for them.

Amoraun would often go into town, but neither man nor woman would give him anything, and in the solitude of their hut the two beggars lived in hunger and cold.

At last, Sir Amiloun instructed the lad to go back to his manor. ‘Ask my wife,’ he said, ‘for the love of God, to give you one of my donkeys, and we will flee this land and try our fortune somewhere else.’

Amoraun went to the manor, which was only five miles away, and his uncle’s wife received him courteously enough.

‘Madam,’ said Amoraun, ‘truly, I am here as a messenger from your husband, who cannot make the journey to see you himself. He has instructed me to ask you humbly if he

could have one of his donkeys to ride upon, and then we shall leave this district altogether and trouble you no more.'

The lady said that she would gladly send her husband two donkeys, if he would use them to vanish from her life completely.

'One will be enough, and you will never see us again,' the child assured her. So the lady delivered the donkey and the child rode it back to Sir Amiloun's hut, where the boy faithfully repeated what his wife had said, namely, that it was given on the condition that they both leave the district for good. He set Sir Amiloun on the donkey's back and they left the town, going from country to country, begging for food through wind and rain.

But however far they travelled, hunger travelled with them, for the famine was widespread and they could get barely half of what they needed to survive. At last, Sir Amiloun said: 'We will have to sell our donkey, for it is all we possess, except for my gold cup which I would not sell even if I was on the point of death itself.'

So early one morning, Amoraun and Sir Amiloun went into a market town, and when the knight had dismounted, the boy led the animal away and sold it for five shillings. And while the famine lasted, this money kept them alive when otherwise they might have starved.

They remained in the town for three days. Amoraun was by now a strapping youth of fifteen and loved his lord no less than he had loved him from the outset, and for six months he carried Sir Amiloun around on his back as they travelled about. And thus they lived, until the depths of winter came and the roads were deep with mud, and many times he would slip and fall into the filth. But never did he contemplate leaving Sir Amiloun, and still he carried him around on his back until, with only twelve pence left in the world, they bought a pushcart for Sir Amiloun to ride in.

Amoraun pushed Sir Amiloun through many a district, up and down across the land, until by chance they came near to the city in which Sir Amis was duke and master.

'Take me to the court of this noble gentleman,' said Sir Amiloun. 'He is a good man and we may receive some comfort there, if God wills. But you must promise me upon your honour that you will not divulge my name or let anyone know who I am.' Amoraun agreed, and they went towards the duke's residence with all the other poor beggars, splashing through the mud.

As it happened, it was Christmas Eve and the duke was on his way back from church. And when the duke came to the gates of his residence, the poor men standing there all stepped back to allow him to pass, as he strode with his knights and sergeants-at-arms into the warmth of his castle. As he entered, the trumpets began to blow, summoning all his guests to the tables. And when everybody was seated, they were quickly served.

The duke was attended to like a prince, and given wine to drink in the finest gold cups; while he who had brought him into this happy state remained outside with the beggars,

hungry and cold.

By chance, a knight and a sergeant came out of the residence on some light-hearted errand and happened to see the hideous leper accompanied by a very noble-looking young man. So the knight went up to Amoraun and asked him who he was, which country he had come from and why he stood there with a leper. 'Who is your lord?' he asked.

'Sir,' said Amoraun, 'I am the page of this man who lies in God's chains. If you are a gentle knight, please take a message for us into the hall.'

The knight asked if the boy would be willing to leave the leper where he was and to come into the hall himself, where he was sure that he would be chosen to serve in the duke's retinue and in the fullness of time might grow to be a successful and wealthy knight. The boy replied mildly that, so help him Christ, only death or infirmity could induce him to leave the noble lord he stood beside. The knight assumed then that the young man was either stupid or insane, and returned to the duke's hall.

'My lord,' he said, 'listen to the funniest thing you will ever have heard.'

The duke invited him to tell the entire hall and called for silence.

'Sir,' said the knight, 'I was just a moment ago outside by the gate where there is the foulest and most hideous leper that you will ever have seen. He lies in a filthy cart and is so crippled that he cannot walk; but over him stands a naked boy, the most noble and handsome-looking youth I have ever set eyes upon. The stature of that young man against the foulness of the leper is quite the most extraordinary sight.'

'Is the boy short of a few farthings?' asked the duke, and the hall erupted into laughter.

'Sir, I asked him to leave the leper in the cart and to come into your service. I offered him the opportunity of lands and rents, but he refused it all in favour of remaining with the beggar. I assume that he is mad.'

'Though his lord is beyond help,' said the duke, 'perhaps the young man feels an obligation. Maybe he is a relative, a son perhaps, or he may have sworn an oath to look after the leper. But whatever the case, the child must be good, by Christ! Before he goes, therefore, I shall have him brought into the hall and will reward him for his charity. But in the meantime,' and the duke called a young squire to his side, 'take my gold cup,' he instructed, 'fill it to the brim with wine and take it to the castle gates. There you will find a leper in a cart. Insist, for the love of Saint Martin, that he and his handsome page drink the wine, and then bring the cup back to me.'

The squire did as he had been told. 'My lord has sent you this cup of wine,' he informed the leper. 'Drink it if you dare.'

The leper took out his own gold cup, which was identical to the one the squire was holding, and poured into it half the wine from the other. The two goblets were now indistinguishable. The young squire stood staring at this bizarre spectacle, and then ran

back into the hall.

‘Sir,’ he cried to the duke, ‘you have wasted many an effort in your time but this one beats everything, for the beggar is a richer man than you are!’

‘That’s impossible!’ exclaimed the duke.

‘No it is true!’ insisted the squire, ‘He must be a spy or an infiltrator. You should have him hanged. For when I gave him the wine, he produced his own goblet every bit as fine as the one you gave me to take to him. I couldn’t tell them apart!’

‘There are no other goblets like the one I gave you,’ said the duke. ‘It was given to me as one of a unique pair by my blood brother long ago, as a token of our parting. If it comes about that this beggar has killed my noble friend Sir Amiloun and stolen his cup, I shall tear him apart with my own bare hands, by Christ!’

Sir Amis rose from the table and grabbing a sword, strode out towards the castle gates; and there was not a man in the entire hall who could keep up with him. Reaching the cart, he took the leper in both his hands and dragged him out into the mud, and there he laid into him as though he had lost his senses. All those around were very upset to see this.

‘Traitor!’ cried the duke. ‘Where did you get this gold cup from? It belongs to Amiloun, my blood brother! How did you come by it? Tell me!’

‘You are right,’ said the leper ‘It was his when he was in his own country, and now that I am here it is mine; I bought it honestly and at great cost.’

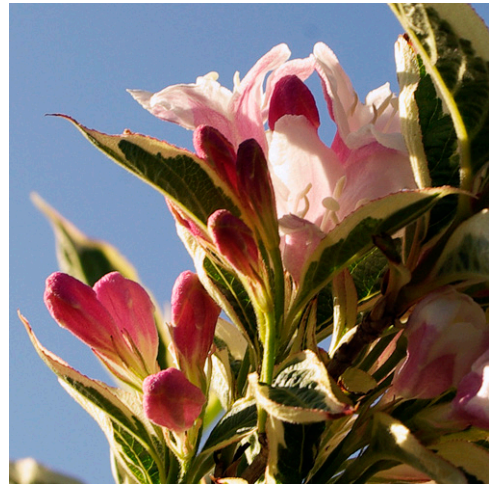
The duke was in such a state that nobody dared lay a finger on him. He kicked the beggar and drew his sword, grabbed him by the feet and dragged him through the filth.

‘Thief!’ he cried. ‘You shall be killed unless you tell me how you came to be in possession of this cup!’

Amoraun had been standing watching all this and now he came forward to try to restrain the duke. He was a strong youth and the duke found it impossible to move as the lad wrestled with him.

‘Sir!’ cried Amoraun. ‘You are ignoble and discourteous to treat a man in this way. It was to save your life that your friend Sir Amiloun received this wound in his shoulder that he might well have grown to regret receiving. It is through you that he suffers, and all you can do is to try to break his bones! A fine repayment for all he once did for you!’

When Sir Amis heard this, he picked Sir Amiloun up in his arms and embraced him sorrowfully. And there indeed on his shoulder was the grisly scar.



‘Alas,’ he cried, ‘that I should live to see this day! What have I done?’

They kissed and embraced, weeping as they did so. Then Sir Amis took Sir Amiloun up into his arms and carried him to the hall. Belissant was waiting there.

‘Sir!’ she cried. ‘What are you thinking of? For Christ’s love, why have you brought a leper into the hall?’

‘It is Amiloun,’ said the duke. ‘The finest knight in all the land and I nearly killed him! But look at the distress he has fallen into!’

The lady fainted, wringing her hands and weeping. Then she kissed Sir Amiloun, foul leper though he was, and bemoaned the state into which he had been reduced. She led him into her chamber, took off all his dirty rags and put him into a hot bath. Then she led him to a bed of silk and eiderdown; and for twelve months they looked after him, and they denied him nothing. Whatever food and wine was served to the high table in the hall, some was always taken up to the duchess’s chamber for Sir Amiloun. And as the year came to a close once more, a marvellous thing happened.

As Sir Amis lay asleep, he dreamed that an angel came from heaven, stood before his bed, and said, ‘On Christmas morning, which is a celebration of the birth of Christ, rise up out of your bed, go and kill your two small children and bath Sir Amiloun in their blood; and through the grace of God, his malady will disappear.’

Sir Amiloun, that night, also dreamed that an angel visited him, urging the same.

In the morning, Sir Amis went to see Sir Amiloun and asked him how he was. ‘Brother,’ he said, ‘I await God’s pleasure, for I can do nothing else.’ And they sat and talked of times gone by for a while. Then Sir Amiloun said: ‘I should tell you something in private. I dreamed last night that an angel came to me and said that the blood of your two children would cure me of my ills and bring me back to health.’

That evening, Christmas Eve, at about the time at which Christ was born, everybody dressed in their finest clothes and prepared to attend church; and when everybody was ready, the duke invited them all to go to church without him, everyone without exception, saying that he intended to spend the night with his friend and blood brother, Sir Amiloun. No one dared to go against his wishes, so they all filed off to Midnight Mass, leaving the duke’s residence deserted.

The duke quickly gathered the keys to the nursery and, taking a candle with him, tip-toed into the children’s room where he found them both sleeping together.

‘By Saint John,’ he said, ‘it is a great pity to kill you, whom Jesus bought with his own blood.’ He drew his knife, but had to creep aside as he wept with sorrow. And crying, he turned again and said to himself: ‘My brother shed his blood for my love. Why, then, should I spare my children if by killing them I can bring my blood brother back to health?’

He hesitated no longer but took up his knife, seized his children and cut their throats over a basin; then he returned their lifeless bodies onto the bed. Then, in terrible anguish, he covered them with a sheet and left the room, locking the door behind him.

He went straight to his brother's chamber and said: 'At this very moment that God was born I have brought my children's blood in the hope that everything the angel said to us will prove to be true.'

'Amis!' said Sir Amiloun, 'have you killed your two children? Alas! Why? I would rather have lived until doomsday in this dreadful condition than that you should have done such a horrible thing!' and he wept uncontrollably.

'Be still!' said Sir Amis. 'Jesus, if he wishes, may choose to send me more children. Because of me you have suffered as much as any man may suffer and I would give my life to help you.'

He took the blood and bathed Sir Amiloun in it, then put him into bed and covered him in blankets. 'My brother,' he said, 'lie still, and sleep if God wishes it. And I pray that Jesus shall bring you back to health.'

Sir Amis left him and went into the castle's private chapel; and he prayed for his children, and he prayed that his crime might not be found out.

The next morning, Belissant returned from the Christmas services and looked for the keys to the nursery but could not find them, and she and the knights accompanying her were all very concerned. The duke told them not to worry, for he had taken the keys himself; he wanted only he and his wife to enter the children's room that morning. He took his wife aside and said: 'Darling, be in good spirits, for I have killed our children. I dreamed that an angel came to me and said that through their blood Sir Amiloun would be cured of his leprosy. And for this reason I have killed them.'

Belissant was beside herself with grief, but seeing that her lord was equally as distraught, she tried to comfort him and said: 'My darling, do not distress yourself. I would give my own life to save Sir Amiloun. No one shall be allowed to see the children, and tomorrow they shall be buried as though they had died in their sleep.'

Thus Belissant comforted her lord as well as she could. And then they went to see Sir Amiloun, who had once been such a great knight. When he awoke, all his leprosy had vanished, through the grace of God, and he was as fair a man as he had been in all his life.

And when they went into the nursery they found both of the children alive and well, without a mark on them, playing together on the bed. They wept for joy and thanked God.

And in this way, Sir Amis's children gave new life to Sir Amiloun.

Sir Amis and Sir Amiloun lived out the rest of their lives together in peace and happiness. And they raised an abbey and endowed it with lands – in Lombardy, so that Masses might be sung for their souls, and for those of their parents, until Doomsday. And they died on the same day, and were lain in one grave; and may they enjoy the bliss of heaven for evermore.