

# Sir Bevis of Hampton

*anon*

*a late-thirteenth century Middle English verse romance, retelling the  
late-twelfth century Anglo-Norman romance Boeve de Haumtone*

**Retold in Modern English prose**

**by**

**Richard Scott-Robinson**

This tale has been translated and retold from: Jennifer Fellows, 2017. Sir Bevis of Hampton, edited from Naples Biblioteca Nazionale MS XIII.B.29 and Cambridge University Library MS Ff.2.38, with selections from National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.2.1 and other manuscripts; published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press. This translation and retelling follows the story found in Naples Biblioteca Nazionale XIII.B.29, with some deviations in favour of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.2.38 and National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.2.1, the Auckinleck Manuscript.

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# Sir Bevis of Hampton

Anon

*a late thirteenth century Middle English verse romance, retelling the late twelfth century Anglo-Norman romance Boeve de Haumtone*

**L**ordlingis, lystenith to my tale · þat is meriour þan þe nyghtyngale · that I wolle yow synge · Of a knyght, Sir Beuon · that was bore in Southampton · withouten lesyng – Gentlemen, everybody, listen to my tale. I will sing you a song, merrier than the nightingale. The knight Sir Bevis was born in Southampton and he was the finest of warriors, he won more battles and more booty than any of his generation and forced many kingdoms to worship Christ. His father was the good earl Sir Guy, who was lord of Southampton and all the surrounding countryside and shire.

Sir Guy was victorious in all his battles but didn't marry until he was quite advanced in years; he took a wife in his old age, the beautiful daughter of the King of Scotland – alas, that he should choose her! It was to cost him his life. When he felt his strength and vigour waning, his thoughts turned towards matrimony and soon afterwards, my tale leads me to believe, he would have given away all his lands just to be rid of her!

The lady's thoughts turn to evil as she plots injustice in her tower. 'My lord is old and cannot satisfy me,' she complains. 'He would rather spend all day in church than come to visit me in my bedroom. If I had a lover, a young knight whose battle scars have not yet sapped his energy, he would be willing to make love to me with all his strength and vigour, to hold and to kiss me day and night, and propel me into bliss.'

This woman was very beautiful. The Emperor of Germany had loved her for a long while and had long sought her hand in marriage. He'd sent messengers to her father and visited her himself, but her father had been adamantly against the match and had given her to Sir Guy instead, even though old age had begun to creep up on him and his strength and vigour had begun to wane. But Sir Guy and his wife spent enough time with each other in bed for a child to be conceived: a boy whom they named Bevis, now a confident and good-looking child. He was only seven years old when his father died. This is how it happened:

Sir Guy's lady called her messenger to her. 'Messenger, give me your word that you won't betray me. If you agree to this, I'll give you gold and property, and make you a knight.'

The messenger, who was an arrogant and treacherous fellow, replied: 'Madam, if you don't find me to be the most loyal and trustworthy messenger you could ever wish to send, you can have my head cut off.'

The lady was satisfied. 'Leave this tower and go into Germany,' she said. 'Use all your cunning and discretion, but go as quickly as you can and greet the emperor on my behalf and ask him, for my love, if, on the first day of the month of May he might arrange to be present with a large contingent of fighting men in the New Forest. I will see to it that

*In addition to this copy in the White Book of Mottistone, there are five manuscript versions of this Middle English romance, all dating to the fourteenth or fifteenth century, as well as a number of fragments. All of these copies are retellings of the late twelfth century Anglo-Norman romance Boeve de Haumtone, which itself survives in two medieval manuscripts, one preserved in print but no longer extant, as well as some fragments. In addition, there are numerous other derivations of this story in many languages, dating from late medieval times up until the early modern period. It was once a popular tale all across Europe.*

*The story as a whole falls into two parts, as though two separate romances have been joined together. In the first, Bevis, like many romance heroes, is exiled overseas as a child where he undergoes a full turn of the Wheel of Fortune, even spending seven years underground after carrying his own death warrant into a city that could convincingly be taken to be one in the Otherworld. Upon escaping, he crosses a sea on horseback, encounters a giant, fights with a dragon and rescues his sweetheart Josian before returning to England to seize back his inheritance.*

*Having earlier disguised himself in order to rescue Josian, and now married to her, the story changes tone. Bevis spends the final part of this romance in a series of adventures, one of which involves his new-born sons immediately being given to a forester and a fisherman to bring up as their own. But as with similar catastrophes experienced by Sir Isumbras, Sir Eglamour of Artois and the mother*

my lord is there with only a small number of men. Tell him to cut off my husband's head and to send it straight to me. When he has done this, I will be his, and then he can do with me whenever he wants, night and day.'

'Madam, I shall go like the wind.'

Off went the messenger, may Christ send him grief! He took ship, the wind was perfect – alas! – and he soon arrived in Germany. Greeting a local man very politely: 'Sir,' he said, 'would you be so kind as to tell me where I can find the emperor?'

'Certainly,' came the reply. 'He's in Rapain, I'm sure of it.'

The messenger thanked him and made his way quickly to Rapain. Here he found the emperor, and he fell to his knees before him, as was the custom.

'Sir, the lady of Southampton greets you in the name of Christ,' he said. 'She asks if, on the first day of the month of May, whatever you may have planned, you might cancel it and instead have your men armed and ready in the New Forest beside the sea. She proposes to send her lord there with only a few companions. You can kill him there, and afterwards, she will make arrangements for you both to be married.'

'Tell your lady that I am happy beyond words with this plan,' the emperor replied. 'Tell her that what she proposes shall be done, and for the trouble that you have gone to, to bring me this message, I shall

give you a fine horse laden with panniers full of red gold. And within this fortnight I shall make you a knight.'

The messenger eagerly thanked him, then quickly made his way back to Southampton. The lady was in her tower. She sent for him and they spoke together.

'Madam, the emperor sends his greetings and with great affection he assures you that he will be ready in the New Forest just as you ask, at the appointed time. If you are ready and willing to be rid of your husband, then he is happier still, many times over, to help

you in this endeavour.’

The lady was very pleased to hear this.

On the first day of May, the lady lay in bed in her tower. She sent for her husband and told him that she felt dreadful and feared for her life. The earl was very upset to hear this and asked if there was anything he could do. She replied: ‘Sir, if I could have a wild boar, I think that that would do wonders to aid my recovery.’



‘My love, where shall I find this wild boar?’ he asked. ‘I will wrestle him to the ground for you with my bare hands!’

‘In the New Forest, that’s where he lives.’

‘By God’s grace, I’ll catch this boar for you.’

‘Bless you. If you will do this for me, you’ll be the finest of all men in my eyes.’

The earl mounted his horse, hung his shield by his side, strapped on his sword but chose not to wear any armour, as he made his way into the forest with only three other men for company. Alas, that he isn’t more alert to the presence of danger!

When he entered the forest, suddenly a voice rang out: ‘Yield to me, you old fool!’ The emperor emerged from the woodland with a large contingent of men. ‘You’re going to hang by the throat and have your head cut off, and your son Bevis will be hanged as well, while your wife and I have sex every day.’

‘You criminal!’ exclaimed the earl. ‘If you have any thoughts of taking my wife and my child from me, I shall not let them go without a fight!’

Sir Guy spurred his horse, showing all the strength and courage that he could still call upon when needed, and struck the emperor with his spear, knocking him off his horse onto the ground. ‘You traitor!’ he cried. ‘Although I am old, do you think that I am afraid of you? You overreach yourself. You have no right to my wife and I’m going to make that very clear to you now!’ He drew his sword.

The earl would have delivered a death blow had not a great number of knights rushed over to rescue the emperor – more than two hundred, the book says. Sir Guy defended himself valiantly, swinging his sword and cutting off forty heads with it, and had he been wearing a good suit of armour he would have won the day, I’m sure. If only he had been wearing his armour! His three companions were quickly killed, and soon his horse was slain from under him and very shortly his only hope was to ask for mercy. The earl knelt before the emperor and pleaded for his life:

‘Through your generosity, I ask for mercy!’ he cried. ‘For all of your men that I have killed, take my sword and all my titles and possessions, but please leave me my young

son Bevis, and my dear wife.'

'By God, no!' cried the emperor, angrily. He drew his sword and killed the good earl there and then, by cutting off his head. 'Take this to my darling,' said the emperor, giving the severed head to one of his knights.

The knight rode into Southampton, found the lady and greeted her: 'Madam,' he said, 'the emperor sends his heartfelt greetings and delivers this to you.'

'May he be blessed forevermore!' she exclaimed. 'He shall marry me tomorrow. And make sure that you ask that sweet man to come to my bedroom tonight.'

The messenger returned with this message.

Bevis, the earl's son, was distraught when he learned what had happened to his father. He wept and wrung his hands and cried 'Alas! Alas!' Then he called his mother to him and when she arrived, he shouted: 'You filthy whore! You deserve to be disembowelled and torn to pieces! It would give me the greatest pleasure to see this happen, for you have killed my father unjustly. What reason do you have, mother, to become a whore and to turn your castle into a brothel? Is this what beauty encourages? I commend all whores to the devil of hell, all of them, including you! And I'll tell you one more thing: if I ever reach an age where I can bear arms, I shall bring grief to all those who have been involved in the killing of my father.'

His mother slapped him hard below the ear. It was a nasty blow. Young Bevis fell to the ground.

Saber quickly ran to him, like the true knight that he was: he was Bevis's uncle and foster father, and he helped Bevis up by the arm and was very angry to see the harm done to the boy. He led Bevis towards his house, and as he did so the lady called him back and said: 'Saber, see to it that young Bevis dies. Have him hanged, or any other death that you like, I don't care, but just make sure that he's gone.'

Saber was very unhappy with this, but he told her that he would do as she asked. He took the child home with him, then took a pig, slaughtered it and sprinkled the blood all over the child's clothes, just as though the boy had been butchered in them, so that he could show the clothes to Bevis's mother. Then he gave Bevis, that noble child, some plain, ordinary garments to wear and said: 'Son, you must look after my sheep in the fields for a fortnight, and when the wedding festivities are over, I will send you into another country, far to the south, to an earl who will look after you and teach you how to become a young nobleman. When you are old enough to bear arms and have become a man, then you will come back to England and win back your rightful heritage through war and by force of arms. I will help you to do this in every way that I can, when you are old enough, with all my might and with the edge of my sword.'

The child thanked him and wept tears of sorrow, then made his way to the fields with his sheep. As Bevis was watching over his animals, he looked over towards Southampton,

which should have been his by right, and saw a throng of people near the tower dancing and singing in great merriment, and heard the sound of tabors and trumpets drifting in the wind.

‘Lord,’ he cried, ‘have pity on me! Am I not an earl’s son, and now a lowly shepherd?’

Bevis seized his cudgel and strode off, angry and aggrieved, towards the tower. ‘Porter,’ he said when he got there, ‘let me in. I’ve a little something I want to say to the emperor.’

‘Away, you imp!’ cried the porter. ‘Do you think you’re going to impress me with this arrogance? Unless you skedaddle at once, you’ll bitterly regret it. Bugger off!’

He turned back towards his guardhouse and shouted: ‘Can you see this tiny son of a whore brandishing a stick at me? If he carries on like this much more, I’ll give him a good whack on the head.’

Bevis was ashamed to hear himself spoken to like this; he was so angry that he didn’t know what else to do, so he smashed his stick over the man’s head and broke his skull.

‘By God, you are right to call me the son of a whore,’ he said. ‘I know this for sure. But I’m no imp.’

Bevis left the man bleeding on the ground as he made his way into the hall, where he looked around, quickly spotted the emperor and shouted: ‘Sir, what are you doing with your arm around my mother’s shoulders? That’s my mother’s hand you’re holding! What are you doing on my land, without my permission? If you don’t return my lands and my rents to me and go away at once, I’ll make you pay! Why did you kill my father? You should be hanged and disembowelled for it! In the name of God, give me back what is mine!’



‘Shut up, you little fool!’ exclaimed the emperor.

Bevis was beside himself with rage to hear himself spoken to like this and marched towards the emperor. Despite the crowd of people in the hall, he struck him three times on the head with the stick, which was still in his hands. Three times he struck him, and the emperor slumped unconscious onto the table. Bevis’s mother quickly shouted: ‘Seize him!’

Bevis knew that he had to leave at once; knights were rising from the tables all around him, but there was much sympathy in the hall for the young lad and they let him escape, for none of them wanted to be the one to capture him. Bevis ran back home as fast as he could. Saber was there.

‘Bevis, by the holy cross! why aren’t you in the fields?’ he asked.

‘I’ll tell you,’ Bevis replied. ‘I’ve just beaten my stepfather with my stick. I whacked him over the head with it three times and left him for dead in the hall.’

‘Oh my God!’ said Saber. ‘Your mother will kill me. Do what I tell you now. If you don’t, we’re both dead.’

Saber led Bevis into a chamber. His worries were well founded, for Bevis’s mother appeared very shortly.

‘Saber, where’s Bevis, that traitor? That villain!’

‘Madam, I killed him as you asked, you know that I did. I showed you his clothes.’

‘You liar! Find out where he is. If you don’t deliver him to me quickly, I’ll see to it that you suffer for it greatly. I’ll have you killed in a most unpleasant way’

Bevis couldn’t bear hearing his foster father Saber being threatened like this: ‘Here I am,’ he cried. ‘Don’t you do anything to harm my uncle!’

The lady seized Bevis by the ear. ‘You should be dead!’ she told him. Then she called three knights to her, ones who were loyal to her and had no feelings for the boy, and gave the child over to them.

‘Go as quickly as you can to the coast,’ she instructed. ‘If there are any ships there from heathen lands, sell this rat to some merchants this very afternoon, and let them take him away with them.’

The knights made their way to the quayside of Southampton and quickly put the boy up for sale. There were many merchants from far-flung lands milling around the place. They sold him to some Saracens and got quite a lot for him.

The wind and the weather were fair, Bevis was soon taken far over the sea and ended up in Armenia. The ship landed, and three merchants took him into the city, hoping to get a good price for him. They draped him in silver chains and led him around the streets with a garland of roses on his head, keeping a firm hold of him and hoping to get plenty of gold for their captive English boy. But they were asking more than people had to give, until the king’s steward, who had no shortage of gold, came along and bought him.

The steward went to the king and presented the young child to him. The king was very happy and thanked his steward many times. ‘Mohammed!’ he exclaimed. ‘I would be delighted and so proud if this wonderful-looking child would learn to bow before us. If he could be persuaded to embrace Islam, then I’m sure – my lord Mohammed – you will be equally delighted. By Apollo who sits on high, I’ve never seen a fairer child than he is, in length and breadth and limb.

‘Child, where were you born?’ he asked. ‘What is your name?’

‘Sir,’ said the boy, ‘my name is Bevis. I was born in England, in Southampton, by the sea. My father was earl there, but my treacherous mother had him killed and she sold me into slavery. She’s capable of anything! But sir, when I’m able to ride a horse well and bear arms and break lances, I’ll avenge my father’s death, I promise.’

Then Bevis told the king everything: he told him how the emperor had murdered his father and when he had finished, the king was quite overcome with emotion and very impressed with the boy.

‘I have no heir to pass my lands on to when I die,’ he confided. ‘None except for my daughter, Josian. If you will renounce your faith and take my lord Apollo as your god, I will give you her hand in marriage in the fullness of time, and you shall inherit all of my lands when I am gone.’

‘No,’ said Bevis. ‘Certainly not! Not for all your silver and gold will I abandon Jesus who paid such a high price for humankind. All those who believe in false gods must be idiots!’

The king admired Bevis’s courage, and his conviction, and thought even more of him because of it. ‘Bevis, while you are still a child you shall be my chamberlain,’ he said, ‘and when you are made a knight you shall carry my banner into battle.’

‘Whatever you wish,’ replied Bevis.

The years went by and the king grew to love Bevis very much, and so did his beautiful and intelligent daughter Josian; in fact, everyone grew very fond of him. By the time he was fifteen years old, there was no young man in the whole of the king’s retinue, neither knight nor squire, who dared to ride against him nor engage him in a fight.

The first conflict that Bevis took part in, I believe – since arriving in heathen lands, that is, and this is absolutely true – was on a Christmas Day. Bevis was riding with sixty Saracens towards the river when a Saracen began to tease him and asked him if he knew what day it was in the Christian calendar. Bevis replied: ‘I haven’t the slightest idea what day it is. I was less than ten years old when I left England, so how should I know?’

The Saracen laughed. ‘It is the first day of Yule, when your God was born in a stable with some donkeys. Christians make a big thing of it and have a lavish festival to honour him, so I’m going to honour mine, now, and just a enthusiastically, both Mohammed and Apollo.’

‘I have dishonoured my religion,’ confessed Bevis. ‘But I have seen knights riding to tournaments with their helmets shining brightly and their shields glistening, and if I was as tough and courageous as my father, Sir Guy, I would, for the love of my God who sits in heaven above, fight with you all, right here and now!’

‘This sounds like fighting talk!’ exclaimed the Saracen to his companions. ‘This Christian dog says that he will knock us all off our horses! Shall we see if he can do it?’

They all crowded around him and began to strike blows, giving Bevis many wounds, some of them deep, until at last Bevis had had enough. Although his body was smarting from the injuries he had received, he gathered his courage, wrestled one of the Saracens off his horse and managed to wrench the sword from out of his hand as he fell. Then he began to inflict some serious injury with it! Sixty Saracens received such a blow upon



the neck with the edge of this sword that their heads went rolling into the dirt. Some he cut into two halves, others he left hanging under their horses' feet. None escaped before Bevis had struck every one of them on the head with his sword.

The riderless horses galloped back to their stables, they knew the way, and Bevis rode home, bleeding from wounds everywhere. He tied up his steed and quickly went to his room. There, he lay face down on the floor to rest and to give himself some relief from his many wounds.

When word came to King Ermine that a large number of his young men had just been killed, and by whom, the king swore and commanded that Bevis be hanged and dismembered for it. But Josian spoke up and said to her father: 'Sir, I firmly believe that Bevis would not have killed your men, by Mohammed and Termagaunt, unless it had been in self defence. Please,' she said, 'therefore, do as I ask: before you have Bevis executed for this crime, I ask you, for my love, let him come before you and give his side of the story, and then, when you know a little better who was in the right and who in the wrong, then you will be in a better position to know whether to sentence him to death or to offer him your forgiveness, and you can give your judgement then.'

'My generous daughter,' the king replied, 'let it be as you say.'

At once, Josian called two knights to her. 'Go to Bevis's chamber,' she said, 'and ask him to come to speak with me, and say that my father is quite willing to make his peace with him.'

The knights went off to Bevis's room and asked him, as the courteous and noble young man that he was, if he would come to speak with Josian. Bevis raised his head up from the floor and gave them such a stern glare, with his eyes bulging and his brow furrowed, that the two knights were scared out of their wits.

'If you weren't carrying a message, I would kill you both here and now, you foul liars!' he shouted at them. 'I won't get up from this floor to speak with any heathen dog. She is a bitch and you are dogs. Get out of my room!'

The knights left immediately; they were happy to be away from there. They quickly went back to Josian.

'He wasn't very pleased to see us,' they said. 'He called us "dogs". We'd rather not go to him again, to be honest. Not for all of Armenia!'

'Gather your courage and come with me,' replied Josian.

So they all went back to Bevis's chamber.

'Bevis, my darling,' said Josian, when they arrived. 'For God's love, speak to me.' She kissed him on the chin and on the mouth and gave him medicines steeped in wine, and after a while she managed to quell his anger.

'Josian, forgive me,' he said. 'But I am badly wounded.'

‘Bevis,’ she replied, ‘I am the finest of physicians. No one has a better ointment than the one I have brought along with me. But first, let’s quickly go to see my father.’

So Bevis went trustingly with Josian and they made their way to King Ermine. Bevis then gave the king a true account of what had happened and showed him the many wounds that he had received, any one of which would have been enough to bring a man down.

‘I wouldn’t want you dead for all the lands that I hold,’ said the king. ‘Please, my daughter, do all you can to save this man. Heal him if you can, heal this doughty young warrior.’

Josian took Bevis into a chamber, had baths prepared for him, the hot water steeped with herbs and medicines, and used her ointment, so that in a short while Bevis was well on the road to recovery. It was not long before he was as eager to fight again as a falcon is to set off into the air.

There are other examples of Bevis’s skill and bravery that I have to tell you about too, if you will stay and listen. There was a wild boar in the district. Everyone was frightened of it. No animal had taken so many lives, men and women, and he didn’t care if ten knights were after him. He didn’t give a bean! Two great tusks protruded from his mouth, each of them over five inches in circumference, his hide was impenetrable and his bristles were long and coarse. He was such a terrifying sight that no man dared to approach him, let alone threaten him.

Bevis lay in bed one night and conceived the idea of demonstrating his strength and valour against this boar, by himself, alone. So the next morning, when it was light and everybody was up and about, Bevis saddled his hunter, intending to go after that boar. He strapped on a good sword, carried a spear, hung a shield by his side and set off towards the forest.

Josian saw him leaving and thought, as always, that he looked magnificent. ‘May I never have possessions or any joy at all unless I can kiss him at least once,’ she said to herself with passion. ‘It will be a lucky lady indeed who has him to play with in bed!’

Bevis arrived at the forest and quickly tied his horse to a thorn tree and hung his shield around his neck. Then he blew a good blast on his horn, three loud phrases one after the other, so that the boar would know he was there. When he came to the boar’s den, he could see the bones of dead men that the boar had killed in the forest and dragged back to eat, and to drink their blood.

‘Come out, you cursed soul, come out quickly and fight!’ Bevis cried.

As soon as the boar saw Bevis, its bristles stood on end. It looked at him with piercing eyes as though imagining how pleasant it might be to swallow him whole, then opened its mouth and gave out an almighty snarl. Bevis ran at the beast with his spear levelled, but it stood its ground against the assault and the spear broke into pieces against the

boar's hide, which was as hard as flint. Bevis's spear was now useless, so he drew his sword and attacked the animal with that. The boar counterattacked in response, and so it went on. The battle lasted for a long while – until evensong I believe. Bevis became so weary that his strength started to fail and he expected to be killed at any moment. The boar was growing just as tired, however, and suddenly turned and retreated.

While the boar was resting, Bevis made a prayer to God and to his mother Mary: 'May one of us be killed before this battle ends!'

The boar suddenly rushed into a fresh attack with all its might, foaming excessively at the mouth, its bristles standing on end. Bevis, on this occasion, and through the grace and excellence of God, managed to slice away half of each of the boar's tusks with a single swipe of his sword. The tip of his sword cut through the boar's skull and exposed a hand's breath of the brain underneath. At this, the boar gave out such a cry that the sound was heard for miles around; men heard that cry from as far away as the castle itself. The boar opened its mouth so wide that Bevis was able to thrust his sword down its throat and cut the animal's heart in two. Bevis withdrew the sword and then cut the boar's head off with it. He set the head onto the end of what remained of his spear and prepared to carry it back to the castle, but first he put his hunting horn to his mouth and blew the motif for a kill, so pleased was he at what he had just achieved.

Bevis intended to take the head to Josian, but before he could reach the castle he was accosted by a large company of men. The king had a steward who had intended to kill the boar himself and was now very jealous of Bevis's success. He had brought twenty knights along with him, and ten foresters, so the book tells us.

Bevis wanted only to wish them a good day and to travel onwards in peace, but the steward had other ideas.

'Cut him down! Kill him!' the steward cried.

Bevis could see that he was in grave danger and went to draw his sword, but he'd left it behind when he had killed the boar. He had nothing to fight with! Bevis was dismayed, but thinking quickly, he pulled the boar's head from the end of the spear and, using the tusks on the boar's head as a weapon, he quickly won a sword for himself; it was called Morglay. When Bevis had this sword in his hand, he ran circles around those who were trying to kill him, for no knight has ever wielded a better one. Some he hit on the helmet, toppling them from their horses, others he struck so hard with this sword that he cut their head off with a single blow. He laid into these heathen knights so fiercely that none of them could overcome him, and he hit the king's steward so hard that he split the man's body into two pieces, by the grace of God Almighty. He threw the corpse onto the ground and mounted the new horse that he had won. He thought that this reward for that stroke was excellent, for the horse was a much better one than the one he had been riding. The horse was called Arundel, which means swallow, for the steed was as swift and sure as a swallow in flight.

Bevis rode over to offer a truce to those knights who were still alive, and to the foresters, but as he approached them he was met by a cascade of arrows. He could barely defend himself against them, so he abandoned all thoughts of peace and in a little while had cut down all ten of the foresters and sliced their bodies into bits.

It says in the book that Josian was watching all this from the castle and had witnessed everything. 'Oh God,' she said. 'Bevis is so strong and courageous! If I possessed the whole world, I would give it all up in order to marry him. Unless he can love me, I am dead! Sweet Jesus, what shall I do? I am in love, and Bevis knows nothing of my feelings for him.'

The young lady complained in this way, as she lay alone in her tower. Bevis, meanwhile, left all the carnage behind him and made his way to the castle. There, he presented the boar's head to King Ermine. The king was very pleased and thanked Bevis a hundred times. He had no idea yet that his steward had been killed.

At that moment, a king arrived with plans to win Josian's hand in marriage, although unbeknown to him she loves Bevis with every fibre of her being. This king's name was Bradmond.

'Sir, give me your daughter to be my wife,' he called out at the top of his voice. 'If you refuse to do this, I shall win her in battle. I'll surround you on all sides, destroy your land and your crown and make your daughter lie beside me. And then to spite you, when I've finished with her I'll give her to a scabby scullion to have filthy sex with.'

'By God, we will defend her from you!' exclaimed King Ermine, angrily. He descended his tower, sent for all his knights and asked them for their advice.

'If Bevis was a knight,' interrupted Josian, 'he would be able to protect you well enough! I saw him kill your steward earlier. Bevis had left his sword behind at the place where he killed the boar, and only had the truncheon of his spear left with the boar's head stuck on it, and your steward had twenty-four knights and ten foresters all armed to the teeth. But Bevis seized the head of the boar and gave the steward a massive blow with it when he realised the danger that he was in. He fought until all the knights were dead. He won the good sword Morglay, and that fine horse Arundel as well. He killed the ten foresters and then rode back here, unmolested.'

King Ermine swore at once that Bevis should be knighted. He called for Bevis and said:

'I shall make you a knight and you shall carry my banner into battle. I am going to have to fight against King Bradmond.'

'Gladly!' exclaimed Bevis. 'I'll be delighted to, by the Holy Cross!'

Straight away, the king knighted Bevis and gave him a handsome shield with three eagles picked out in azure against a background of gold and silver. Then he strapped the sword Morglay onto him. Josian brought him a coat of chainmail and a padded coat to wear

underneath. Bevis put on the coat – which was worth a small town – and the chainmail, and all those who witnessed this said that they had never seen chainmail like it. It was so strong and finely made that nothing could damage it, but it weighed no more than a single penny! Josian also gave Bevis the horse Arundel, to be his own. Bevis leapt into the saddle at once and led his contingent away, with their gleaming shields and bright banners, three thousand and fifteen men in total.

Bevis found himself receiving immediate attention from King Bradmond's forces. King Radstone, who was as shaggy as a sheep, was King Bradmond's standard-bearer. Bevis spurred Arundel with golden spurs and Arundel knew exactly what to do. Bevis impaled King Radstone through the chest with his spear. Shield, chainmail and leather were no more use to him than a button! He fell dead to the ground.

'Get some sleep down there, you heathen hound!' cried Bevis. 'You would have been better off staying at home than coming here.' Then he laid into the enemy with ferocity and courage, and killed Saracens like a frenzied madman. Sir Bevis killed as many in that fight as the rest of his comrades put together. He swung Morglay without rest until the sun began to set.

Bevis and his contingent killed sixty-thousand that day; they had all come from Damascus, but they never returned home. When Bradmond saw that his army had been cut to pieces, he fled the battlefield with what forces he had left.

As Bradmond was riding beside the seashore with the remains of his army, he came across two of Bevis's knights. He got down off his horse, captured them, tied them up and led them off, intending to take them to his prison and earn a good ransom for them. He was roping them to a horse when Bevis spotted what he was doing and quickly gave chase.

'Bradmond, you foul wretch! Did you come here to take Josian back with you like that? You're going to find out quickly enough who's here to stop you and hang you on a gibbet! To get past me, you'll have to get past Morglay.'

Without another word being spoken, Bevis hit King Bradmond on the helmet with his sword and toppled the man to the ground.

'Mercy!' cried Bradmond. 'I yield to you! I surrender! But I'll give you a thousand castles, cities and towers if you'll let me escape.'

'No, by Saint Martin! I am sworn to King Ermine, and all that I do, I do in his name. Therefore, God help me but you will swear to me now, at once, and by all that you hold dear, that you will never make war on him again but pay homage to him instead, and hold your lands from him, and give him sovereignty over all that you possess.'

'I swear to all this,' replied Bradmond. 'I will never again seek to harm him, and I will never take up arms against you, Bevis.'

When he had sworn to all this, Bevis let King Bradmond go, which was a great pity. It's

a shame that he didn't kill him there and then. Bevis will spend seven years in his prison, as you will hear shortly.

Bevis went quickly home and came before King Ermine. 'King Bradmond of Saraceny has agreed to pay you homage and to be your vassal,' he said. 'He will hold his lands, hereafter, from you.'

King Ermine was delighted to hear this and thanked Bevis many times. The beautiful maiden Josian helped Bevis to remove all his armour and made sure that he was comfortable at the table; she served his meal herself. Then she did all that she could to persuade him to go to her private chamber afterwards and once there, she gave him water to drink and made him feel very much at home.

Bevis sat on her bed, and the beautiful Josian saw her opportunity and seized it.

'Bevis, my darling, have mercy on me! I have loved you for a very long time. There is no remedy. Unless you can give yourself licence to do whatever you wish with me, right now, I will die.'

'God forbid!' exclaimed Bevis. 'There is no king, prince nor sultan in this whole world who wouldn't take you to be his wife in an instant, the moment he set eyes on you! I am a knight from a foreign land and possess nothing except for the clothes that I stand up in.'

'It doesn't matter!' she cried. 'I would rather take you as my lover, dressed only in your shirt, than possess all the wealth in the entire world. Can you not learn to love me discretely?'

'No,' said Bevis, with equal conviction.

Josian fell down in a flood of tears. 'You're right,' she sobbed. 'In this world there is no king nor emperor who wouldn't choose me to be his wife. And you! Churl! You have rejected me! May Mohammed send you pain and suffering!'

'Damsel,' said Bevis, 'you are being unfair to me. It is true that I possess nothing, neither here nor in my own country, but my father was an earl. How can I then be a churl, if my father was a nobleman? You gave me a horse. Have it back. It is unsafe being on friendly terms with you and I want nothing more to do with you. I shall return to my own country. You will never see me again.'

Bevis went off to his lodgings in the town. He was very upset, and ashamed that she had made him appear so naïve and stupid.

When Bevis was gone, Josian's fears and sorrows rose within her until she became quite distraught. She imagined that the tower would fall in upon her. She called her chamberlain, Sir Boniface, to her, told him what had happened and instructed him to go at once to Bevis and to try to make amends for everything, everything that she knew she had done wrong. Boniface went off and found Bevis in his chamber.

‘Josian has sent me,’ he said. ‘She says that she regrets all the things that she has said and which have upset you. She will make amends, in any way that you wish.’

‘Tell her that there’s nothing a messenger can say that will change my mind. But for taking the trouble to bring this message to me, I will give you a fine reward: a milk-white robe with a border of red silk and fastened with gold buttons; a robe fit for a king.’

Sir Boniface eagerly thanked him and turned for home, where he found Josian in a dismal mood. His answer, when he gave it, did nothing to cheer her up.

‘I advise you to go to see him yourself,’ he said. ‘Honestly, you did a dreadful thing when you slandered such a noble knight as him. Look at this robe he gave me!’

‘Alas,’ she cried. ‘It’s no act of a churl to give a messenger such a fine robe. Since he won’t come to me, I will go to him. Whatever may come of it, I shall go to his chamber.’

Bevis heard that the maiden was outside and pretended to be asleep.

‘Awake! Wake up!’ she cried. ‘I’ve come to make it up to you, my darling. Show your nobility and your generosity. Say a kind word to me now, and show me your love.’

‘Damsel,’ replied Bevis, ‘leave me in peace. Go away! I’m weary from fighting. I fought for you, but it’s the last time that I will.’

‘Have mercy on me!’ she cried, and fell down in a flood of tears. ‘Forgive me for acting so rashly and for insulting you. As a reward, I shall renounce all my false gods and become a Christian, for your sake.’

‘I accept your apology, then,’ said Bevis at once, and kissed her on the mouth.

That kiss was nearly the death of him, though. He’d appointed as his chamberlain one of those two knights whom he’d rescued from the clutches of King Bradmond, but it would have been better if he had let him stay captured. The man went straight to the king with what he had seen:

‘Sir, that believer in a false god, Sir Bevis, is having sex with your daughter.’

This is what that villain said! May he die an agonising death for it! All he had seen was Bevis kissing Josian once on the mouth. But it’s true what is said in romance: save a thief from the noose and he won’t rest until he’s seen you hanged on the same rope.

‘Alas,’ cried King Ermine. ‘This is terrible. Not for all of Armenia would I wish to see him accused of any crime. He must be punished for it, though, this is absolutely clear. But I would rather not have to watch him being killed.’

Up spoke a Saracen – may he have God’s curse and mine! – ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘why don’t we write a letter to King Bradmond and give this communication to Bevis to deliver. In this letter we can say something to the effect that the messenger, Bevis, has gone to bed with Josian and suggest that Bradmond has him killed, and he can have the hand of your daughter in marriage if he still wants it.’

The letter was written, then the king sent for Bevis and said: 'Sir Bevis, I want you to go to King Bradmond, who has sworn friendship to us now. I ask you to make yourself ready to take this letter to him. But you must swear upon your faith that you won't show the letter to anybody.'

'If I can take Arundel,' said Bevis, 'I'll go into that land at once and deliver it for you very quickly. I'll take Morglay as well.'

'It is not customary,' replied the king, 'for a messenger to deliver a message riding a war-horse or carrying a sword. A quieter and more comfortable pony would be much more appropriate. Take a little hackney, and leave your sword Morglay behind.'

So Bevis mounted a riding pony and rode on his way, carrying with him his own death warrant; may God, who sees everything, find a way of protecting him.

But let us turn again to where we were at the beginning and speak of Saber, who is Bevis's uncle. Saber was grief-stricken when his nephew was sold into slavery. He called his own son, Tirry, and asked him to travel into heathen lands, near and far, to see if he could find out where those mariners had taken Bevis.

'Son,' he said, 'you're my own flesh and blood and you'll recognise your lord anywhere, I know. For my sake, I implore you, go and search for him; take seven years if you need to and look everywhere for him. I'll give you money; just let me know where you are and I'll send the money to you.'

'I'll search for Bevis until I find him, even if I have to go as far as India,' replied Tirry.

So off went Tirry, and he looked everywhere for Bevis. In the whole of the heathen world there was no town known to Christianity that Tirry did not travel to in order to look for Bevis. But he could find no sign of him. At last he had to admit that he'd found not a trace of him. He had drawn a blank.

Sir Bevis rode onwards, carrying the letter from King Ermine to King Bradmond, making as speedy progress as he could. He was riding through a large forest one day when he saw, on his right hand side, a palmer sitting eating his dinner. The man was all alone, but he seemed to be tucking into quite a good meal. He was sitting under a tree and making short work of three fowl that men call quails in these parts; he didn't seem to be short of food, although he was dressed quite poorly. He glanced up with bright eyes when he saw Bevis approaching and generously invited him to share his meal with him.

'Sir, come over here and dine with me. Share my food with me upon this ground, and let us speak with one another. You can tell me where you have travelled and what adventures you have seen. You look to be a gentleman and I'm sure that you will be able to help me concerning a man whose name I shall tell you when we have eaten.'

Bevis eagerly alighted from his horse and turned his thoughts to the feast before him. They ate and drank their fill; then afterwards they turned, as is customary, to conversation. Bevis asked the pilgrim if he was a Christian, where he had come from and where



he was going and why he was travelling as he was. 'Tell me everything, my friend,' Bevis said.

The palmer replied: 'I was born in England, in Southampton, beside the sea, and I was very happy there. I have been looking these past seven years for a man whose name I shall tell you: Bevis is his name, by God of heaven. I've sought him in many lands, far and near, and having my arms and legs tied up with rope is the only way of stopping me from looking some more. I won't stop until I find him, so I can bring him back to England to help my father.'

'What is your father's name?' asked Bevis.

The palmer replied innocently: 'My father's name is Sir Saber. He is Bevis's uncle, and the cow that is Bevis's mother instructed him to throw Bevis into the sea, and that was my father's undoing. She went to my father and told him to kill her own son, my father's nephew, by casting him into the sea and drowning him. But my father saved him. He didn't kill him and because of this he is in great difficulty. He is holed up in a strong castle protected by the sea on all sides: Carisbrooke Castle, on the Isle of Wight. Thankfully, there is no shortage of food there. There is more than enough to feed everybody for seven years.'

'This is my quest, then, to find Bevis. So tell me now, if you will, do you know where I can find this man?'

'By God, I know him well enough!' exclaimed Bevis with a laugh. 'It wasn't that long ago since I saw the Saracens hang him.'

Tirry fell in a faint, and when he recovered, he tore his clothes and his hair, sighed and wept. Bevis tried to comfort him.

'Go home again to your father,' he said, 'tell him all about your suffering and tribulation, tell him about all the distant lands that you have been to and what adventures you have seen, and help him to defend his castle and keep him safe from those who wish him harm. Tell him what I have told you. Though you have sought Bevis these seven years, you were never near that young man.'

'Then tell me now, for charity,' asked Tirry, 'which is the way to England? And where are you going?'

'I'm taking this message to the beautiful city of Damascus. I'm carrying a letter that is folded and sealed in silver and gold. It's for the eyes of the king himself. I haven't a clue what's in it.'

'So may you prosper, then, let me see what it says,' said Tirry. 'I've been to school and can read. You could be carrying your own death warrant around with you.'

'I could do the same myself,' replied Bevis. 'But by God above, it shall not be opened. Not until the king himself is ready to read it.'

The palmer kissed Bevis farewell and took his leave. Then he made his way back to this country, to England. Bevis continued on his own journey, without fear or apprehension, towards the city of Damascus, that shone as brightly as glass.

It was about midnight when Bevis approached this city, and it shone so brightly, even at night, that it dazzled him with its brilliance. All the windows and all the walls were made of crystal, and all the chambers and the halls were as well. It was beautifully constructed; the columns were made of cypress wood gilded with red gold, and all the roofs were sealed in lead and gold. Such was this city, as the romance tells us, that it took a man more than two days to walk around it. There was a double wall protecting the outer environs and it was surrounded by a moat, and there was none deeper in the whole world; it was wide and deep, large enough for a ship or a galley to make way under oars without any danger of grounding at all.

There were seven gates into this city, with drawbridge and portcullis; these gates were out of this world and they made the city impregnable. Reaching over the water was a bridge of brass that allowed men and animals to cross into the city. Beneath this bridge were sixty bells, as the book of romance tells us, and whenever a man or an animal went across, all these bells rang out. At the end of this bridge was a tower, decorated in gold and azure, and at the top of this tower was a fully-grown eagle constructed entirely out of gold, except for his eyes, which were made of precious stones. These eyes shone so brightly that they gave out more light than the city itself did. Bevis could see it as clearly as though he was standing in the city, although he was still over thirty miles away.

‘Such wealth!’ thought Bevis to himself. ‘I’ve never seen a place like this in all my life!’

Bevis rode towards Damascus and when he came to the bridge, he hurried his pony across. The bells rang loudly beneath him and within the city the king heard the noise.

‘What’s all this?’ he asked. ‘Who’s making the bridge shake so much?’ and he made his way quickly to the bridge, to see who was crossing.

Bevis rode up to the castle gate and found King Bradmond waiting for him. When he saw the king standing there with his crown on his head, Bevis got off his palfrey, went down onto one knee and, with his hands outstretched, offered his own death to the king.

‘May Jesus, who made the world, give you his blessing, King Bradmond,’ said Bevis. ‘King Ermine sends you his greetings and his complements, and gives you this letter written on parchment.’

King Bradmond read the letter and swore by his god that he had never been more pleased.

‘You are the one who killed fifteen thousand of my men in one day,’ he said. ‘You made me swear an oath that I would never again bear arms against your lord for as long as he lived, which was a gross injustice. Now go into the hall and eat and drink as much as you

want. I warn you, it will be your last meal. Prepare yourself for a rough time ahead.'

The Saracens led Bevis into the hall and gave him a place at the seat of one of the knights. Then they served him as they should a messenger, with as much food and drink as he wanted.

Suddenly, Bradmond took hold of Bevis, held tightly onto his arm so that he couldn't draw his sword and yelled out to all those who were standing nearby: 'For the love of me, get this man onto the ground, quickly!'

Everybody crowded around Bevis like bees around a hive, and they quickly wrestled him to the ground.



'You humiliated me in battle,' said Bradmond, 'and I would be quite pleased to see you hanged, or perhaps, better still, to suffer a more lingering death; like the one that a man in prison has to endure, deep under the earth, twenty yards down, where disease will torment you and you'll have to live every day on a cupful of brown porridge, and if you want to drink anything else, there'll be water equally as putrid in the puddles at your feet.'

Bradmond led Bevis to a great stone that weighed over four hundredweight, he had him shackled to it and then carried into his dungeon, twenty paces below the ground. At the doorway into this prison Bevis found the handle of a spear and he grabbed it with his hand as he passed, so that he could defend himself against snakes with it.

Now Bevis is beneath the ground. May God bring him out safely!

Meanwhile, back in Armenia, Josian went to her father and asked: 'Sir, where is Bevis, I haven't seen him for a while?'

'Daughter, he has gone back to his own country to live. He has estates and a wife of great nobility, the daughter of the King of England, I believe.'

Josian was overcome with grief. She ran to her chamber, wept copious tears and pulled at her hair, and soon convinced herself that some kind of treason was afoot. 'He would have said something,' she thought. 'When he last spoke to me he didn't give any indication that he was leaving. He didn't say goodbye. He's been tricked! That noble knight has been betrayed!'

But now we must turn to speak of a man called King Ivor. He was a ruler of great wealth. When he went into battle, fifteen kings were under his command, and he has arrived to seek Josian's hand in marriage. He quickly sought out her father, they agreed to a betrothal and, as Josian was his heir, King Ermine agreed also that his lands should pass to King Ivor when he died.

'Alas,' Josian sighed. 'There is nothing I can do. I have to do as my father wishes. But I would rather marry Sir Bevis, that noble knight of Southampton, than have all the wealth and power in the whole world. I love him so very much and I know that he has been betrayed. He is so good. I have a ring, and the stone in it has this virtue: that, all the while that I wear it, although I may be married to King Ivor and lie in bed with him, even when I'm lying naked beside him he won't have any sexual desire for me. By God who sits in judgement over us all, I shall wear this ring always! I shall wear it for Bevis's sake.'

When the time came for the wedding, King Ivor sent messengers to Babylon to the sultan there and to the fifteen kings who owed him allegiance, and asked them all to come to his marriage feast. I won't describe the feast itself, I want to get on with the story.

When the wedding feast was over, the kings all departed. Men yoked carts and pack-horses and a very unhappy Josian made ready to set off with her new husband.

King Ermine had the horse Arundel decked out with a magnificent saddle and bridle and went to Bevis's chamber to fetch the sword Morglay. Then he led Arundel to King Ivor, intending to give the horse to him as a present.

'Sir,' said King Ermine, 'have this steed, it's the best warhorse in the whole world, I believe. And take this sword of burnished steel as well: it belonged to Sir Bevis and I know for a fact that he wouldn't have swapped it for the whole of Arabia.'

'And neither would I,' replied King Ivor. 'Not for all the treasure that you could cram into your city.'

'Son-in-law,' said King Ermine, 'may it serve you well.'

King Ivor set off, with his new wife and with Arundel, for Mombrant, his principal city. When he neared it, he decided to lead his new wife into the city on horseback, like a warrior, so he mounted Arundel; but the horse was intelligent and knew that it was not Bevis riding him.

This doesn't bode well for King Ivor! Arundel galloped over ditches and thorn bushes, over fields and through valleys, and nothing that King Ivor could do to try to stop him had any effect at all. His people were hard pressed to save their king from being killed, and with no small measure of ingenuity and luck they only just managed to save him.

They kept Arundel tethered in iron chains for seven years with no food at all, no hay nor corn nor any water, except for what could be lowered down through a hole in the ceiling.

So now Josian is a queen, and Bevis lies in sorrow and discomfort. The book says that he sat in his dungeon until his hair grew to his feet. Snakes and adders slithered around him – how many, I wouldn't like to say, but the dungeon was full of them. They bit him with their venomous fangs and threatened his life; but through the grace of God Almighty, he was able to use the spear handle that he had managed to bring in with him to ward

them off, and to kill many of them, so the book says.

There was one particular snake living in a hole, and one day it made a lunge at Bevis's head. Bevis was ready with his truncheon and managed to bat it to the ground, but another one bit off his right eyebrow as he was doing this. Bevis flew into a rage and struck the other adder on the head so hard that its brains remained sticking to the truncheon as its body fell dead to the ground, but not before it had given him a nasty wound on the face.

By the time he had managed to kill all these snakes, Bevis had lain incarcerated in this dungeon for seven years, in great pain and discomfort. He drank little, ate even less and his wound was healing badly; it was infected, had begun to stink and was disfiguring his looks, as will be clearly seen when Josian fails to recognise him when they meet again.

One day Bevis felt so exhausted that he cried out to Jesus Christ, and to Mary his mother: 'Lord, King of Heaven, you bring relief to all things,' he cried despairingly. 'Why, then, am I being punished like this? You could help me if you wanted to. Why do you allow these wicked fiends – your own enemies! – to grieve your servant so? Please lord, for pity's sake, have mercy on me and let me escape from this place, or else allow me to die; hanged or pulled apart, I don't care.'

The jailors who were supposed to be looking after Bevis heard this desperate outburst and one of them said: 'If it's death you want, be my guest!' and lowered a lamp down on a cord, then fastened a sword to his belt and lowered himself down on a rope. When his feet settled on the floor of the damp dungeon he struck Sir Bevis with his hand so hard that Bevis was knocked to the ground.

Bevis was incensed at this outrage and punched the man with his fist so hard that the man's neck snapped in two. The jailor above heard the commotion and shouted down: 'Hurry up, my friend, don't waste time! Do you need any help? I'll come down if you want?'

'Yes,' Bevis shouted back, and cleverly cut the rope at the highest point that he could reach with the sword.

Immediately, the other jailor began to descend the rope. When the rope gave out on him and he could hold on to it no longer, Bevis set the handle of the sword on the floor of the dungeon, point upwards, and the man was impaled upon it as he fell to the ground.

Both jailors lay there dead. But Bevis was still bound up in chains. All the while that he had been in prison he'd had a cupful of barley mush for his midday meal and his dinner, but now both his warders were dead. He went for three days without any food, and without any water either, and reached the point where he knew that he must die.

Bevis prayed desperately to Jesus Christ for help; and his help came very quickly! The chains began to snap, and the one around his waist securing him to the great stone broke apart and fell in pieces to the ground. Bevis thanked Jesus Christ and made his escape

up the rope that the jailors had left hanging there.

Bevis soon made his way into the castle proper and found that it was the middle of the night. The place was deserted. No one was there. But he could see a light coming from a chamber beneath a small watch-tower; it seemed that the room was illuminated by torchlight. Bevis made his way there and found twelve knights, who were supposed to be guarding the castle, lying fast asleep. The chamber door was unlocked and Bevis crept in. He armed himself with a sword and a spear, hung a shield about his neck and made his way softly out again. Then he went to the stables, where some young grooms were messing about, chatting and joking together. Bevis burst in, and before they could think about crying out for help or sounding the alarm, he quickly killed them.

Bevis chose the best horse that he could find, saddled it at once and leapt upon its back. When he reached the gates he called out to the porter, in a loud voice: 'Awaken, you proud fellow! Are you asleep? You should be hanged and pulled apart limb from limb for it! Unlock these gates at once! Bevis has escaped from prison. I've been sent to recapture him.'

The porter was dismayed: 'Alas!' he cried, and threw open the gates as quickly as he could. Bevis rode out at once and galloped away. But he hadn't gone seven miles before he began to feel so tired that he felt that he couldn't go any further, even if his life depended on it, so he tied the reins of his horse to a chestnut tree and lay down to sleep.

As Bevis slept, he dreamed that King Bradmond and seven of his knights stood over him with their swords drawn and were about to kill him where he lay. He woke with a start, leapt upon his horse and galloped off before waking up fully; and like a bewildered man who has lost all sense of direction, he didn't realise that he was now riding back towards Damascus.



But let's pause for a moment and return to King Bradmond. Morning has arrived and Bevis's escape has been discovered. King Bradmond is beside himself with grief and anger. And it so happened that a parliament was due to be convened that morning; earls and barons were all in the city, as well as fifteen kings, and in front of all this royalty and nobility, King Bradmond was able quickly to explain how Bevis had escaped from his prison and was now on the run, and that he required the help of them all to recapture him.

There was a very strong and formidable king there whose name was Grandinere, and he had a very fine horse called Trenchefis; he hadn't been able to purchase this horse until he had found its own weight in silver to pay for it! He donned some fine armour and led a contingent of seven knights, with himself in front on Trenchefis, hoping to win a little honour, and it was not long before he saw Bevis riding back towards the city.

‘Surrender to me, you filthy little fox cub!’ he cried. ‘Your god will be no help to you now! I’m going to kill you myself!’

‘There’ll be no honour in killing me,’ replied Bevis. ‘I haven’t eaten or drunk anything for over three days. But nonetheless – since needs must – let’s exchange a stroke or two and see what happens.’

With fierce resolution, King Grandinere galloped at Bevis and Bevis at him. They clashed together and both their spears shattered into five pieces. The ground shook from the force of these blows, and then fire flew from their swords as though from flint. They battled away like this from midmorning until early afternoon. King Grandinere was sorely annoyed that Bevis should last so long against him and delivered such a fierce blow with his sword that a quarter of Bevis’s shield flew away. The blade continued downwards past chainmail, breastplate and leather and cut half a foot into the front of Bevis’s saddle. When Bevis saw how powerful this stroke had been:

‘That was a fine blow,’ he taunted, ‘but here’s a better one!’ and he smashed away King Grandinere’s shield with his sword, severing the king’s left hand at the wrist as he did so.

Grandinere has lost his hand! But he carried on fighting insanely and gave such vicious strokes with his sword that no other knight would have been able to withstand them. Bevis found himself getting very angry indeed, and at last, with a single blow, he cut off King Grandinere’s head.

The dead body fell over the saddle and onto the ground.

Bevis made short work of the seven heathen knights who were accompanying King Grandinere; he killed them all, the book says. And he had no intention of leaving behind the best horse he could lay his hands on either: he mounted Trenchefis and galloped off.

King Bradmond soon arrived with a host of followers and they all gave pursuit, certain that they would be able to catch up with Bevis very quickly. They chased and chased until they had Bevis trapped on the seashore. Now listen to a marvellous thing, for Bevis had two choices: either to plunge into the sea or turn and face his enemies. He asked Jesus Christ for help, and it was granted at once.

‘Lord,’ he said, ‘you are the King of Heaven and the maker of all things, you made fish as well as mankind and fish can do no sin, but these heathen dogs tied you up and beat you and had you killed, and now I may just as easily go into the water with the fishes, who have never committed any sin, than stay here on dry land and suffer death at the hands of the ungodly.’

Bevis spurred his horse and leapt into the deep sea.

Once in the water, Bevis and Trenchefis made good progress through the waves. In the space of a day and a night, the horse carried Bevis across. When at last they had crossed that great stream, the horse stumbled ashore and shook itself, and Bevis fell to

the ground, overcome by exhaustion and hunger.

‘Alas!’ he exclaimed when he’d recovered his senses. ‘I was once heir to an earldom, I’ve got this fine warhorse, but even if I had Arundel here with me as well, I’d give it all away at once, now, for a slice of bread!’

Bevis was so hungry that he didn’t know what to do. But he leapt back onto Trenchefis and they rode over dale and down until they came to a settlement. There was a castle nearby and in a turret Bevis could see a fair lady. He thought there might be a chance of getting some food here – but he’ll have to pay a high price for it!

Bevis made his way to the castle and asked for a meal. ‘Madam,’ he said, ‘for the love of God, will you give me something to eat?’

‘I’d get away from these gates if I were you,’ the lady replied. ‘You’d be better off anywhere but here. Go away, before you get a mouthful of something you don’t expect. My lord is a giant who believes in Termagaunt and he hates all Christian men. He regards them all as lower than dogs.’

‘However angry this giant may become, I intend to get some food,’ replied Bevis. ‘With goodwill if possible, but if not, by force, I’m not joking.’

The lady was not pleased. She went down to the hall and explained to her lord how a Christian knight had just sworn: ‘that he won’t go away until he’s been given some food and drink.’

The giant was incredibly strong and over twenty feet tall. He picked up a large stick, walked over to the gates and had a good look at Bevis. He recognised the horse. ‘You’ve been stolen,’ he said to the animal.

‘Where did you steal this horse?’ he asked Bevis. ‘You’re riding Trenchefis. He belongs to my brother, Sir Grandinere.’

‘I gave Grandinere a tonsure with the edge of my sword, a crown of red blood,’ said Bevis. ‘It was such a good cut that it took his entire head off. I’ll make you his deacon if you like.’

‘My dear little man,’ replied the giant, ‘I’m not going to allow you to live any longer.’

‘Nor I you!’ shouted Bevis.

They approached one another in livid acrimony. The stick that the giant was carrying was twenty feet long and very stout and heavy. He swung it at Bevis with all his strength and without any mercy, but failed in his aim and knocked Trenchefis on the head instead. The horse fell dead onto the ground.

‘My horse has done nothing to deserve that!’ cried Bevis. ‘Why do that to him? I’ll tell you this: if I get half a chance, I’m going to aim a similar blow at you.’

Bevis whipped out his sword and a fierce fight began; massive strokes were exchanged,



many more than I can describe. But then the giant raised his huge staff and struck so hard that Bevis's shield flew across three acres of ground. In retaliation, Bevis cut the giant's staff in two and one of the pieces spun into the giant's chest, causing him to fall heavily to the ground. It was all getting too much for the giant; he was out of breath, his face was becoming quite flushed, but he raised himself to his feet again and smashed what remained of his staff down onto Bevis's shoulder. The wound that this caused bled profusely and when Bevis saw that he was treading in a pool of his own blood he redoubled his efforts and ran at his assailant, cutting the giant's neck bone in two. The giant fell again to the ground, this time for good.

Bevis went in at the castle gate and met the lady.

'Madam, give me some food, and may you go to heaven for it.'

The lady was very frightened, but she led Bevis into the hall. But Bevis made her eat a little of everything first, just in case it was poisoned, and to taste the wine – which happened to be very good – in case that was as well.

When Bevis had eaten his fill, he snatched a piece of cloth from her wimple and used it to staunch the bleeding on his shoulder.

'Madam,' he said, 'please have a horse saddled for me, I will depart at once. I'm not going to stay in this castle any longer.'

The lady said she would be happy to do this and had a good horse brought for him from the stables, saddled and well turned out. Like the fine and noble knight that he was, Bevis leapt onto it without any need of the stirrups.

Bevis rode onwards through lush meadows, thinking of King Bradmond and sweet revenge. He followed the river Jordan until he came to Jerusalem and went at once to see the Patriarch, to be absolved of a lifetime of sins. He told the Patriarch everything that had happened to him throughout his life, all his sorrows and all his joys, and how he had lost the woman he most wanted to marry. The Patriarch admired his honesty and had compassion for him, and arranged for physicians to treat his wound, which they did expertly, so that he made a full recovery. And the Patriarch forbade Bevis, upon his life, to marry any woman who was not still a virgin.

'Of course I won't!' Bevis replied.

When his wound was healed, Bevis took his leave from the Patriarch, and as he was riding alone, early the next morning: 'Lord,' he thought to himself, 'what am I going to do now? If I go to England – no, there isn't any point in that, unless I have an army to help me to kill my stepfather. Then he thought that it might be a good idea, instead, to go back to Armenia, to the sweet and beautiful Josian.

As he was journeying onwards, mulling over all this in his mind, he met with a heathen knight and they travelled together. And as they were riding along, towards Armenia, they realised that they knew each other, they had once been friends; they dismounted

and hugged one another, and kissed in greeting. Then, as they continued their journey, they told each other what had happened to them.

‘I haven’t got on too badly,’ said Bevis with a laugh. ‘Except that I’ve suffered hunger and cold and many other afflictions as well, and all because of King Ermine’s scheming. Yet I hope to pay him back for his deception. He sent me to King Bradmond with a letter that was my death warrant, but thanks to God, here I am! Bradmond cast me into his prison and for seven years I suffered pain and hunger in his deepest dungeon. But God released me from that torment and I was able to escape, through God’s grace and through my own ingenuity. King Ermine has been the cause of all my sorrows, though, and if Josian wasn’t his daughter, I would happily see him dead!’

‘Josian is married,’ said the knight. ‘Against her will, she had to be dragged to the altar, but that was seven years ago, a little more than that now. She is married to the wealthy King Ivor of Mombrant and taken to share his table and his bed. He has your sword, Morglay, and he was given Arundel as well, that excellent horse of yours.

‘I’ve never laughed so much in all my life, I have to tell you, as when I saw King Ivor ride Arundel,’ he said. ‘Your horse wasn’t at all pleased to find the king sitting on his back. He galloped off with him clinging on for dear life! I’m telling you the truth. In the end he bucked him off into a bog. When they fished him out, the king was nearly dead. They’d cornered the horse just in time, I think. They scoured the country for the strongest ropes and ever since then Arundel has remained tied up in his stable. No one has dared to ride him again.’

Bevis was glad to hear this. ‘If Josian was as loyal to me as Arundel,’ he thought, ‘I would be relieved of all my sorrows.’

‘Where is Mombrant?’ he asked.

‘Sir, by Termagaunt, it’s to the north of us.’ Bevis turned his horse and made his way quickly northwards.

Mombrant was at this time the richest city in the whole of the Saracen lands. There was no city to compare with it, not by a long chalk. When Bevis was approaching it, he met a pilgrim, a palmer, and he greeted him courteously.

‘Palmer, where is the king?’

‘Sir, he has gone hunting, with fifteen other kings.’

‘Where is the queen?’

‘Sir, in her tower I imagine.’

‘Palmer, for your love, will you exchange all your clothes for mine, and have my horse



as well?’

‘My God! Absolutely! What a bargain!’

Sir Bevis got down from his horse, dressed the palmer as a knight and gave him the horse that he was riding, in exchange for the man’s scruffy satchel, his ragged clothes and his tatty hat. Bevis was delighted to have that! The palmer rode off like a king and Bevis walked away like a beggar.

Bevis arrived at the castle gate and found poor men there and many palmers, the majority of whom were from distant lands. Bevis asked them what they were all doing there.

‘We’ve come to receive alms,’ said a man who was standing by the gates. ‘Aren’t you here for the same thing?’

‘Who’s distributing them?’ asked Bevis.

‘The queen is, God bless her! She loves all palmers. Every day, throughout the entire year, she feeds every palmer that she finds standing here, and gives out clothes as well.’

‘When does this take place? What time of day?’

‘In the afternoon.’

Bevis could see that it was still morning, so he decided to have a look around the town before the alms were distributed, to see if he could find some way that he might be able to break into the castle. As he passed a turret, he heard a woman weeping. He drew as near to the sound as he could. It was Queen Josian, and as always, I believe, she was lamenting her fate:

‘Alas! Alas! Sir Bevis, that gentle knight of Southampton; alas that I have seen this day. I, Josian, that fair maiden, am wedded and full of sorrow, and all for Sir Bevis’s sake.’ Then she gathered herself and prepared to make her way to the gates, to distribute alms to all the palmers.

Bevis returned to the gates, and when they were opened, the palmers all rushed up to be the first to go through. Bevis was left at the back. Josian saw him there, but she didn’t recognise him. ‘You seem honourable,’ she said to him when at last she reached him, ‘and you shall be first to the table, for you appear to be noble and courteous.’

Bevis was given all the food and drink that he wanted, washed down with some excellent wine. All the beggars ate like kings, and afterwards the queen said to them: ‘Gentlemen, have you heard, in any land where knights are to be found, any of you, in village or town, field or city, any word of a knight called Bevis of Southampton? I will make anyone who can tell me where he is a rich man.’

‘We’re afraid not,’ they all said. ‘We’ve never heard of him. What about you, stranger?’ they said, turning to Bevis.

‘I know him,’ replied Bevis, with a laugh. ‘At home, in his own country, I am an earl, and

so is he. We are great friends. He used to make a great fuss about a horse of his named Arundel. I've scoured the world looking for this horse and it has cost me a fortune. Men have told me that he is here. If you love Bevis, then let me see this horse.'

Because this man knew Sir Bevis, Josian was delighted to make his acquaintance. Without any delay, she led him to the stables, and when she looked closely into his face and saw that his brow was so scarred, she called out to Boniface and then blushed, and said: 'If his brow wasn't so torn, by the mother who bore me, I might have sworn that this man was Bevis himself!'

At the sound of his master's voice and the mention of his name, Arundel pulled so hard at the seven chains which held him that he broke free of his confinement and went galloping into the castle, neighing and prancing with delight, and making a terrible din.

'Alas! Alas!' called Josian. 'This horse will kill someone! He'll wreak havoc before he can be caught again.'

'Madam, he won't harm anybody,' Bevis assured her with a laugh. 'I'll fetch him easily enough, if you'll allow me. He won't attack anyone, I promise.'

'Go after him, then,' said the lady, 'and lead him back to the stables. Tie him up where he was and I'll reward you for it.'

When Arundel saw Bevis, he immediately bowed his head before him and put his muzzle against his shins. Bevis leapt up onto his back. Instantly, Josian found herself in no doubt as to who this palmer was.

'Oh Bevis, my darling!' she exclaimed. 'Do you remember that you were going to marry me if I rejected all my false gods? Now you have Arundel. I can give you Morglay as well, if you like. Take me back with you quickly, to your own country! Take me away with you!'

'If we made love together now,' replied Bevis very sternly, 'it would be a grievous sin. I have suffered much already and the Patriarch of Jerusalem has forbidden me to marry any woman unless she is a clean virgin, upon pain of my life, and you have been a queen for seven years and have lain beside a king every night. How could you still be a virgin?'

Josian's heart froze within her. She suddenly felt weak and very tearful. 'Oh mercy, my sweet, no!' she cried, fearfully. 'Take me home with you, and unless you find me to be still a virgin, then send me away at once, clothed only in a linen smock!'

'If you want to come away with me,' replied Bevis, 'then go quickly and make yourself ready!'

'Sir,' interrupted Sir Boniface, 'should you wish to take my advice, and if I may be so bold, the king will be returning from hunting very soon, accompanied by many wealthy kings – fifteen in all, I believe – and a great number of earls and dukes, armed and on

horseback, and if he finds us all gone when he returns, he will be ready to pursue us at once. I don't give much for our chances in that case. So can I suggest that you first lead Arundel back to the stable, then go and wait by the gates until the king returns. He will ask you where you are going and where you have been: tell him that you have travelled widely, and that when you were passing through Diabilent, which is three days journey from here, say that men there were plotting to kill the king, who is in great need of help. The king there is King Ivor's brother. When he hears this, he'll ride there as fast as he can with all the other kings and noblemen, and then we can make our escape with a much better chance of success.'

'This is a fine idea!' declared Bevis.

Bevis led Arundel back to his stable. Then he went to the castle gates and stood there amongst the poor men, staff and satchel by his side, wearing a rough, baggy coat with his beard hanging down to his chest – as handsome a man as anyone might wish to play host to! No finer-looking man had ever appeared in that country, that's for sure! Bevis was a source of great marvel to everybody. He stood there until King Ivor returned from his hunting expedition with fifteen kings alongside him, as well as many dukes, earls and barons – I couldn't tell you their names – but they all wondered at Bevis when they saw him, and the king had Bevis summoned to him.

'Palmer, I can see that you have travelled far,' the king said. 'Tell me, which countries are at peace, and which are at war? Speak to me freely, for I want to hear the truth.'

'Sir, I have come from Jerusalem,' replied Bevis, 'and I've been to Nazareth and Bethlehem, Emmaus Castle and Mount Sinai, India, Arabia and Asia. I've also been to Egypt, Greece and Babylon, Sicily, Saxony and Tarshish. I've visited Friesland, Tyre and Sidon, I've been to Africa and many empires there, and all is peaceful in every one of these places, except for the land of Diabilent. There is no peace to be found there at all, nothing but conflict and strife, sorrow and anxiety. The king of that land is probably already dead; his cities have been captured and his towns burnt to the ground. Three kings and five dukes had driven his knights into full retreat and cornered him in a castle by the sea when I left. They'd completely surrounded him. His position seemed hopeless.'

'Alas!' cried King Ivor. 'Gentlemen, this is disastrous! Everybody, gather arms, mount your finest warhorses, we must go to help him at once!'

King Ivor and the other fifteen kings set off, leaving behind only an aged king, whose name was Garcy, to stay and look after the queen.

'Now, let's go!' cried Bevis to Josian and Boniface.

'Sir, if you will take my advice,' said Sir Boniface, 'this old king, Garcy, knows a lot about the magic arts. He can look into his gold ring and see everything that's going on. How can we stop him? I know of a herb that grows in the forest, and I can send someone off to find it. If we infuse this herb in some wine, then anyone who drinks it will feel so tired that they'll find out what it feels like to sleep for a week! If we give it to Garcy, he will

sleep for at least a day and a night without waking.’

Sir Boniface had this herb fetched and everything was done as he suggested. Very early the next morning, as dawn was breaking, Josian, Boniface and Bevis took enough money to keep them going, in the way of silver and gold and other valuables as well, and quickly set off.

When they were gone, Garcy slept all that day and all the next night, and woke up again the following morning. He was astonished when he learnt that he’d slept for so long. He reached for his ring, to check up on things, and saw within it at once that Queen Josian was fleeing with the palmer.

‘To arms, everybody, to arms!’ he shouted.

When his knights knew that the queen had got away, they armed themselves and set off at a gallop, followed by those on foot, and soon the whole country was looking for the fugitives. They were quickly tracked down and located.

‘I’ll do battle with Garcy,’ said Bevis to Boniface, ‘and I’ll see what I can do against his knights. With God’s will, I’ll defeat them all.’

‘Sir, if you’ll listen to my advice,’ said Sir Boniface, ‘I know this country well and I can take you to a cave nearby that is easily defended, rather than putting yourself in such danger; a shepherd armed only with a stick would be able to keep himself safe in there. And it is very hidden and secluded.’

Under cover of darkness, Boniface took them to this cave. King Garcy and his forces hunted everywhere the next day, but couldn’t find them, much to his great annoyance, so he abandoned the search and went home. No matter, he thought: he would send Ascopart to destroy them.

Bevis, Josian and Boniface spent another night hiding in the cave. They had no food or water. It had been two days since they had eaten anything or had anything at all to drink. Josian was in a bad way. She told Bevis how hungry and thirsty she was.

‘It’s no use telling me,’ he replied, tetchily. ‘You know I have nothing to give you.’

Josian answered mildly: ‘I have heard, when young men camp out in the forest, that they kill a deer or some other animal and then skin it and boil the meat in the skin. This is what men do when they live out in the wilderness. Sir, you will easily be able to kill a deer, and I can make a good sauce...’

‘Look after Josian while I go hunting in the forest,’ Bevis told Boniface.

Bevis went out into the woodland, to see what he could catch. As soon as he was out of sight, two lions approached the cave. Sir Boniface instantly ran to his horse, armed himself and mounted, then turned to face these lions, which were now snarling and standing rampant with their claws extended. In a very short while one of the lions had killed his horse and the other had killed and eaten Boniface.

Josian retreated quickly into one of the caves; the two lions followed her and sat at her feet, snarling ferociously but unable to do her any harm, for as everybody knows, a king's daughter who is also a virgin cannot be injured by these beasts – this is the nature of lions.

Bevis soon returned from hunting, with three deer. The first thing he saw was the carcass of a horse gnawed to the bone, and no sign of Josian. He was almost overcome with trepidation as he ran from cave to cave, looking for her. Suddenly, he came upon her, sitting in terror behind two lions.

'Sir, please help me to fend these two lions away,' she said. 'They've killed Boniface.'

She said that she would hold onto one of them while Bevis killed the other, and she grabbed one of them by the neck.

'Madam, in all honesty, I'll receive little honour for killing a lion while a woman is holding onto the other one for me!' exclaimed Bevis.

So Josian let go of the lion she was holding and Bevis attacked the other. And no fiercer fight has ever been described before, in any romance. May the souls of all who listen to this go straight to heaven! One of the beasts was a lioness, and she soon had Bevis in great distress: she leapt at him and began biting at his hands before he was ready for her, while the other lion, the one that Josian had been holding onto, ran at Bevis with great agility and leapt on him so hard that he stripped away his armour and made a large gash in his thigh with his claws. Bevis was livid with anger and shame and began to fight even harder. The lioness ran at him again; they both attacked at once and Bevis found himself in a maelstrom of savagery! His shield was scarcely up to the job of fending them off!

Bevis managed to draw his sword Morglay and swung it at one of the lions, cutting off a hind paw; but the creature darted under his shield and bit a chunk out of Bevis's groin. Bevis fell to one knee, but rose again and stabbed the lion through the liver and heart, then swung Morglay down through the top of the lion's head, cutting it in two, and stabbed it through the heart again. The lion fell dead.

Fiercely and savagely, the other lion, the lioness, attacked Sir Bevis. She grabbed his shield in her mouth so ferociously, as the book describes, that it was wrenched out of his hand.

When Josian saw the lioness attacking Bevis, and realising how close he was to being killed, she got up and seized the lioness in her hands. But Bevis told her to sit down again. He ordered her to! He swore by the Holy Trinity that unless she let the lioness go at once, he would kill her as eagerly as he would the lioness!

When Josian understood what was at stake, she picked up Bevis's shield and gave it to him, then sat down. The lioness attacked Bevis at once, caught his right leg in her jaws, just as a wolf does a sheep, and tore at his calf muscle. Bevis was beyond anger, but in this moment, through the grace and generosity of God, he found himself able to strike

a blow so hard with Morglay that the sword came down squarely upon the lioness's back and cut right down through her, into the ground.

Josian was overjoyed that both lions had been killed. Bevis's joy cannot be described as he thanked God for his victory. He was very upset about Boniface, though. But since there was nothing they could do about it, he set Josian on her mule and they set off without delay.

On a hill they met a giant. He was not a pretty sight: the hairs of his beard were like a pig's bristles, his mouth gaped like a grinning lunatic, his eyebrows were a span in length, set two feet apart and he carried an enormous club made from the entire trunk of an oak tree. Bevis was astonished. He asked him his name and whether everybody else in that country was as big as he was.

'My name,' replied the giant, 'is Ascopart. 'Garcy has sent me here to bring the queen back to him and to kill you. As to my fellows: I was driven out of my town because I was so small. Everybody would hit me and call me a dwarf. But now that I'm in this land, I'm stronger than you and ten others put together, I believe, and I shall demonstrate this to you right now.'

'Oh no you won't, so God help me,' replied Bevis.

Bevis spurred his horse, galloped at Ascopart and broke his lance against the giant's shield. Ascopart raised his club and heaved it down with immense force, but his foot slipped as he did so and he fell to the ground with a thud. Bevis got down from his horse, drew his sword and Josian could see that Bevis was preparing to cut off the giant's head. She cried out:

'Sir! So God save me, but let him live! He can be our servant.'

'Madam, he will betray us,' replied Bevis.

'I guarantee that he won't,' she said.

Ascopart knelt at Sir Bevis's feet.

Onwards they went, all three of them, until they came to the sea. A sailing ship was moored there, full of Saracens who were intending to sail towards heathen lands, but they had no master mariner on board.

Ascopart was known to be a skilful sailor, so they invited him aboard. He took his club in his hand and injured them all so severely that he drove them off the vessel. Then he carried Arundel aboard under his arm, and shortly afterwards brought Josian and her mule aboard. They quickly raised the sails and had a fair and pleasant voyage until they came, through God's grace, into the city of Cologne. Bevis was told that the bishop there was his uncle, a wise man whose name was Saber Florentyne. Sir Bevis went to see the bishop at once and explained who he was. The bishop was delighted at his arrival.

'Welcome my dear nephew!' he said. 'I've never been happier in all my life. I thought



you were dead! But tell me – who is this lovely lady?’

‘Sir, she is the queen of a heathen land. But she is willing, for my sake, to convert to Christianity.’

‘And who is this tall man with a huge face?’

‘Sir, he is my servant. You must christen him as well, straight away if you would.’

Soon afterwards, the bishop christened Josian.

Ascopart prepared for his baptism and the bishop made ready to shove him into the water, but Ascopart suddenly became fearful and slipped out of the bishop’s grasp back onto the bench.

‘Are you going to drown me, shepherd?’ he cried. ‘May the devil of hell send you pain! I’m too big to become a Christian!’

The giant was very angry. They all laughed and thought it a great joke.

So Josian has renounced all her false gods. But Bevis now has a great battle to take on, with a dragon, a battle greater than any Christian man has ever undertaken before; with the exception of Sir Lancelot, who fought a fire-drake, and Wade of course, but only these two – Oh, and Sir Guy, who killed a dragon in Northumberland. But Bevis will have to take on a battle involving a dragon too, one that lives nearby.

Let me tell you how this dragon came to be there. There was a king in Calabria, in southern Italy, and one nearby in Apulia, and they fought together for more than forty-five years without stopping and they would accept no terms of peace. Everyone was terrified and the land was destroyed by them, everywhere. They had many men’s bodies, which exacerbated their evil and they therefore died in deadly sin and went straight to hell, and afterwards they became vile dragons. They fought on as dragons for more than twenty-four years and did great harm everywhere. But there was a man in that land who was full of God’s grace and he prayed to Christ that, for the love of his mother Mary, and through his providence, he might rid the country of these two dragons. And I can tell you, these dragons weren’t able to stay there any longer, but they flew into another land to wreak havoc there instead; they destroyed lands from Tuscany into Lombardy and did great harm in these places.

Then one of the dragons flew to the court of Rome and hid beneath Saint Peter’s bridge; and there he lies, I tell you. Within that city, truly, whenever that cursed beast raises his bones, then the country is terrified of being torn to pieces by him.

The other dragon flew to Cologne and lay under a hill beside that city. No one had since dared to leave its walls, for fear of this dragon. And when Sir Bevis arrived at that place, through the grace of the Son of God, on that first night he was taken to bed by the light of many torches, since darkness had fallen, and was awoken by the sound of a mournful groaning within the city:

'Jesus Christ, have pity and mercy!' the voice cried. 'I am rotting, bone from bone. Jesus Christ, what shall I do?'

Bevis was very upset by it and had great pity, and in the morning he asked whose voice he had heard during the night. He was told that it was a valiant knight who had been very successful in battle, but he had met with this dragon and been poisoned by it. He was desperately ill, his flesh was swollen, his bones were rotting and he looked to be very close to death.

'Jesus Christ!' exclaimed Sir Bevis. 'Can no one kill this creature?'

'No,' came the reply. 'If every warrior in Christendom came to fight this dragon, he would kill them all.'

'Ascopart, where are you?' shouted Bevis. 'Shall we go to meet this dragon?'

'Absolutely!' cried the giant. 'We shall go boldly, and by the grace of God we'll slay this beast.'

Bevis rode to where the dragon was, with Ascopart by his side. 'Can you hear what I hear?' asked the giant, suddenly.

'Yes,' Bevis replied. 'The dragon must be lying close by somewhere. We'll make our way towards him and with the grace of God, we'll kill him.'

'Not likely!' exclaimed the giant. 'That noise terrifies me!'

'I thought you were braver than this,' replied Bevis. 'You haven't seen him yet.'

'I don't want to see him, or hear him. He sounds like the devil of hell!'

'Well, I'm going to take a good look before I go,' said Bevis. He spurred his horse and was soon in very close proximity to the dragon. When the dragon caught sight of Bevis, he began to roar and cry out so loudly that the sound was heard in hell itself. Then he emerged into plain view. His body was as large as the biggest barrel imaginable. His wings were as bright as glass, his head as hard as metal and he measured forty feet from shoulder to tail. The dragon came out of his den and Bevis at once spurred his horse into a gallop and levelled his lance. It shattered into pieces on impact, but the dragon didn't flinch, his hide was as hard as flint. He swung his tail and hit Sir Bevis, knocking his horse to the ground and breaking Bevis's ribs. But Bevis managed to get back onto his feet. He drew Morglay and began to attack the dragon with it, but however hard he hit the beast the edge of the sword wouldn't bite. The dragon remained uninjured and began to threaten Bevis more and more, until at last he came lunging right up to him and Bevis was forced to retreat; but there was nowhere for him to go.

Nearby however, through the grace of God, was a spring of pure water; Bevis had no idea that it was there until he staggered backwards and fell into it unexpectedly. As he fell, his foreboding was immense, for he imagined that the dragon would now be able to kill him easily. But this well was possessed of great virtue: a virgin had once lived a very holy life

in that land and she had been accustomed to bathing in this spring, and because of this, through the might of Jesus Christ, the dragon had no power to approach this water; not by as much as forty feet, in all honesty; it couldn't get any closer to it than this.

When Sir Bevis saw that the dragon was unable to approach, he unlaced his helmet, took it off and drank his fill of water. Then he leapt back out again with his sword drawn and began attacking the dragon once more. The dragon at last started to be hurt by Bevis's strokes and began to feel threatened by them. Suddenly, he vomited out of his mouth a gallon or more of venom that landed squarely on his assailant.

Bevis's armour began to fall apart at once. He fell to the ground and lay there lifeless, as though he was dead. Just to make sure that he was, the dragon clubbed him with his tail, but Bevis didn't stir. He lay like a man who had fallen fast asleep. The dragon swiped Bevis again with his tail and the force shot him across the ground and back into the spring.

Through God's providence, Bevis awoke again. He took time to recover his thoughts and looked at his body and saw that all the poison had been washed away. He felt as strong and healthy now as he did when he first came to battle. He was healed! When Bevis realised this, he was delighted, I can tell you!

Bevis laced his armour back on, his coat of chainmail, reassembled his helmet and put it on, then prayed fervently to God that he might kill this dragon. He blessed himself and emerged from the water once again. Soon he was swinging his sword valiantly and delivering some hard blows. The dragon turned away as if to flee, and Bevis delivered a sword stroke that cut off five feet or more of its tail, then he swung Morglay at the dragon's head and cut its throat in two.

Bevis stuck the head on the shaft of a spear and thanked God for granting him this victory. Then he went back to Cologne with the dragon's head and everybody greeted him with great rejoicing. He could hear bells ringing merrily and clerics and priests singing loudly.

'What's all this celebration for?' he asked.

'It's for you!' they cried. 'We thought the dragon had killed you!'

'I'd feel better with a little drink inside me,' said Bevis.

When the bishop heard that his nephew had returned, he went to greet him at the head of a grand procession, singing the Te Deum and praising God. Everybody in the town applauded Sir Bevis and blessed him for what he had done.

But it was not long before Bevis gave every indication of having weighty matters on his mind. He said to the bishop: 'Dear uncle, please advise me: what is to be done concerning my stepfather? He killed my father with his own hands and disinherited me from what is rightfully mine. It is only through villainy and gross injustice that he is my stepfather at all, and he holds my land through treason. He killed my father and I want

revenge. Tell me, sir, have you any thoughts that you could share with me about how I might best achieve this?’

‘Your uncle Saber lives on the Isle of Wight,’ replied the bishop. ‘I can tell you that every year, on a particular day, he offers battle to the Emperor of Germany, and all for your sake. He comes with a great number of noblemen every year to challenge the emperor for your inheritance, although he is quite sure that you are dead. Therefore, nephew, do as I advise: If I give you a hundred strong and valiant knights, then make your way to Carisbrooke Castle with them. Saber will do all that he can to help you.’



Sir Bevis went to see Josian. ‘Darling,’ he said, ‘I am going away to seek reprisal on my enemies and avenge my father’s murder. If I can find enough strength and ingenuity I shall regain my inheritance.’

Bevis then departed with the men that the bishop had given him. They journeyed for a long while and arrived at last on some downs that lay two miles outside Southampton.

‘Gentlemen,’ said Bevis to his men, ‘here’s my plan. I want a brave volunteer to go into Southampton to tell the Emperor of Germany that a company of soldiers, including a hundred knights, have arrived from France, and that they are ready and eager to fight for him. Tell him that my name is Gerard, that I am a mercenary, and that if he hires me he will find me to be without equal, as far as skill and courage in battle, as far as fighting goes.’

A man came forward who could speak French fluently. He went to the castle gates and the porter quickly appeared. The porter went off to find the emperor and delivered the message that Bevis’s man gave to him. The emperor was very pleased and sent the visitor back with an invitation for Sir Bevis to come and dine with him.

Bevis and the emperor sat together that night at supper; Bevis’s mother sat in front of them in a chair and seemed very pleased to give Bevis all the honour that he seemed to warrant. The emperor asked him his name.

‘Gerard,’ said Bevis at once.

‘Gerard, this lady is my wife,’ said the emperor, introducing Bevis to his own mother. ‘Her husband was an earl before I married her. They had a child between them who was a wicked and ill-mannered wretch, as arrogant and as full of himself as his father; it obviously ran in the family! His name was Bevis and as soon as he came of age he sold his inheritance to me, then squandered his wealth and fled the country. He has an uncle on the Isle of Wight, a hardy enough knight who lives on the island with all his noblemen and who challenges me continually for his nephew’s inheritance. He plots and schemes constantly to bring about my death. If you could pay him back for this treachery and

give him his just deserts by killing him in the field, I would pay you handsomely for this service.’

‘Sir,’ said Bevis, ‘I have some powerful and valiant knights, but they lack armour. It was not possible to carry it across the sea with us.’

The emperor quickly had Bevis’s men armed, every one of them; he gave them fine steeds and had ships provisioned as well.

‘Give me a hundred of your men to sail with me,’ said Bevis. ‘I’ll leave at once and I swear by Saint Mary that within a little while I’ll have concocted an ingenious little strategy that I’ll be able to tell you about later.’

Everything that the emperor had given, horses, provisions and shining armour, was stowed aboard the ships and they quickly set sail. Bevis made sure that the emperor gave him no more men than his own; there were an equal number of his own men and those loyal to the emperor and he had his own men paired with the emperor’s, so that when they were afloat in the middle of the Solent, each of his own men was able to throw an emperor’s man into the sea, so that not one of them was left on board. Then they sailed quickly onwards until they reached the Isle of Wight.

When Saber looked out of his castle and saw ships approaching, he could clearly see the shining armour and feared what it might mean.

Bevis guessed that their presence may be causing anxiety: ‘Put up a flag, in case Saber is fearful of our intentions,’ he said.

Upon the highest mast they set a pennon displaying his father’s colours and his emblem, confident that Saber would recognise it; for many times in the past, Saber had carried these colours into battle. As the ship neared shore, Saber recognised this flag and began to dare to believe that Sir Bevis might be returning. When he had a clearer view still: ‘Ah, lord!’ he exclaimed. ‘You are welcome indeed! I was afraid that you were dead!’

Sir Saber ran joyfully to the quay and he and Bevis ran up to kiss one another. They both wept with joy. When the greetings were over, Bevis told his uncle how he had deceived the emperor into giving him armour and horses.

‘Have you any man who is brave enough,’ asked Bevis, ‘to go to Southampton in a swift boat to speak to the emperor? He must tell him that the man he met and made an agreement with was no Frenchman, and that his name wasn’t Gerard either, but Bevis, the son of Guy of Southampton. He must say that his wife is my mother and that I intend to bring shame upon them both and avenge the death of my father.’

Up stood a brave knight. ‘I’ll deliver this message,’ he said.

The knight was quickly armed and given a boat and a crew. The emperor was at supper when the knight disembarked. As the emperor sat eating, the knight entered the hall and greeted him.

‘Sir emperor, I bring you some news. That knight whom you think is called Gerard, he’s not who you think he is. He is Bevis of Southampton, your wife’s son, and he is going to avenge his father’s murder and cause you as much harm and shame as he can. He intends to fight with you to reclaim his land.’

The emperor’s son was standing in front of the table and the young man impetuously seized a long knife and hurled it at the messenger with the intention of killing him on the spot. But the knight was able to dodge the missile and deliver a thrust with his sword, and the emperor’s son fell to the floor, bleeding profusely from a wound through his body. The messenger spurred his horse and cantered out of the hall.

The knight made a good voyage back to the Isle of Wight and told Bevis that he had killed the emperor’s son. Bevis had a good laugh and made a joke about it. But let us leave them for a moment and speak of the maid Josian who is still in Cologne with the giant Ascopart, waiting for Bevis to return.

There was an earl not far away in that large country who had fallen in love with Josian and who very much desired that his feelings should be reciprocated. But when he spoke kindly and affectionately to her, hoping that this might achieve the desired result, she exclaimed:

‘Stop it! It is of no use!’

This rejection made the earl very angry, that Josian should refuse to take him as her lover. ‘Who is there strong enough to stop me?’ he threatened at last. ‘Unless you love me willingly, I will have you, willing or not!’

‘Oh no you won’t!’ shouted Josian. ‘I have nothing to fear from you while I have Ascopart to protect me. You can brag and boast all you like, but I’m not afraid of you, nor of your cronies.’

Then Earl Miles – for this was his name – decided to concoct some devious ruse in order that he might have his evil way with her. He had a letter written and this is what it said: Ascopart should go immediately to a castle on a small island a mile offshore where Bevis will be waiting for him.

Josian and Ascopart innocently and enthusiastically set off at once for this castle. When they arrived, the earl had the gates unlocked, and through a cruel deception, he guided Ascopart into a strong enclosure and was able to lock him inside. Then the earl turned his attention to Josian.

‘Try now to rebuff my advances,’ he said. ‘See if you can warn me away now, with Ascopart safely out of the way.’

As quickly as she could, Josian sent a messenger to the Isle of Wight, informing Bevis of what was happening. But the earl came to her and took her into his arms. It was in his thoughts to force her to make love with him there and then.

‘For charity, sir, mercy!’ she cried. ‘I have sworn not to do this thing, not even if my life depends upon it, unless I am a married woman. If you will marry me and make me your wife, then I will lie with you.’

‘Then certainly, without question!’ he replied. ‘Tomorrow we shall be married!’ He kissed her and then sent for all his barons and knights to attend a wedding feast, to honour his marriage.

It was not long before the day arrived. The ceremony took place in the morning with great merriment in the town, and much joy amongst all the noblemen. Later that afternoon, a great feast was provided, and when the day drew to a close, the earl’s thoughts turned to making love with his new wife. The bedroom was prepared, and as Josian sat upon the bed, the earl came to her with a great company of his friends and noblemen, carrying spiced wine.

‘Sir,’ said Josian, ‘before we go any further, can I ask that nobody enters this room and that the door is shut fast. Please do this for the love of me. It is the first time I will have stood naked in front of a man and I would rather not have an audience when I do it. We women prefer to retain our modesty, particularly if we are virgins on our wedding night. We are prone to be nervous on this first night, especially when a maiden has married a strong warrior like you.’

‘Darling, gladly,’ he said. ‘Barons, knights, men and servants, go away, all of you. Ladies, maidens, please leave the room as well.’

The earl locked the door with a key, so that no one would enter again – and in doing so, he sealed his own fate.

‘Lady, it’s done,’ he said. ‘I shall take my own shoes off, without any help of a chamberlain.’

He sat on a chair and took off his shoes. Josian drew the curtains that were around the bed, as was customary, and used the concealment it afforded her to knot her girdle in preparation for what she had in mind. Then she prepared a soporific for him to drink.

When he was asleep, she tied the girdle around his neck and threw the other end round a beam in the ceiling, then hauled him up and left him hanging there. He hung there all night.

The next morning, the noblemen all arose. Some went hunting, others went to church. The sun shone brightly and it was quite late in the morning before anybody became concerned that the earl was lying so long in bed. Some said: ‘Leave him alone. He’s exhausted!’ and gave a knowing smile.

Midday came and went, however, and as the afternoon wore on, the noblemen began to get anxious. ‘I’m going to have a look,’ said one of them at last.

When he got to the chamber door, he kicked it hard with his foot and it shot open.

‘Wake up, Earl Miles!’ he cried. ‘You’ve been asleep for too long. I imagine you have a hangover. Make him a cordial, madam, to sooth his headache.’

‘No’ replied Josian. ‘His head will never ache again. He’ll never have headaches any more. He’s been hanging by his neck all night. He still is. Yesterday he married me through great injustice, and last night I hanged him for it. Never again will he harm a woman. Now do with me what you want.’

The day became one of great sorrow. They quickly condemned Josian to death and sentenced her to be burnt alive. They had a stake erected outside the town to make a fire against and to burn her at. They brought a barrel to put her in, and fetched wood for the fire.

Ascopart lay in the castle and saw the barrel being readied. He saw all the people and all the activity and knew that something was going on, something sinister. He gathered his strength and broke out of the castle where he was locked in. Being a good swimmer he leapt into the sea and very soon saw a fisherman in a boat and swam towards him. The fisherman thought it was the devil approaching and jumped out of his boat into the waves. Ascopart climbed aboard and rowed as hard as he could to land. Then he made his way as quickly as he could towards the fire.

Sir Bevis came up behind Ascopart and overtook him.

‘Villain!’ cried Bevis. ‘Where have you been? You deceived me!’

‘No, sir, I swear! It was Earl Miles who betrayed me!’

They made their way as quickly as they could towards the fire. The priest who had been designated to hear Josian’s last confession took so long while she was standing in only a light smock to cover her nakedness – may Christ’s blessing be upon him! – that Bevis could see that he’d arrived in time. As they were preparing to burn her, Bevis rode up on Arundel with his good sword Morglay, and Ascopart approached quickly from another direction. They both attacked all those who were standing around the fire and killed them where they stood. This was the reward that Earl Miles got for his scheming.

Sir Bevis took up Josian and settled her on his horse in front of him, then as quickly as he could, he made his way back with her, and with Ascopart, to the Isle of Wight.

Saber was delighted to see them all when they arrived. He and Bevis sent messengers far and wide summoning the finest knights from every land and every country with offers of silver and gold, for they intended to attract the best knights in the world to their cause.

The emperor was very anxious, he was almost beside himself with worry, but his wife was quick to comfort him: ‘Sir, there is nothing to fear. Send for your army in Germany, and when they have all arrived, send for my father, the King of Scotland. He will come to us with a magnificent host of knights. You have no reason to fear Sir Bevis or Sir Saber.’

They had letters written at once and messengers were sent off with them.



The month of May arrived, the grass and the leaves began to flourish and Southampton saw the arrival of a vast army: the King of Scotland came with thirty thousand brave knights and Germany provided a huge contingent of horses and warriors. The emperor led the noblemen into the hall.

‘Lords, gentlemen, you are all very welcome,’ he said. ‘The old knight Sir Saber has often caused me a great deal of grief and now Sir Bevis has come to help him. He was sold long ago to Saracens and I thought that he had been hanged. But he has threatened to kill me and to win back his lands, and he’s brought a giant with him who seems to be no earthly man, no creature of flesh and bone but rather a devil from hell! Gentlemen, arm yourselves in iron and steel, for although this giant may be strong and fearsome, we are many and he is but one!’

The emperor prepared ships and soon they all arrived at the walls of Carisbrooke Castle. They pitched tents and wound up and tensioned their siege engines, so that never before will you have heard of such a vast army laying siege to a single castle; such a siege has never been described before. Sir Bevis and Sir Saber gathered their own host together, knights from France and from many other countries, the best knights that they could find. Have no fear, those within Carisbrooke Castle will be able to withstand and overcome those who are outside. Saber stood on top of the high tower, high above the mound of the keep, and saw the great army that had gathered beyond the walls. He couldn’t help but be in awe of it; he crossed himself and swore by his grey beard that many of those outside would rue the day they had come.

Saber descended the tower and described to Sir Bevis what he could see. ‘Sir Bevis, we must arm ourselves and take the battle to them. I will lead the first battalion myself, and you another,’ he said. ‘Ascopart shall lead the third, with his great club. We must engage them in the field at once, for if we do, I’m certain that many of those warriors outside will be dead men before the day is out.’

Saber blew his horn and gathered all his men around him. ‘To arms, gentlemen!’ he cried. ‘Be of good heart and have no fear. We’ll attack them so fiercely they’ll all wish they’d stayed at home rather than coming here!’

The emperor heard the sound of Sir Saber’s horn and knew that the men in the castle were preparing for battle. He had his own knights made ready in response. ‘To arms, everyone!’ he shouted. ‘To battle, they’re coming out of the castle to take us on!’

The Emperor of Germany divided his forces into two: the King of Scotland took command of one battalion and the emperor himself the other. Out of the castle came Saber with his grey beard, leading five thousand valiant knights. The savage Morris of Machalry galloped his horse towards him; his spear was long and heavy and its point was very sharp. Sir Saber turned his horse to face this attack and, despite the keenness of Morris’s lance, Saber knocked him to the ground. Sir Bevis spurred Arundel towards the emperor and the weight and ferocity of his blow knocked the emperor from his horse. Bevis drew Morglay, intending to cut off the emperor’s head with it, but the emperor’s

knights quickly streamed towards him, more than ten thousand I believe, and defended the emperor so vigorously that they were able to rescue him from Bevis's clutches. They mounted him onto another horse, much to Bevis's disgust.

But now Ascopart joined in the battle with his contingent of forces. Wherever he went, he felled horse and man. Bevis was very pleased and called out to him:

'Ascopart, take good heed, look, over there, the emperor is riding a white horse. I'll reward you handsomely if you can bring him into the castle for me.'

Ascopart swung his club from side to side, killing men and horses, as he made his way towards the emperor. He managed to grab the emperor's horse by the head and whatever the emperor might have thought about it, or tried to do to stop it, he was unceremoniously dragged with his mount into the castle.

'Now that we have him at our mercy, let's get a great cauldron full of tar and sulphur and molten lead, and throw him into it!' said Bevis.

When a cauldron with these noxious ingredients was boiling at its fastest, the emperor was cast into it. And that was the end of him. May his soul go wherever the hell it likes.

Bevis's mother watched her lord being immersed into this seething cauldron from the castle wall and was so overcome with grief and sorrow that she fell and broke her neck. Bevis and Saber were both delighted about this.

When the emperor was dead, his army began to withdraw in disarray and very soon knights and men were fleeing westwards. All the gentry from town and countryside rode to greet Sir Bevis, with joy and with great pride; the entire nobility of Southampton came to pay homage. They received him with great honour and led him into his own castle.

'Lord Christ!' exclaimed Bevis. 'I have avenged myself upon the man who killed my father at last! Josian, we must send for my uncle, the Bishop of Cologne.'

The bishop quickly arrived and was soon presiding over a marriage ceremony. There was a great deal of joy at the wedding of Bevis and Josian, and much fine entertainment afterwards.

Not long after this, Saber advised Bevis to go to London, to see King Edgar there. When Bevis was brought before the king, Edgar asked him who he was and why he had come to see him.

'My name is Bevis of Southampton. My father was an earl, his name was Earl Guy. The Emperor of Germany killed him because of my mother and I have taken my revenge in full and now I ask you for the restoration of my inheritance and my privileges.'

'My son, I grant you your inheritance, by Saint Augustine! But fetch me my golden rod,' he commanded, 'for I see before me the son of my former marshal. Sir Guy was my mar-

shal and his son shall be as well.’ The king took up the golden rod, gave it to Bevis and conferred the office of Marshal of the King’s Hall upon him, for his father’s sake.

So now Bevis has all his inheritance back, all his titles and his land.

That summer, around about the time of Whitsun, when riding is at its most pleasurable for earls and knights, a racecourse was set out and a race announced so that every knight could test the speed and fitness of his horse and find out which amongst them was the strongest and the fastest. The course was seven miles long and the winner would receive a hundred pounds in gold. Bevis was delighted to hear about this race. He had every faith in Arundel.

That morning, as soon as the sun was up, knights and squires arose, saddled their horses and made ready for the race. The starting signal went off. But Bevis was distracted, and ten knights were already a mile down the course before he was aware that the race had even started. He spurred Arundel and shook his bridle so hard that he overtook them in the middle of the course and won the race by four furlongs! He dismounted and received the treasure. These winnings contributed greatly to the building of Arundel Castle. Bevis found it hard to praise Arundel highly enough, he had performed so well.

The king’s son asked Bevis to give Arundel to him as a gift. Bevis answered: ‘Sir, this horse will suffer nobody to touch him except for myself, it’s just his disposition, and for anybody else to go near him is just foolishness.’

While Bevis was carrying out his responsibilities one day, the king’s son, like the fool that he was, went to the stables and attempted to untie Arundel. The horse kicked him so hard with a back hoof that the young man’s brains were splattered against the stable wall.

There was much sorrow and weeping when this incident was discovered. The king swore that Bevis should be hanged and then pulled apart by wild horses, but a nobleman spoke up: ‘Sir king, that would be against the law. You can only give that punishment to the perpetrator of the crime, which is the horse.’

‘No!’ exclaimed Bevis, ‘I won’t let any harm come to Arundel, not for anything. I’d rather let harm come to England, if this is the price for saving my horse.’

Bevis set off at once for Southampton. He explained everything to Josian and to Ascopart and, leaving his uncle Saber to inherit all his titles and wealth and to be his heir, he lifted Josian onto a mule, leapt up onto Arundel and with Sir Tirry and Ascopart by his side, they all rode off.

Ascopart, however, wasn’t sure what he wanted to do, and when they came to a fork in the road, this tall giant decided to part company with them and to travel to Mombrant.

Josian and Bevis rode onwards, through field and through town, and Josian – may Christ shield her from shame! – gave birth in a wood. God was kind to her and things could

have been worse. At the edge of the woodland Bevis and Tirry dismounted and used their swords to cut branches in order to make a woodland lodge, and they took Josian into it, they couldn't think of anything else to do. Sir Bevis offered to help Josian in the birth but she declined the offer: 'Thank you, but no,' she said. 'For God's love, go away! God forbid that a woman's private parts should be exposed to any man! Go for a walk somewhere, you and Sir Tirry, and let me get on with it, with the help of Our Lady.'

So Bevis and Tirry went off and were soon far enough away that they couldn't hear her screams. While they were gone, the lady gave birth to twins, two little boys. But alas! Just after she had delivered them, Ascopart came striding along, and for all her pain and exhaustion he made her go along with him. She had to leave her babies behind. It's a wonder that her heart did not burst with grief and sorrow.

Bevis retraced his footsteps back to the lodge, but when he arrived there was no sign of Josian, just two lovely little boys lying on the damp ground, looking as though they had been born only moments ago. Bevis fell in a faint. Tirry wept as he helped Bevis up. They cut some ermine from their store of clothes and wrapped the unbaptised boys in the fur, then got up onto their horses and went away.

In the wood they met a forester, and Bevis greeted him courteously: 'May Christ bless you,' he said. 'Have you seen a woman come this way or anywhere hereabouts, by any chance?'

'Sir, I'm afraid I haven't,' replied the forester.

'What is your occupation?'

'Sir, I am a forester.'

'May Christ shield you from shame, but will you have this baby christened? He was born only a short while ago but he has already lost his mother.'

The forester agreed to keep the child for seven years, without any payment, and for seven years more as well, if this was necessary. 'What shall I call the child?' he asked.

'Give him my father's name: Guy. And if the child survives into adolescence, please teach him to bear arms.'

The forester took the child and went on his way. Bevis and Tirry rode onwards until they met with a man who said he was a fisherman. They gave him the other baby to baptise and asked him to name the child Miles, after the fisherman himself.

Then they rode over valley and upland until they came to a great town. They dismounted and went to have supper, and while Bevis was looking out of a window he noticed many horses in bright trappings and shining armour. He asked what was going on.

'Sir,' said the innkeeper, 'haven't you heard about the great tournament that is going to take place? It's being put on for the sake of a beautiful maiden, a duke's daughter. She is his heir. The duke has had the jousting proclaimed far and wide for those who might

want to win this beautiful creature to be his wife, for whoever can prove that he is the foremost amongst his peers shall win this maiden's love.

'Shall we joust tomorrow,' Bevis asked Tirry.

'Yes sir, by Saint Thomas of India!' exclaimed Sir Tirry. 'We mustn't let ourselves take a back seat in this!'



The next day, when the sun was up, every knight and every squire threw colourful coats over themselves, displaying the arms that would allow the maiden to be able to follow their progress on the tournament field. Sir Bevis devised an emblem of black and red for himself, emblazoned on linen and embellished along the edges with roses; it was a lovely sight to behold!

A knight spurred his horse onto the field of combat and Sir Bevis rode to meet him. Bevis gave him such a blow upon the shield that he fell to the ground in a heap, and all who subsequently rode against Bevis suffered the same fate. Bevis jousted so well that day that the maiden in the castle began to desire him as her husband, and very soon she had set her heart on him completely.

'I have a wife,' objected Bevis, and he explained how she had been stolen from him and he didn't know where she was.

'Since this is the case,' the maiden replied, 'then my love shall be yours in waiting for the next seven years, and if she reappears during this time, then Tirry can marry me instead.'

But let us leave Sir Bevis and Sir Tirry and return to Sir Saber.

Saber was asleep one night when he dreamed that Bevis had been wounded on the way to some shrine or other: Saint James in Compostela or Saint Giles near Nîmes perhaps. He awoke out of this dream and recounted it to his wife Erneburgh with his heart feeling like ice within him. 'My dear, interpret this dream for me,' he pleaded.

'Sir, there can be no doubt that Bevis is in trouble,' she told him. 'He has lost a child, or a wife, I'd stake my life on it. Through some kind of treachery, Ascopart has managed to deceive him, I am sure.'

Saber gathered twelve knights and had them dress themselves in pilgrim's garb, although beneath this disguise they were well armed. Their staffs were functional indeed, concealing the finest steel, ground to a sharp point.

May God protect Josian! As she approached Mombrant, Saber met her on the road.

'Gentle knight,' she said, 'you look to be a noble man. Please offer me some assistance.'

Unless you can help me, I shall die.'

'Madam, this is why I am here!' he replied. 'Each of you palmers, wield your sticks!'

Saber thrust his staff so hard into Ascopart's chest that it quickly brought about the giant's death. All the Saracens ran away. Saber took up Josian and smeared her with an ointment that made her face, once so beautiful, appear quite ugly and unpleasant.

They spent seven years like this, searching for Bevis.

One day, they approached a town where Bevis was staying. Saber left Josian at an inn while he went off to get food, and when he came to the castle gate he saw his son Tirry there. Tirry was steward of that land. Saber recognised his son and asked him: 'For the love of Saint Mary! Give me something to eat, my son.'

Tirry looked him up and down and said: 'Palmer, you shall have the finest food that we can provide, for you look very much as though you are my father.'

'Your mother used to say the same thing!'

Tirry took his father into his arms and kissed him many times. Saber hugged his son for all that he was worth. They had never been happier, for there was much to be joyful about.

Shortly afterwards there was even more to be joyful about and to celebrate, for Saber quickly went back into the town, washed all the ointment from Josian's face, gave her some nice clothes to wear and then took her to the castle and presented her to Bevis. Bevis had never received a pleasanter surprise. Then, suddenly, the fisherman and the forester appeared, leading two happy and delightful children.

Tirry married the lady of that land. There was celebration galore and much feasting and entertainment. But let us leave them in their joy and merriment for a moment and turn once more to King Ermine and to King Ivor, for these two kings have readied their armies against one another, and all because of Josian.

A palmer carried news of this impending conflict to Bevis, and Bevis sent messengers as quickly as he could, far and wide, to the thirty thousand knights who owed him allegiance. Then he had all his men armed and took his leave from Sir Tirry, who wanted to go with him, but Bevis said that it would be better if he didn't.

'If I have need of you, I will send for you,' he said. 'Your father Saber will come with me.'

Sir Miles and Sir Guy got themselves ready to go, and they gathered together strong and reliable men to fight alongside them. Bevis travelled with this army to the city of Ambiford. King Ermine was happy and not at all displeased to see him when he arrived: 'Sir, forgive me your anger,' he pleaded. 'I will be christened for your sake, and for your love.'

In this way, they settled their differences and agreed to take the battle to King Ivor.

King Ivor assembled a great host of knights and rode at the head of them all with great eagerness and bravado, aware that Bevis and Saber had come to lend their support to King Ermine. The noise of their advance was intense, the sound of their cries deafening. Bevis observed it all from the top of a tower. He descended and decided to give battle at once.

King Ivor was soon defeated. Fifteen thousand of his men were killed. Bevis had the king cast into King Ermine's prison, where King Ivor swore by his god Termagaunt that he would provide thirty packhorses laden with gold for his ransom, along with four hundred beds of silk with quilts of cloth-of-gold, four hundred goblets made of copper alloy and as many again made of gold, if it bought his life and would ensure that he wasn't killed.

'I will give you all this for my ransom,' he said, 'if you will let me live.'

'Bring it to me, then,' said Bevis. 'Then you can go back to your own country.'

King Ivor sent a messenger to Tabafers, his chamberlain, and the man arrived with the ransom. In this way was King Ivor freed from prison. But let us leave him and speak of King Ermine the old, for now he is lying sick on his bed.

Before King Ermine died, it happened one day that he sent for Bevis's two children. He called Sir Guy to him, placed a crown upon his head and conferred upon him the entirety of his kingdom. Soon afterwards, he died, may his soul go to heaven. Then Saber came to see Bevis and informed him that he intended to depart for England, for he was eager to see his wife and children again.

Saber journeyed to England and arrived safely in Southampton.

King Ivor had a thief, may God punish him, a thief who contrived to take Arundel from Bevis; he stole the horse away through charms and deception, taking him south to Mombrant. Saber lay asleep in Southampton one night and dreamed that Bevis was badly wounded and in dire straits, his neck broken, and when Saber awoke he was so frightened for Bevis that he woke his wife to tell her what he had just dreamed.

'Sir, you are at fault for staying here too long,' she said.

Saber dressed himself in pilgrim's clothes, said goodbye to his wife and went as quickly as he could to Ambiford. Bevis was very pleased to see him and quickly told him that Arundel had been stolen. 'Rabin the thief purloined him months ago,' he said.

Sir Saber made the journey to Mombrant, and when he arrived he stood at a place where it was customary to take warhorses for their morning drink. He waited there and at last saw a Saracen riding Arundel.

'Mohammed save you!' cried Saber. 'Where did this wonderful warhorse come from? He has a fine chest on him, I must say! What about his hindquarters?' The Saracen turned Arundel about. At once, Saber leapt onto Arundel's back, grappled the man from behind

and threw him off with such a hard blow with the point of his staff that the man went tumbling dead to the ground.

‘Take a last look at Arundel!’ Saber cried to King Ivor. ‘You stole him unjustly and I have come to fetch him back and return him to his rightful owner, in front of your very eyes!’

King Ivor was beside himself with rage. ‘To arms, everybody!’ he cried.

A force was quickly gathered to pursue Saber, four thousand or more, and they gave Saber a hard chase, pursuing him for miles and miles. Josian, as she stood in her turret, saw them approaching; she could make out Saber and he appeared to be riding Arundel, so she descended from the tower as quickly as she could and told Guy and Bevis what she could see.

‘Saber is approaching, but he is being pursued!’ she cried.

Sir Guy was the first to ride out to help Sir Saber, followed by his brother Miles and by Sir Tirry’s son Bevis, all of them young and courageous knights. When they arrived, they brought much-needed relief to Sir Saber. All those who were pursuing him were forced to turn tail, and were soon fleeing for their own lives back to Mombrant.

King Ivor arose the next morning in a foul mood. He quickly sent for fifteen emirs and fifteen kings, gave them armour fit for a fierce battle and together they rode towards Ambiford. When they arrived, King Ivor summoned his marshals Arabele and Judas to him and said: ‘Advise me. Should I offer single combat to Bevis of Hampton, this knight of great renown?’

‘We think that you should,’ they replied.

‘You have a powerful contingent of knights,’ King Ivor shouted to Bevis, ‘and I have many knights here as well, trustworthy, courageous and eager to fight, but will you agree to meet me in single combat? If you kill me, I promise that all my titles and all my honour will go to you.’

The romance says that Bevis gave his assent to this. They threw down their gauntlets in agreement to these terms, then armed themselves and leapt onto their horses. They crossed the water onto an island and each made a prayer to his own god.

Then they rode fiercely at one another, each thrusting his spear at the other’s shield, sending pieces flying. Their shields were split and broken, their coats of chainmail torn and damaged. They turned their horses around and rushed at each other again. Bevis drew his sword and struck King Ivor with Morglay high upon the head, so hard that the crest of his helmet broke away and fell off, a corner of the king’s shield flew to the ground and a part of his saddle was cut clean away. It’s no surprise that King Ivor fell off his horse! Bevis was proud of that stroke, as you might imagine.

King Ivor got back onto his feet. Sir Bevis dismounted. King Ivor drew his sword and



angrily brought it down onto Bevis's head. The keen blade made a great dent in Bevis's helmet. Bevis was furious and with a great stroke of his sword, he cut off King Ivor's head.

The Saracens were mortified to see their king's headless trunk fall to the ground and remain there motionless and decapitated. They were so terrified that they rushed to get back across the causeway and were swiftly pursued by Sir Guy and Sir Miles, who slew many of them before they were able to get back across the water. Guy then rode towards Mombrant to seize that city. He was advised by a heathen to disguise himself as a Saracen, and by virtue of this deception he captured this city for his father. His knights killed all those who dared to oppose him.

Now Bevis is king of all the land that King Ivor previously ruled over. The beautiful Josian is queen there again, for a second time.

One day, Bevis and his uncle were taking their amusement beside a river when a messenger came riding up, asking to see Sir Saber urgently. Saber went over to him at once.

'Messenger, what news?' he asked.

'Sir, King Edgar is treating you with contempt and trying to kill your son and heir, Robant.'

'This is an outrage!' exclaimed Saber and he went straight to Bevis to tell him what he had just heard, and to ask leave to depart for England at once.

'I will come with you,' said Bevis, with typical courtesy and generosity. 'So will Sir Guy and Sir Miles, and your son Tirry shall accompany us as well.'

Bevis made his way to England with Sir Tirry and with a great many other knights; sixty thousand in all. They crossed the sea and arrived in Southampton. Saber's wife, Erneburgh, and his son Robant, quickly came to meet them.

'What's happening?' Saber asked.

They told him that King Edgar had seized their lands from them.

'He will give it back again very shortly, if we can keep our lives!' replied Bevis.

The bailiff of Southampton sent messengers to London to warn the king of Bevis's arrival and of his intentions. He told him that Saber and Bevis had come with a large number of fighting men from afar, and that they were intent upon making war upon him.

Bevis, however, had a plan. He left his men in Southampton and rode off with little ceremony to Putney, where he left Josian, and then crossed the river Thames with six knights only. They arrived in London and quickly found King Edgar. Bevis asked for his inheritance to be restored to him and his lands to be returned. All the knights who were there were friendly enough, except for the steward, who was, of all of them, the least amicable by far.

‘Sir,’ said the steward to the king, ‘it is a wonder, indeed, that this man who is asking for something that is nothing short of criminal should return again from his banishment. It would be a good thing if you had him killed at once.’

The king was minded to show mercy to Bevis, but his steward was wholly against it.

Sir Bevis left the court and took lodgings at an inn. When he was having his dinner, the steward thought it a good moment to attack. He had it cried out throughout the town that every free man and youth, everyone who was fit to bear arms, should make themselves ready to capture the king’s enemy, or risk his own head. In every lane and every street, chains were stretched across to make it impossible for a man to ride past. Word came to Bevis that this was going on; he armed himself in iron and steel and went to confront the steward, who came to meet him accompanied by two hundred well-armed men.

‘Bevis, you are shortly going to die!’ shouted the steward. ‘I can tell you this for a fact, because I’m going to kill you myself.’

The steward spurred his horse, lowered his spear and galloped towards Bevis, hitting him so hard on the shield that it broke into two pieces with the impact. Sir Bevis came to a standstill and saw that his shield was now useless. ‘Now I’m ready to hit him hard!’ said Bevis, and galloped towards the steward, catching him a blow on the top of his head that toppled him from his horse. Bevis quickly forced two hundred men to the ground, but trying to make his escape through Goose Lane he found himself in difficulty; the way was so narrow that there was no space for him to defend himself. He had won many battles in his time but had never experienced so much doubt and anxiety as now. He drew the sword Morglay and killed many men with it, and managed to fight his way into Cheapside.

Bevis cried out to all those people around him who seemed to be so aggrieved: ‘Why don’t you open the gate for me and let me escape?’

‘Give yourself up,’ they cried back, ‘or you shall die!’

Bevis now fought them with enthusiasm and bathed his sword in their blood. He cut seven thousand men to the ground, and afterwards there was not a mark or a scratch on him. He exerted himself to the limit, but as night fell, there was no let up. The Londoners redoubled their efforts to capture him. Arundel played a large part in protecting Bevis; he kicked out with his hind legs so violently that no one dared to come within forty feet of his side or his rear. In this way, the fight lasted for half a day and half a night.

News reached Putney that Bevis had been killed. Josian fell to the ground in a faint when she was told. Sir Guy and Sir Miles quickly ran over to their mother. ‘What’s the matter,’ they asked.

‘Your father is dead,’ she replied. ‘Take my advice: get away from London as quickly as you can.’

‘If our father has been killed, then we must retrieve his body at once,’ said Sir Miles.

Guy and Miles armed themselves. Sir Guy mounted a large Arab steed that Bevis had won in a heathen land. It was not small! He carried a strong sword called Randoney that had a blood-red garnet on the pommel, a sword that had once belonged to Sir Lancelot of the Lake and had split many a head open; there was never a better sword and never will be until doomsday, so the romance tells us. Sir Miles was mounted on his own Arab steed that was as swift as a swallow.

They rode quickly towards London with four thousand men, and then mounting their attack at once, they took boats across the Thames and laid siege to the portcullis protecting one of the main gates, killing many men and making entry for themselves. They set fire to Ludgate and killed all the men that they could find; they killed everyone they came across.

By now, dawn was beginning to break. Bevis was so tired from fighting that he doubted if he could last for very much longer.

A Lombard who lived in London gathered a large contingent of men and mounted another attack on Bevis with great confidence and much bravado. He was a noble and well-known individual and held a mace of heavy steel in his hand. He galloped at Sir Bevis, brandishing this mace.

‘Yield to me at once, you disgusting criminal!’ he cried, and gave Bevis such a blow that Bevis gave out a grunt – he didn’t know where he was for a moment and slumped forwards over his saddle.

Suddenly, Sir Guy appeared. Intent upon bringing some respite to his father, he swung the sword Randoney at the Lombard and hit him on the head with it, cutting through helmet and leather and raising sparks as the point of the blade carried on downwards and dashed against the stone pavement before coming to a halt. Both split man and horse fell heavily to the ground. Sir Bevis laughed with joy and relief and thanked omnipotent God that his children had arrived at last, to help their poor father!

Bevis quickly regained his composure and his agility. Arundel gave out a great neigh, in pride at bearing this mighty man and eager to help him to continue the fight. It was not long before Bevis caught sight of his other son, Sir Miles, approaching with a great body of armed men. Soon, heads were broken and corpses were strewn everywhere. The fighting was so fierce that the gutters of every street ran with blood. It says in this romance, both in English and in French, that so many men lay dead that the waters of the Thames turned the colour of blood. The area from Saint Mary at Bow to the wall had no houses at this time, it was open ground and no one lived there; this was a long time ago, but the final battle took place in this area and the romance is quite clear about the number of people who met their end here: thirty-four thousand were killed in all, through the unfaithfulness and duplicity of King Edgar’s steward. No good ever came of dishonesty; a bad man comes to a bad end, as the saying goes.

Sir Miles and Sir Guy quickly crossed back over the river Thames and took their father to Putney. When Josian saw her two sons returning with their father, she fainted for sheer joy.

News of this massacre was brought to King Edgar. The king sent for all his noblemen, earls, barons and knights, and told them how most of the freemen of London were now dead because of his steward's ill-considered advice. He explained how Bevis had come from far away with an army to wage war upon him.

'He has brought along with him his two sons,' said the king. 'I have it in my mind that I should offer my daughter's hand in marriage to one of them. This may bring about peace between us.'

They all agreed that this was a very good idea, and the king's mind was then made up. And by the tradition of inheritance that all medieval romance honours, Sir Miles was crowned king as well, by marrying the king's daughter. You can imagine, even if you hadn't been told, that the wedding feast was magnificent. It was a royal wedding and a coronation rolled into one. The celebrations lasted for a fortnight.

Sir Bevis made preparations to return home. He asked Saber very fervently to look after Miles, to teach him all that he knew and not to fail him in any way, and then, after commending Tirry to God almighty, he took passage and made his way directly to Mombrant.

But by the time that they arrived, Josian had contracted a sickness and fallen ill. Bevis was very worried. He went to his stables and found Arundel lying dead. He brought this news to his son Guy.

'Sir,' said Guy, 'my mother will die, that's for certain.'

They went to her at once. Sir Bevis took her up in his arms and kissed her, and they died in one another's arms.

The king had a chapel built and dedicated it to Saint Lawrence, and he had a gold chest constructed to contain their bodies. Men say that it was laid out like a shrine and incorporated into a house of religion, so that monks could sing for the souls of Bevis and Josian for eternity – may God have mercy upon them – and for Arundel's too, if it is possible for men to pray for the soul of a horse.

So ends Bevis of Hampton, who was a nobleman and a king. May all those who have listened to this story from the beginning receive the pardon of heaven for their souls, and pray that we may all become as virtuous and successful as Bevis was.

Amen.

Here endeth Bevis of Hampton