

## NOTES FROM THE LIBRARY

### *THE STRATAGEM OF THE VIRGIN*

IN 1944 Levi della Vida, an Italian orientalist, published an account of an old legend which is contained in an Arabic manuscript belonging to the library of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary.<sup>1</sup> This manuscript, a fragment of a much larger work, was written towards the end of the thirteenth century or the beginning of the fourteenth and contains nine legends of Eastern saints, monks, and pious women. Of these legends the most important is the "Stratagem of the Virgin" which eventually found its way into the *Orlando Furioso* of Ariosto. Since the story is of considerable interest in itself and since it illustrates well the way in which old Eastern tales were adapted by Western writers, I am prompted to tell something of its metamorphoses.

Those who are acquainted with Italian literature or have read Leigh Hunt's *Stories from the Italian Poets* know well the touching story of Isabella, told by Ariosto. Isabella, the lovely wife of Zerbino, the Scottish prince, who had lost his life in the war with the Saracens, vowed to devote herself to God. Accompanied by a hermit, she was going to bury the body of her beloved lord in an old chapel in southern France, and thence

<sup>1</sup> "Le Stratégème de la Vierge," *Université Libre de Bruxelles: Annuaire de l'Institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales et slaves*, VII (New York, 1944), 83-126.

go to a nunnery. But just as she was about to reach her destination she was encountered by Rodomont, king of Algiers and the fiercest enemy of Christendom. The loveliness of the lady charmed the Saracen, and he resolved to have her, but as his gentle and gallant entreaties left the lady unmoved, his thoughts turned to violence. The lady contrived to die rather than lose her virtue. She said to the Saracen:

"I know, and on my way a herb did view,  
And nearly know where I on this could  
light,  
Which, being boiled with ivy and with rue,  
Over a fire with wood of cypress dight,  
And squeezed, when taken from the caul-  
dron, through  
Innocent hands, affords a juice of might,  
Wherewith whoever thrice his body laves,  
Destructive steel or fire securely braves.

.....  
In querdon for this present, I request  
That thou to me upon thy faith wilt  
swear,  
Thou never wilt my chastity molest  
In word or deed."

The offer of the lady impressed the Saracen and he asked her to prepare the drug. Once the drug was in his possession, he could still enjoy the lady, he thought. The lady prepared the ointment and spoke thus to the Saracen:

"I first will trial make" (that lady said)  
"Of this choice liquor with rare virtue  
blest;  
Lest haply thou shouldst harbour any dread  
That mortal poison from these herbs be  
prest.

With this will I anoint myself, from head  
Downwards below the naked neck and  
breast.

Then prove on me thy faulchion and thine  
arm,  
And prove if one can smite, the other  
harm."

.....  
She washed, as said, and gladly did decline  
Her neck to that unthinking pagan's  
brand;

Unthinking, and perhaps o'ercome by wine,  
Which neither helm, nor mail, nor shield  
withstand.

That brutish man believed her, and, in sign  
Of faith, so struck with cruel steel and  
hand,

That her fair head, erewhile Love's place  
of rest,

He severed from the snowy neck and  
breast. (Canto XXIX, Stanzas 1-26,  
W. S. Rose's translation.)

The head made three bounds as it  
fell. Thus died the lovely lady, faith-  
ful to her beloved Zerbino and to her  
vows to God.

Ariosto did not invent this tale. His  
immediate model has been traced to  
the work of the Venetian human-  
ist Francesco Barbaro, *De re uxoria*,  
written in 1416; another version of  
it, almost identical, is found in *Polo-  
nia, sive de origine et rebus gestis  
Polonorum* by Martin Cromer, a six-  
teenth-century writer. But the story  
is much more ancient than that. It is  
of oriental origin and goes back to the  
early years of Christianity and possibly  
to the Hellenistic times. The original  
version was in Greek, but it passed into  
a number of other languages, includ-  
ing Arabic, Armenian, Ethiopian, and  
Georgian.

The Arabic manuscript in the Li-

brary of the New Brunswick Theo-  
logical Seminary records the story  
in somewhat different details. The  
following is my translation of the  
French version of Levi della Vida:

"When Jerusalem was sacked [by  
the Persians in 614 A.D.], a young  
virgin nun, very beautiful, fell by lot  
into the hands of a warrior [Persian],  
who wanted to violate her. She said  
to him: 'Wait, do not be hasty.' He  
said to her: 'Why?' She replied, 'I  
am in possession of an important thing  
which I learned from the virgins, and  
only a virgin is capable of preparing it:  
otherwise, it is of no use. It is a salve  
with which one can anoint a man,  
and no one, armed either with arrows  
or sword or with any other weapon  
can do him any harm. Thou needest  
that, for thou goest to war continu-  
ally.' He said to her: 'How shall I be  
able to obtain that?' Now the holy  
nun had devised a stratagem in order  
that she might die by the sword rather  
than soil her virginity. She took then  
some oil and pretended to utter some  
magic words over it, and then said to  
the warrior: 'Anoint thy neck and  
give me the sword that I may strike  
thee with it.' The other said to her:  
'Anoint thy neck thyself instead and I  
shall make the test with the sword.'  
The holy one anointed her neck and  
said to him: 'Strike with all thy force.'  
He unsheathed his sword, which was  
very sharp; she stretched out her neck,  
and he struck with all his force, as she  
had told him to do. The head of the  
holy of God rolled on the ground, and  
the spouse of Christ consented to die

by the sword rather than soil her virginity. The warrior was profoundly afflicted and wept bitterly because he had killed this beautiful woman, and he understood that she had deceived him in order to escape violation."

In an earlier article Levi della Vida, who did not yet know of the existence of the New Brunswick manuscript, discussed other Arabic versions of this story and came to the conclusion that they derive from a Greek original, now lost.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, another scholar, Campbell Bonner, had studied the problem and had made some important discoveries.<sup>3</sup> Most important of these was his finding of a Greek version in a manuscript belonging to the University of Michigan. This is probably not the original, but "it preserves more of the coloring of the ancient popular tale than any of its kindred." I give Bonner's translation of this Greek version:

"This holy virgin [Anna] was in one of the nunneries of the holy city Jerusalem, on the holy Mount of Olives; and when by the permission of God, all Palestine was given over to the hands of the Persians, this holy city also was captured by them, and all the monasteries and the nunneries were taken, and given over by God to the godless Persians for rape and pillage, because of our sins. Now this blessed maid also was seized by one of the Persian nobles. She was very fair to look upon, and most beautiful

in body and in soul; so to her Master, Christ, she made earnest and continuous supplication, with many tears, that she might keep her maidenhood inviolate. And God heard her entreaty, and brought her prayer to fulfilment.

"So when the Persian who had captured her was pressing upon her for the wounding of her soul as well as her body, God gave her wisdom, even as to Judith, the bravest among women, when he made her wise to destroy the oppression and the lewdness of Holophernes. And she spoke to him by an interpreter, saying, 'Would that I might be thought worthy to be the bedmate of my lord! But since henceforth I love thee as my master, I am minded to entrust to thee a wondrous thing, known to many of the Greeks.' And he said, 'Speak.' And the holy maiden said, 'There is a certain herb, unknown to many, which if one takes and pounds in a mortar, and anoints his body with the juice thereof, iron shall never hurt his body.' And the lewd man said, 'Do my will now, and in good time show me the herb.' She said, 'This herb may not be got by a corrupted woman, but only by a maid unwed and inviolate. For it be not so, the wonder of its battle with the steel worketh not.' And so he excused her for that evening.

"In the morning he said to her, 'Come show me the herb.' And the blessed maid went with him and made as if she had found the plant. And she said to him, 'Behold, here it is.' The barbarian said, 'How shall I know that?' She said, 'Crush it, and anoint

<sup>2</sup> "A Christian Legend in Moslem Garb," *Byzantion*, XV (Boston, 1941), 144-157.

<sup>3</sup> "The Maiden's Stratagem," *Byzantion*, XVI (Boston, 1944), 142-161.

some part of thy body, and try with the sword, and thou shalt see its power.' But he was fain to spare himself, and would not endure to try it. Then the bride of Christ, desiring to be espoused to her Lord, bruised the herb and anointed her own neck. She said to the barbarian, 'Take thy sword with thy two hands and strike with all thy might; and from the deed itself thou shalt learn the power of the herb.'

"Believing her words, and thinking that he had a test (i.e. of a protection?) in time of war, he took the sword and struck upon her neck with all his might; and with that very stroke he cut off her blessed head. Then, perceiving that he had been mocked, he began to gnash his teeth, but it availed him nought. And thus was fulfilled her martyrdom."

Bonner has also pointed out that in addition to the works of Barbaro and Cromer a version of this story is included in Nicolaus von Jeroschin's rhymed German translation of Peter von Dusburg's Chronicle of Prussia, first half of the fourteenth century and another in the work, still in manuscript form, of Giovanni Malpighini, a protégé of Petrarch.

We have here an oriental tale finding its way into western Europe to contribute to the development of its literature. But it is not the only one. Henri Grégoire<sup>4</sup> has traced the source of

<sup>4</sup> Henri Grégoire, "L'origine bulgare de *La Tempête* de Shakespeare," *Bulletin de l'Institut archéologique bulgare*, IX (Sofia, 1935), 81-97.

Shakespeare's *Tempest* to an old Bulgarian story and more recently another scholar has found in the distortion of an old Byzantine tale the prototype of Shylock.<sup>5</sup> And these are only two of the many instances that we can cite. The more we study the civilization of the orient, the more we learn of its manifold contributions to the development of western culture.

"East is East, and West is West,  
And never the twain shall meet."

I wonder.

PETER CHARANIS

### EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY UNIQUITIES

OVER forty years ago Charles Evans began the publication of his *American Bibliography*. In it he attempted to list year for year the authors and titles of all books, pamphlets, newspapers, and other printed materials produced in the United States from the time of the first printing press in Massachusetts to the year 1820, and to give the locations of copies of these titles. When he died in 1935, his great undertaking had reached the letter M for the year 1799.<sup>1</sup> Ever since the

<sup>5</sup> B. N. Nelson and J. Starr, "The Legend of the divine Surety and the Jewish Moneylender," *Université Libre de Bruxelles: Annuaire de l'Institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales and slaves*, VII (New York, 1944), 289-339.

<sup>1</sup> At the time of his death Evans was completing his task through the year 1800, for he had given up the plan to go to 1820. His papers were left to the American Antiquarian Society, which hopes before long to publish the final volume of the *Bibliography*.

appearance of the first volume, librarians, collectors, and other bibliophiles have been playing the game of finding errors and omissions in this magnificent work, which is remarkable, as a matter of fact, for its completeness and its accuracy. Quite beyond this desire "to get something on" Evans, the many bibliographers of Americana have served a most useful purpose, for by examining their holdings and adding to the titles known to him, they have assisted in the great task of preserving the literary heritage which we have received from the early days of our country. The addition of particular items, moreover, together with a note as to where copies may be found, is of immediate use to those engaged in many valuable studies.

In an attempt to analyse and appraise a large number of eighteenth-century books and pamphlets recently made available by the Library, we checked these titles by Evans's lists and found an even dozen which had not been included in the *American Bibliography*. We then wrote to several of the largest library centers in the country to find out whether they had records of these books. The Library of Congress, the Philadelphia Bibliographical Center, the William

L. Clements Library, and the John Carter Brown Library, all responded, and all whittled down our list of supposedly unique items until only four remain. Of these four "uniquities," as Dr. Randolph G. Adams calls them, one—*Reflections of a Saint*—was reprinted in the *Journal* for June, 1944. The other three, the titles of which follow, are not very promising either as literary or historical material:

1. Constitution of the Ladies Society, Established in New-York, for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children. New-York: Printed by J. Oram, No. 33, Liberty-Street, 1799.
2. The Heidelbergh Catechism, or Method of Instruction in the Christian Religion, as the Same is Taught in the Reformed Churches and Schools of Holland. Translated for the Use of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of the City of New-York. [rule] The Eighth Edition. [double rule] New-York: Printed and sold by T. Greenleaf, M,DCC,LXXXVIII.
3. Sands, Niles. Some Short Remarks upon a Late Anonymous Writer on Baptism. [rule] by Sands Niles. [rule] *He that is first in his own cause seemeth just; but his neighbour cometh and searcheth him.* Prov. 18.17. [double rule] Stonington, May 1, 1788. [rule] New-London: Printed by T. Green.

R.K.