CHAPTER IV

THE OLD FRENCH EPIC

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(*Chansons de Geste*)

It appears to be generally the case in all old epic literature, and it is not surprising, that the existing specimens come from the end of the period of its greatest excellence, and generally represent the epic fashion, not quite at its freshest and best, but after it has passed its culmination, and is already on the verge of decline. This condition of things is exemplified in *Beowulf;* and the Sagas also, here and there, show signs of over-refinement and exhaustion. In the extant mass of old French epic this condition is enormously exaggerated. The *Song of Roland* itself, even in its earliest extant form, is comparatively late and unoriginal; while the remainder of French epic poetry, in all its variety, is much less authentic than *Roland*, sensibly later, and getting rapidly and luxuriantly worse through all the stages of lethargy.

It is the misfortune of French epic that so much should have been preserved of its "dotages," so little of the same date and order as the *Song of Roland*, and nothing at all of the still earlier epic—the

more original *Roland* of a previous generation. The exuberance, however, of the later stages of French epic, and its long persistence in living beyond its due time, are proof of a certain kind of vitality. The French epic in the twelfth century, long after its best days were over, came into the keenest and closest rivalry with the younger romantic schools in their first vigour. Fortune has to some extent made up for the loss of the older French poems by the preservation of endless later versions belonging in date to the exciting times of the great romantic revolution in literature. Feeble and drowsy as they often are, the late-born hosts of the French epic are nevertheless in the thick of a great European contest, matched not dishonourably against the forces of Romance. They were not the strongest possible champions of the heroic age, but they were *there*, in the field, and in view of all spectators. At this distance of time, we can see how much more fully the drift of the old Teutonic world was caught and rendered by the imagination of Iceland; how much more there is in Grettir or Skarphedinn than in Ogier the Dane, or Raoul de Cambrai, or even Roland and Oliver. But the Icelandic work lay outside of the consciousness of Europe, and the French epic was known everywhere. There are no such masterpieces in the French epic as in the Icelandic prose. The French epic to make up for that has an exciting history; it lived by antagonism, and one may look on and see how the *chansons de geste* were fighting for their life against the newer

forms of narrative poetry. In all this there is the interest of watching one of the main currents of history, for it was nothing less than the whole future imaginative life of Europe that was involved in the debate between the stubborn old epic fashion and the new romantic adventurers.

The *chansons de geste* stand in a real, positive, ancestral relation to all modern literature; there is something of them in all the poetry of Europe. The Icelandic histories can make no such claim. Their relation to modern life is slighter, in one sense; more spiritual, in another. They are not widely known, they have had no share in establishing the forms or giving vogue to the commonplaces of modern literature. Now that they are published and accessible to modern readers, their immediate and present worth, for the friends of Skarphedinn and Gunnar, is out of all proportion to their past historical influence. They have anticipated some of the literary methods which hardly became the common property of Europe till the present century, and even now, when all the world reads and writes prose stories, their virtue is unexhausted and unimpaired. But this spiritual affinity with modern imaginations and conversations, across the interval of medieval romance and rhetoric, is not due to any direct or overt relation. The Sagas have had no influence; that is the plain historical fact about them.

The historical influence and importance of the *chansons de geste*, on the other hand, is equally plain and evident. Partly by their opposition to the new

modes of fiction, and partly by compliance with their adversaries, they belong to the history of those great schools of literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries from which all modern imaginations in prose and rhyme are descended. The "dolorous rout" of Roncesvalles, and not the tragedy of the Niblungs, still less the history of Gunnar or of Njal, is the heroic origin of modern poetry; it is remembered and renowned, πᾶσι μέλουσα, among the poets who have given shape to modern imaginative literature, while the older heroics of the Teutonic migration are forgotten, and the things of Iceland are utterly unknown.

French epic has some great advantages in comparison with the epic experiments of Teutonic verse. For one thing, it exists in great quantity; there is no want of specimens, though they are not all of the best sort or the best period. Further, it has no difficulty, only too much ease, in keeping a long regular course of narrative. Even *Beowulf* appears to have attained to its epic proportions by a succession of efforts, and with difficulty; it labours rather heavily over the longer epic course. *Maldon* is a poem that runs freely, but here the course is shorter, and it carries much less weight. The Northern poems of the "Elder Edda" never attain the right epic scale at all; their abrupt and lyrical manner is the opposite of the epic mode of narration. It is true that the *chansons de geste* are far from the perfect continuity of the Homeric narrative. *Roland* is described by M. Gaston Paris in terms not unlike those that are applied by Ten Brink in his criticism of *Beowulf*:—

On peut dire que la *Chanson de Roland* (ainsi que toutes nos plus anciennes chansons de geste) se développe non pas, comme les poèmes homériques, par un courant large et ininterrompu, non pas, comme le *Nibelungenlied*, par des battements d'ailes égaux et lents, mais par un suite d'explosions successives, toujours arrêtées court et toujours reprenant avec soudaineté" (*Litt. fr. au moyen âge*, p. 59).

Roland is a succession of separate scenes, with no gradation or transition between them. It still bears traces of the lyrical origins of epic. But the narrative, though broken, is neither stinted nor laboured; it does not, like *Beowulf*, give the impression that it has been expanded beyond the convenient limits, and that the author is scant of breath. And none of the later *chansons de geste* are so restricted and reserved in their design as *Roland;* most of them are diffuse and long. The French and the Teutonic epics are at opposite extremes of style.

The French epics are addressed to the largest conceivable audience.[1] They are plain and simple, as different as possible from the allusive brevity of the Northern poems. Even the plainest of the old English poems, even *Maldon*, has to employ the poetical diction, the unprosaic terms and figures of the Teutonic School. The alliterative poetry down to its last days has a vocabulary different from that of prose, and much richer. The French epic language is not distinguished and made difficult in this way; it is "not prismatic but diaphanous." Those who could understand anything could under-

[1] G. Paris, Preface to *Histoire de la littérature française*, edited by L. Petit de Julleville.

stand it, and the *chansons de geste* easily found currency in the market-place, when they were driven by the new romances from their old place of honour in "bower and hall." The Teutonic poetry, even at its simplest, must have required more attention in its hearers than the French, through the strangeness and the greater variety of its vocabulary. It is less familiar, less popular. Whatever dignity may be acquired by the French epic is not due to any special or elaborate convention of phrase. Where it is weak, its poverty is not disguised, as in the weaker portions of Teutonic poetry, by the ornaments and synonyms of the *Gradus*. The commonplaces of French epic are not imposing.[1] With this difference between the French and the Teutonic conventions, there is all the more interest in a comparison of the two kinds, where they come into comparison through any resemblance of their subjects or their thought, as in *Byrhtnoth* and *Roland*.

The French epics have generally a larger political field, more numerous armies, and more magnificent kings, than the Teutonic. In the same degree, their heroism is different from that of the earlier heroic age. The general motives of patriotism and religion, France and Christendom, prevent the free use of the simpler and older motives of individual heroism. The hero of the older sort is still there, but his game is hindered by the larger and more complex political conditions of France; or if these are evaded, still the mere size

[1] See the preface to *Raoul de Cambrai*, ed. Paul Meyer (Anc. Textes), for examples of such *chevilles;* and also *Aimeri de Narbonne*, p. civ.

of the country and numbers of the fighting-men tell against his importance; he is dwarfed by his surroundings. The limitation of the scenes in the poems of *Beowulf*, *Ermanaric*, and *Attila* throws out the figures in strong relief. The mere extent of the stage and the number of the supernumeraries required for the action of most of the French stories appear to have told against the definiteness of their characters; as, on the other hand, the personages in *Beowulf*, without much individual character of their own, seem to gain in precision and strength from the smallness of the scene in which they act. There is less strict economy in the *chansons de geste*.

Apart from this, there is real and essential vagueness in their characters; their drama is rudimentary. The simplicity of the French epic style, which is addressed to a large audience and easily intelligible, is not capable of much dramatic subtlety. It can be made to express a variety of actions and a variety of moods, but these are generally rendered by means of common formulas, without much dramatic insight or intention. While the fragments of Teutonic epic seem to give evidence of a growing dramatic imagination, and the Northern poems, especially, of a series of experiments in character, the French epic imagination appears to have remained content with its established and abstract formulas for different modes of sentiment and passion. It would not be easy to find anything in French epic that gives the same impression of discovery and innovation, of the search for dramatic form, of the absorption of the poet's mind in the

pursuit of an imaginary character, as is given, again and again, by the Northern poems of the Volsung cycle. Yet the *chansons de geste* are often true and effective in their outlines of character, and include a quantity of "humours and observation," though their authors seem to have been unable to give solidity to their sketches.

The weakness of the drama in the French epics, even more than their compliance with foreign romance in the choice of incidents or machinery, is against their claim to be reckoned in the higher order of heroic narrative. They are romantic by the comparative levity of their imagination; the story, with them, is too much for the personages. But it is still the problem of heroic character that engages them, however feebly or conventionally they may deal with it. They rely, like the Teutonic epic and the Sagas, on situations that test the force of character, and they find those situations in the common conditions of an heroic age, subject of course to the modifications of the comparatively late period and late form of society to which they belong. *Roland* is a variation on the one perpetual heroic theme; it has a grander setting, a grander accompaniment, than *Byrhtnoth* or *Waldere*, but it is essentially the old story of the heroic age,—no knight-errantry, but the last resistance of a man driven into a corner.

The greatness of the poem of *Roland* is that of an author who knows his own mind, who has a certain mood of the heroic imagination to express, and is at no loss for his instrument or for the lines of his work.

The poem, as has been already noted, has a general

likeness in its plan to the story of Finnesburh as told in *Beowulf*, and to the poems of the death of Attila. The plot falls into two parts, the second part being the vengeance and expiation.

Although the story is thus not absolutely simple, like the adventures of Beowulf, no epic has a more magnificent simplicity of effect. The other personages, Charlemagne, Ganelon, Oliver, King Marsile, have to Roland nothing like the importance of Agamemnon, Ajax, Diomede, or Hector, as compared with Achilles in the *Iliad*. The poem is almost wholly devoted to the praise and glorification of a single hero; it retains very much of the old manners of the earlier stages of epic poetry, before it ceased to be lyric. It is a poem in honour of a chieftain.

At the same time, this lyrical tone in *Roland* and this pathetic concentration of the interest on one personage do not interfere with the epic plan of the narrative, or disturb the lines of the composition. The central part of the poem is on the Homeric scale; the fighting, the separate combats, are rendered in an Homeric way. *Byrhtnoth* and *Roland* are the works that have given the best medieval counterpart to the battles of Homer. There is more of a crisis and a climax in *Roland* than in the several battles of the *Iliad*, and a different sort of climax from that of *Byrhtnoth*. Everything leads to the agony and heroic death of Roland, and to his glory as the unyielding champion of France and Christendom. It is not as in the *Iliad*, where different heroes have their day, or as at Maldon, where the fall of the captain

leads to the more desperate defence and the more exalted heroism of his companions. Roland is the absolute master of the *Song of Roland*. No other heroic poetry conveys the same effect of pre-eminent simplicity and grandeur. There is hardly anything in the poem except the single mood; its simplicity is overpowering, a type of heroic resistance for all the later poets of Europe. This impressive effect is aided, it is true, by an infusion of the lyrical tone and by playing on the pathetic emotions. Roland is ideal and universal, and the story of his defeat, of the blast of his horn, and the last stroke of Durendal, is a kind of funeral march or "heroic symphony" into which a meaning may be read for every new hero, to the end of the world; for any one in any age whose *Mood is the more as the Might lessens.* Yet although Roland has this universal or symbolical or musical meaning—unlike the more individual personages in the Sagas, who would resent being made into allegories—the total effect is mainly due to legitimate epic means. There is no stinting of the epic proportions or suppression of the epic devices. The *Song of Roland* is narrative poetry, a model of narrative design, with the proper epic spaces well proportioned, well considered, and filled with action. It may be contrasted with the *Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrok*, which is an attempt to get the same sort of moral effect by a process of lyrical distillation from heroic poetry; putting all the strongest heroic motives into the most intense and emphatic form. There is something lyrical in *Roland*, but the poem is not governed by lyrical principles;

it requires the deliberation and the freedom of epic; it must have room to move in before it can come up to the height of its argument. The abruptness of its periods is not really an interruption of its even flight; it is an abruptness of detail, like a broken sea with a larger wave moving under it; it does not impair or disguise the grandeur of the movement as a whole.

There are other poems among the *chansons de geste* which admit of comparison with *Roland*, though *Roland* is supreme; other epics in which the simple motives of heroism and loyalty are treated in a simple and noble way, without any very strong individual character among the personages. Of these rather abstract expositions of the heroic ideal, some of the finest are to be found in the cycle of William of Orange, more especially in the poems relating the exploits of William and his nephew Vivian, and the death of Vivian in the battle against the Moors—

> En icel jor que la dolor fu grans
> Et la bataille orible en Aliscans.

Like *Roland*, the poem of *Aliscans* is rather lyrical in its effect, reiterating and reinforcing the heroic motives, making an impression by repetition of one and the same mood; a poem of the glorification of France. It shows, at the same time, how this motive might be degraded by exaggeration and amplification. There are too many Moors in it (as also in *Roland*), and the sequel is reckless and extravagant, where William of Orange rides to the king's court for help and discovers an ally in the

enormous scullion of the king's kitchen, Rainouart, the Morgante of French epic. Rainouart, along with William of Orange, was seen by Dante in Paradise. In his gigantic and discourteous way he was one of the champions of Christendom, and his manners are interesting as a variation from the conventional heroic standards. But he takes up too much room; he was not invented by the wide and comprehensive epic imagination which finds a place for many varieties of mankind in its story, but by some one who felt that the old epic forms were growing thin and unsatisfactory, and that there was need of some violent diversion to keep the audiences awake. This new device is not abandoned till Rainouart has been sent to Avalon—the epic form and spirit losing themselves in a misappropriation of Romance. These excursions are of course not to be ascribed to the central authors of the cycle of William of Orange; but already even in the most heroic parts of the cycle there are indications of the flagging imagination, the failure of the old motives, which gave an opening to these wild auxiliary forces. Where the epic came to trust too much to the mere heroic sentiment, to the moral of *Roland*, to the contrast of knight and infidel, there was nothing for it but either to have recourse to the formal heroics of Camoens or Tasso, —for which the time had not yet come,—or to be dissolved altogether in a medley of adventures, and to pass from its old station in the front of literature to those audiences of the market-place that even

now, in some parts of the world, have a welcome for Charlemagne and his peers.[1]

Those of the French epics in which the motives of *Roland* are in some form or other repeated, in which the defence of Christendom is the burden, are rightly considered the best representatives of the whole body. But there are others in which with less dignity of theme there is more freedom, and in which an older epic type, more akin to the Teutonic, nearer in many ways to the Icelandic Sagas, is preserved, and for a long time maintains itself distinct from all the forms of romance and the romantic schools. It is not in *Roland* or in *Aliscans* that the epic interest in character is most pronounced and most effective. Those among the *chansons de geste* which make least of the adventures in comparison with the personages, which think more of the tragic situation than of rapid changes of scene and incident, are generally those which represent the feuds and quarrels between the king and his vassals, or among the great houses themselves; the anarchy, in fact, which belongs to an heroic age and passes from experience into heroic literature. There is hardly any of the *chansons de geste* in which this element of heroic anarchy is not to be found in a greater or less degree. In *Roland*, for example, though the main action is between the French and the Moors, it is jealousy and rivalry that bring about the catastrophe, through the treason of Ganelon. This sort of jealousy, which is subordinate

[1] *Historia Verdadera de Carlo Magno y los doce Pares de Francia:* Madrid, 4to (1891), a chap-book of thirty-two pages.

in *Roland*, forms the chief motive of some of the other epics. These depend for their chief interest on the vicissitudes of family quarrels almost as completely as the Sagas. These are the French counterparts of *Eyrbyggja*, and of the stories of Glum or Gisli. In France, as in Iceland, the effect of the story is produced as much by the energy of the characters as by the interest of adventures. Only in the French epic, while they play for larger stakes, the heroes are incomparably less impressive. The imagination which represents them is different in kind from the Icelandic, and puts up with a very indefinite and general way of denoting character. Though the extant poems are late, some of them have preserved a very elementary psychology and a very simple sort of ethics, the artistic formulas and devices of a rudimentary stage which has nothing to correspond to it in the extant Icelandic prose.

Raoul de Cambrai in its existing form is a late poem; it has gone through the process of translation from assonance into rhyme, and like *Huon of Bordeaux*, though by a different method, it has been fitted with a romantic continuation. But the first part of the poem apparently keeps the lines of an older and more original version. The story is not one of the later cyclic fabrications; it has an historical basis and is derived from the genuine epic tradition of that tenth-century school which unfortunately is only known through its descendants and its influence.. *Raoul de Cambrai*, though in an altered verse and later style, may be taken as

presenting an old story still recognisable in most of its original features, especially in its moral.

Raoul de Cambrai, a child at his father's death, is deprived of his inheritance. To make up for this he is promised, later, the first fief that falls vacant, and asserts his claim in a way that brings him into continual trouble,—a story with great opportunities for heroic contrasts and complications. The situation is well chosen; it is better than that of the story of Glum, which is rather like it[1]—the right is not all on one side. Raoul has a just cause, but cannot make it good; he is driven to be unjust in order to come by his own. Violence and excess in a just cause will make a tragic history; there is no fault to be found with the general scheme or principle in this case. It is in the details that the barbarous simplicity of the author comes out. For example, in the invasion of the lands on which he has a claim, Raoul attacks and burns a nunnery, and in it the mother of his best friend and former squire, Bernier. The injured man, his friend, is represented as taking it all in a helpless dull expostulatory way. The author has no language to express any imaginative passion; he can only repeat, in a muffled professional voice, that it was really a very painful and discreditable affair. The violent passions here are those of the heroic age in its most barbarous form; more sudden and uncontrolled even than the anger of Achilles. But with all their vehemence and violence there is no real tragic force, and when the hero is killed by his friend,

[1] Glum, like Raoul, is a widow's son deprived of his rights.

and the friend is sorry afterwards, there is nothing but the mere formal and abstract identity of the situation to recall to mind the tragedy of Kjartan and Bolli.

Garin le Loherain is a story with a similar plot,—the estrangement and enmity of old friends, "sworn companions." Though no earlier than *Raoul de Cambrai*, though belonging in date to the flourishing period of romance, it is a story of the older heroic age, and its contents are epic. Its heroes are unsophisticated, and the incidents, sentiments, and motives are primitive and not of the romantic school. The story is much superior to *Raoul de Cambrai* in speed and lightness; it does not drag at the critical moments; it has some humour and some grace. Among other things, its gnomic passages represent very fairly the dominant heroic ideas of courage and good temper; it may be appealed to for the humanities of the *chansons de geste*, expressed in a more fluent and less emphatic shape than *Roland*. The characters are taken very lightly, but at least they are not obtuse and awkward. If there is not much dramatic subtlety, there is a recognition and appreciation of different aspects of the same character. The story proceeds like an Icelandic Saga, through different phases of a long family quarrel, springing from a well-marked origin; foreshadowed and accompanied, as in many of the Sagas, by the hereditary felonious character of the one party, which yet is not blackened too much nor wholly unrelieved.

As in many of the Icelandic stories, there is a stronger dramatic interest in the adversary, the wrong

side, than in the heroes. As with Kari and Flosi in *Njála*, as with Kjartan and Bolli in *Laxdœla*, and with Sigmund and Throndof Gata in *Færeyinga Saga*, so in the story of Garin it is Fromont the enemy whose case is followed with most attention, because it is less simple than that of the heroes, Garin of Lorraine and Begon his brother. The character of Fromont shows the true observation, as well as the inadequate and sketchy handling, of the French epic school. Fromont is in the wrong; all the trouble follows from his original misconduct, when he refused to stand by Garin in a war of defence against the Moors :—

Iluec comence li grans borroflemens.

But Fromont's demeanour afterwards is not that of a traitor and a felon, such as his father was. He belongs to a felonious house; he is the son of Hardré, one of the notorious traitors of French epic tradition; but he is less than half-hearted in his own cause, always lamentable, perplexed, and peevish, always trying to be just, and always dragged further into iniquity by the mischief-makers among his friends. This idea of a distracted character is worked out as well as was possible for a poet of that school, in a passage of narrative which represents more than one of the good qualities of French epic poetry,—the story of the death of Begon, and the vengeance exacted for him by his brother Garin. This episode shows how the French poets could deal with matter like that of the Sagas. The story is well told, fluently and clearly; it contains some fine expressions of heroic sentiment,

and a good fight, as well as the ineffectual sorrows and good intentions of the anti-hero Fromont, with all the usual tissue of violence which goes along with a feud in heroic narrative, when the feud is regarded as something impersonal and fatal, outside the wishes of the agents in it.

It may be said here that although the story of Garin and of the feud between the house of Lorraine and their enemies is long drawn out and copious in details, it is not confused, but falls into a few definite episodes of warfare, with intervals of truce and apparent reconciliation. Of these separate acts in the tragedy, the *Death of Begon* is the most complete in itself; the most varied, as well as the most compact. The previous action is for a modern taste too much occupied with the commonplaces of epic warfare, Homeric combats in the field, such as need the heroic motives of Maldon or Roncesvalles to make them interesting. In the story of the *Death of Begon* there is a change of scene from the common epic battlefield; the incidents are not taken from the common stock of battle-poetry, and the Homeric supernumeraries are dismissed.

This episode[1] begins after an interval in the feud, and tells how Begon one day thought of his brother Garin whom he had not seen for seven years and more (the business of the feud having been slack for so long), and how he set out for the East country to pay his brother a visit, with the chance of a big boar-hunt on the way. The opening passage is a very

[1] *Garin le Loherain*, ed. Paulin Paris (1833-35), vol. ii. pp. 217-272.

complete and lively selection from the experience and the sentiments of the heroic age; it represents the old heroic temper and the heroic standard of value, with, at the same time, a good deal of the gentler humanities.

One day Begon was in his castle of Belin; at his side was the Duchess Beatrice, and he kissed her on the mouth: he saw his two sons coming through the hall (so the story runs). The elder was named Gerin and the younger Hernaudin; the one was twelve and the other was ten years old, and with them went six noble youths, running and leaping with one another, playing and laughing and taking their sport.

The Duke saw them and began to sigh, and his lady questioned him:—

"Ah, my Lord Duke, why do you ponder thus? Gold and silver you have in your coffers; falcons on their perch, and furs of the vair and the grey, and mules and palfreys; and well have you trodden down your enemies: for six days' journey round you have no neighbour so stout but he will come to your levy."

Said the Duke: "Madame, you have spoken true, save in one thing. Riches are not in the vair and the grey, nor in money, nor in mules and horses, but riches are in kinsmen and friends: the heart of a man is worth all the gold in the land. Do you not remember how I was assailed and beset at our home-coming? and but for my friends how great had been my shame that day! Pepin has set me in these marches where I have none of my near friends save Rigaut and Hervi his father; I have no brother but one, Garin the Lothering, and full seven years are past and gone that I have not seen him, and for that I am grieved and vexed and ill at ease. Now I will set off to see my brother Garin, and the child Girbert his son that I have never seen. Of the woods of Vicogne and of St. Bertin I hear news that there is a boar there; I will run him down, please the Lord, and will bring the head to Garin, a wonder to look upon, for of its like never man heard tell."

Begon's combined motives are all alike honest, and his rhetoric is as sound as that of Sarpedon or of

Gunnar. Nor is there any reason to suppose, any more than in the case of Byrhtnoth, that what is striking in the poem is due to its comparative lateness, and to its opportunities of borrowing from new discoveries in literature. If that were so, then we might find similar things among the newer fashions of the contemporary twelfth-century literature; but in fact one does not find in the works of the romantic school the same kind of humanity as in this scene. The melancholy of Begon at the thought of his isolation—"Bare is back without brother behind it"—is an adaptation of a common old heroic motive which is obscured by other more showy ideas in the romances. The conditions of life are here essentially those of the heroic age, an age which has no particular ideas of its own, which lives merely on such ideas as are struck out in the collision of lawless heavy bodies, in that heroic strife which is the parent of all things, and, among the rest, of the ideas of loyalty, fellowship, fair dealing, and so on. There is nothing romantic or idealist in Begon; he is merely an honest country gentleman, rather short of work.

He continues in the same strain, after the duchess has tried to dissuade him. She points out to him the risk he runs by going to hunt on his enemy's marches,—

C'est en la marche Fromont le poësti,

—and tells him of her foreboding that he will never return alive. His answer is like that of Hector to Polydamas:—

Diex ! dist il, dame, merveilles avez dit :
Ja mar croiroie sorciere ne devin ;
Par aventure vient li biens el païs,
Je ne lairoie, por tot l'or que Diex fist,
Que je n'i voise, que talens m'en est prins.

The hunting of the boar is as good as anything of its kind in history, and it is impossible to read it without wishing that it had been printed a few years earlier to be read by Sir Walter Scott. He would have applauded as no one else can this story of the chase and of the hunter separated from his companions in the forest. There is one line especially in the lament for Begon after his death which is enough by itself to prove the soundness of the French poet's judgment, and his right to a welcome at Abbotsford : "This was a true man ; his dogs loved him" : —

Gentis hons fu, moult l'amoient si chien.

Begon came by his death in the greenwood. The forester found him there and reported him to Fromont's seneschal, who called out six of his men to go and take the poacher ; and along with them went Thibaut, Fromont's nephew, an old rival of Begon. Begon set his back to an aspen tree and killed four of the churls and beat off the rest, but was killed himself at last with an arrow.

The four dead men were brought home and Begon's horse was led away :—

En une estable menerent le destrier
Fronce et hennit et si grate des pies
Que nus de char ne li ouse aprochier.

Begon was left lying where he fell and his three dogs came back to him : —

> Seul ont Begon en la forest laissié :
> Et jouste lui revindrent si trois chien,
> Hulent et braient com fuissent enragié.

This most spirited passage of action and adventure shows the poet at his best; it is the sort of thing that he understands, and he carries it through without a mistake. It is followed by an attempt at another theme where something more is required of the author, and his success is not so perfect. He is drawn into the field of tragic emotion. Here, though his means are hardly sufficient for elaborate work, he sketches well. The character of Fromont when the news of his opponent's death is brought to him comes out as something of a different value from the sheer barbarism of *Raoul de Cambrai*. The narrative is light and wanting in depth, but there is no untruth and no dulness in the conception, and the author's meaning is perfectly clear. Fromont is different from the felons of his own household. Fromont is the adversary, but he is a gentleman. Even when he knows no more of the event than that a trespasser has been killed in the forest, he sends his men to bring in the body ;—

> Frans hons de l'autre doient avoir pitié

—and when he sees who it is (*vif l'ot véu, mort le reconnut bien*) he breaks out into strong language against the churls who have killed the most courteous knight that ever bore arms. Mingled with this

sentiment is the thought of all the trouble to come from the revival of the feud, but his vexation does not spring from mere self-interest. Fromondin his son is also angry with Thibaut his cousin; Thibaut ought to be flayed alive for his foul stroke. But while Fromondin is thinking of the shame of the murder which will be laid to the account of his father's house, Fromont's thought is more generous, a thought of respect and regret for his enemy. The tragedy of the feud continues after this; as before, Fromont is involved by his irrepressible kinsmen, and nothing comes of his good thoughts and intentions.

> Our wills and fates do so contrary run,
> Our thoughts are ours, the ends none of our own.

This moral axiom is understood by the French author, and in an imaginative, not a didactic way, though his imagination is not strong enough to make much of it.

In this free, rapid, and unforced narrative, that nothing might be wanting of the humanities of the French heroic poetry, there is added the lament for Begon, by his brother and his wife. Garin's lament is what the French epic can show in comparison with the famous lament for Lancelot at the end of the *Mort d'Arthur*:—

> Ha! sire Begues, li Loherains a dit
> Frans chevaliers, corajeus et hardis!
> Fel et angris contre vos anemis
> Et dols et simples a trestoz vos amis!
> Tant mar i fustes, biaus frères, biaus amis!

Here the advantage is with the English romantic

author, who has command of a more subtle and various eloquence. On the other hand, the scene of the grief of the Duchess Beatrice, when Begon is brought to his own land, and his wife and his sons come out to meet him, shows a different point of view from romance altogether, and a different dramatic sense. The whole scene of the conversation between Beatrice and Garin is written with a steady hand; it needs no commentary to bring out the pathos or the dramatic truth of the consolation offered by Garin.

She falls fainting, she cannot help herself; and when she awakens her lamenting is redoubled. She mourns over her sons, Hernaudin and Gerin: "Children, you are orphans; dead is he that begot you, dead is he that was your stay!"—"Peace, madame," said Garin the Duke, "this is a foolish speech and a craven. You, for the sake of the land that is in your keeping, for your lineage and your lordly friends—some gentle knight will take you to wife and cherish you; but it falls to me to have long sorrow. The more I have of silver and fine gold, the more will be my grief and vexation of spirit. Hernaudin and Gerin are my nephews; it will be mine to suffer many a war for them, to watch late, and to rise up early."—"Thank you, uncle," said Hernaudin: "Lord! why have I not a little habergeon of my own? I would help you against your enemies!" The Duke hears him, and takes him in his arms and kisses the child. "By God, fair nephew, you are stout and brave, and like my brother in face and mouth, the rich Duke, on whom God have mercy!" When this was said, they go to bury the Duke in the chapel beyond Belin; the pilgrims see it to this day, as they come back from Galicia, from St. James.[1]

[1] One of the frequent morals of French epic (repeated also by French romance) is the vanity of overmuch sorrow for the dead.

ἀλλὰ χρὴ τὸν μὲν καταθάπτειν ὅς κε θάνῃσιν
νηλέα θυμὸν ἔχοντες, ἐπ' ἤματι δακρύσαντας.
(Odysseus speaking) *Il.* xix. 228.

"Laissiez ester," li quens Guillaumes dit;
"Tout avenra ce que doit avenir;

Roland, *Raoul de Cambrai*, and *Garin le Loherain* represent three kinds of French heroic poetry. *Roland* is the more purely heroic kind, in which the interest is concentrated on the passion of the hero, and the hero is glorified by every possible means of patriotism, religion, and the traditional ethics of battle, with the scenery and the accompaniments all chosen so as to bring him into relief and give him an ideal or symbolical value, like that of the statues of the gods. *Raoul* and *Garin*, contrasted with *Roland*, are two varieties of another species; namely, of the heroic poetry which (like the *Odyssey* and the Icelandic stories) represents the common life of an heroic age, without employing the ideal motives of great causes, religious or patriotic, and without giving to the personages any great representative or symbolical import. The subjects of *Raoul* and *Garin* belong to the same order. The difference between them is that the author of the first is only half awake to the chances offered by his theme. The theme is well chosen, not disabled, like so many romantic plots, by an inherent fallacy of ethics or imagination; a story that shapes itself naturally, if the author has the wit to see it. The author of *Raoul de Cambrai*, unhappily, has "no more wit than a Christian or an ordinary man," and leaves his work encumbered with his dulness of perception; an

> Li mort as mors, li vif voissent as vis;
> Duel sor dolor et joie sor joïr
> Ja nus frans hons nel devroit maintenir."
> Les cors enportent, les ont en terre mis.
> *Garin*, i. p. 262.

evidence of the fertility of the heroic age in good subjects, and of the incompetence of some of the artists. *Garin*, on the other hand, shows how the common subject-matter might be worked up by a man of intelligence, rather discursive than imaginative, but alive to the meaning of his story, and before everything a continuous narrator, with the gift of natural sequence in his adventures. He relates as if he were following the course of events in his own memory, with simplicity and lucidity, qualities which were not beyond the compass of the old French verse and diction. He does not stop to elaborate his characters; he takes them perhaps too easily. But his lightness of spirit saves him from the untruth of *Raoul de Cambrai;* and while his ethics are the commonplaces of the heroic age, these commonplaces are not mere formulas or cant; they are vividly realised.

There is no need to multiply examples in order to prove the capacity of French epic for the same kind of subjects as those of the Sagas; that is, for the representation of strenuous and unruly life in a comprehensive and liberal narrative, noble in spirit and not much hampered by conventional nobility or dignity.

Roland is the great achievement of French epic, and there are other poems, also, not far removed from the severity of *Roland* and inspired by the same patriotic and religious ardour. But the poem of *Garin of Lorraine* (which begins with the defence of France against the infidels, but very soon passes to the business of the great feud—its proper theme), though it is lacking in the political motives, not to

speak of the symbolical imagination of *Roland*, is significant in another way, because though much later in date, though written at a time when Romance was prevalent, it is both archaic in its subject and also comprehensive in its treatment. It has something like the freedom of movement and the ease which in the Icelandic Sagas go along with similar antique subjects. The French epic poetry is not all of it made sublime by the ideas of *Roland;* there is still scope for the free representation of life in different moods, with character as the dominant interest.

It should not be forgotten that the French epic has room for comedy, not merely in the shape of "comic relief," though that unhappily is sometimes favoured by the *chansons de geste*, and by the romances as well, but in the "humours" inseparable from all large and unpedantic fiction.

A good deal of credit on this account may be claimed for Galopin, the reckless humorist of the party of Garin of Lorraine, and something rather less for Rigaut the Villain Unwashed, another of Garin's friends. This latter appears to be one of the same family as Hreidar the Simple, in the Saga of Harald Hardrada; a figure of popular comedy, one of the lubbers who turn out something different from their promise. Clumsy strength and good-nature make one of the most elementary compounds, and may easily be misused (as in *Rainouart*) where the author has few scruples and no dramatic consistency. Galopin is a more singular humorist, a ribald and a prodigal, yet of gentle birth, and capable of

good service when he can be got away from the tavern.

There are several passages in the *chansons de geste* where, as with *Rainouart*, the fun is of a grotesque and gigantic kind, like the fun to be got out of the giants in the Northern mythology, and the trolls in the Northern popular tales. The heathen champion Corsolt in the *Coronemenz Looïs* makes good comedy of this sort, when he accosts the Pope: "Little man! why is your head shaved?" and explains to him his objection to the Pope's religion: "You are not well advised to talk to me of God: he has done me more wrong than any other man in the world," and so on.[1]

Also, in a less exaggerated way, there is some appreciation of the humour to be found in the contrast between the churl and the knight, and their different points of view; as in the passage of the *Charroi de Nismes*, where William of Orange

[1] Respont li reis: "N'iés pas bien enseigniez,
Qui devant mei oses de Deu plaidier;
C'est l'om el mont qui plus m'a fait irier:
Mon pere ocist une foldre del ciel;
Tot i fu ars, ne li pot l'en aidier.
Quant Deus l'ot mort, si fist que enseigniez;
El ciel monta, ça ne volt repairier;
Ge nel poeie sivre ne enchalcier,
Mais de ses omes me sui ge puis vengiez;
De cels qui furent levé et baptisié
Ai fait destruire plus de trente miliers,
Ardeir en feu et en eve neier;
Quant ge la sus ne puis Deu guerreier,
Nul de ses omes ne vueil ça jus laissier,
Et mei et Deu n'avons mais que plaidier:
Meie est la terre et siens sera li ciels.
l.c., l. 522.

The last verse expresses the same sentiment as the answer of the Emperor Henry when he was told to beware of God's vengeance: "Celum celi Domino, terram autem dedit filiis hominum" (Otton. Frising. *Gesta Frid.* i. 11).

questions the countryman about the condition of the city under its Saracen masters, and is answered with information about the city tolls and the price of bread.[1] It must be admitted, however, that this slight passage of comedy is far outdone by the conversation in the romance of *Aucassin and Nicolette*, between Aucassin and the countryman, where the author of that story seems to get altogether beyond the conventions of his own time into the region of Chaucer, or even somewhere near the forest of Arden. The comedy of the *chansons de geste* is easily satisfied with plain and robust practical jokes. Yet it counts for something in the picture, and it might be possible, in a detailed criticism of the epics, to distinguish between the comic incidents that have an artistic value and intention, and those that are due merely to the rudeness of those common minstrels who are accused (by their rivals in epic poetry) of corrupting and debasing the texts.

There were many ways in which the French epic was degraded at the close of its course—by dilution and expansion, by the growth of a kind of dull

[1] Li cuens Guillaumes li comença à dire :
—Diva, vilain, par la loi dont tu vives
Fus-tu a Nymes, la fort cité garnie ?
—Oïl, voir, sire, le paaige me quistrent ;
Ge fui trop poures, si nel poi baillier mie.
Il me lessèrent por mes enfanz qu'il virent.
—Di moi, vilain, des estres de la vile.
Et cil respont : — Ce vos sai-ge bien dire
Por un denier .ii. granz pains i véismes ;
La denerée vaut .iii. en autre vile :
Moult par est bone, se puis n'est empirie.
—Fox, dist Guillaume, ce ne demant-je mie,
Mès des paiens chevaliers de la vile,
Del rei Otrant et de sa compaignie.
l.c., ll. 903-916.

parasitic, sapless language over the old stocks, by the general failure of interest, and the transference of favour to other kinds of literature. Reading came into fashion, and the minstrels lost their welcome in the castles, and had to betake themselves to more vulgar society for their livelihood. At the same time, epic made a stand against the new modes and a partial compliance with them; and the *chansons de geste* were not wholly left to the vagrant reciters, but were sometimes copied out fair in handsome books, and held their own with the romances.

The compromise between epic and romance in old French literature is most interesting where romance has invaded a story of the simpler kind like *Raoul de Cambrai*. Stories of war against the infidel, stories like those of William of Orange, were easily made romantic. The poem of the *Prise d'Orange*, for example, an addition to this cycle, is a pure romance of adventure, and a good one, though it has nothing of the more solid epic in it. Where the action is carried on between the knights of France and the Moors, one is prepared for a certain amount of wonder; the palaces and dungeons of the Moors are the right places for strange things to happen, and the epic of the defence of France goes easily off into night excursions and disguises: the Moorish princess also is there, to be won by the hero. All this is natural; but it is rather more paradoxical to find the epic of family feuds, originally sober, grave, and business-like, turning more and more extravagant, as it does in the *Four Sons of Aymon*, which in its

original form, no doubt, was something like the more serious parts of *Raoul de Cambrai* or of the *Lorrains*, but which in the extant version is expanded and made wonderful, a story of wild adventures, yet with traces still of its origin among the realities of the heroic age, the common matters of practical interest to heroes.

The case of *Huon of Bordeaux* is more curious, for there the original sober story has been preserved, and it is one of the best and most coherent of them all,[1] till it is suddenly changed by the sound of Oberon's horn and passes out of the real world altogether.

The lines of the earlier part of the story are worth following, for there is no better story among the French poems that represent the ruder heroic age—a simple story of feudal rivalries and jealousies, surviving in this strange way as an introduction to the romance of *Oberon*.

The Emperor Charlemagne, one hundred and twenty-five years old, but not particularly reverend, holds a court at Paris one Whitsuntide and asks to be relieved of his kingdom. His son Charlot is to succeed him. Charlot is worthless, the companion of traitors and disorderly persons; he has made enough trouble already in embroiling Ogier the Dane with the Emperor. Charlemagne is infatuated and will have his son made king:—

Si m'aït Diex, tu auras si franc fief
Com Damediex qui tot puet justicier
Tient Paradis de regne droiturier!

[1] Cf. Auguste Longnon, "L'élément historique de Huon de Bordeaux, *Romania*, viii.

Then the traitor Amaury de la Tor de Rivier gets up and brings forward the case of Bordeaux, which has rendered no service for seven years, since the two brothers, Huon and Gerard, were left orphans. Amaury proposes that the orphans should be dispossessed. Charlemagne agrees at once, and withdraws his assent again (a painful spectacle!) when it is suggested to him that Huon and his brother have omitted their duties in pure innocence, and that their father Sewin was always loyal.

Messengers are sent to bring Huon and Gerard to Paris, and every chance is to be given them of proving their good faith to the Emperor.

This is not what Amaury the traitor wants; he goes to Charlot and proposes an ambuscade to lie in wait for the two boys and get rid of them; his real purpose being to get rid of the king's son as well as of Huon of Bordeaux.

The two boys set out, and on the way fall in with the Abbot of Clugni, their father's cousin, a strong-minded prelate, who accompanies them. Outside Paris they come to the ambush, and the king's son is despatched by Amaury to encounter them. What follows is an admirable piece of narrative. Gerard rides up to address Charlot; Charlot rides at him as he is turning back to report to Huon and the Abbot, and Gerard who is unarmed falls severely wounded. Then Huon, also unarmed, rides at Charlot, though his brother calls out to him: "I see helmets flashing there among the bushes." With his scarlet mantle rolled round his arm he meets the lance of

Charlot safely, and with his sword, as he passes, cuts through the helmet and head of his adversary.

This is good enough for Amaury, and he lets Huon and his party ride on to the city, while he takes up the body of Charlot on a shield and follows after.

Huon comes before the Emperor and tells his story as far as he knows it; he does not know that the felon he has killed is the Emperor's son. Charlemagne gives solemn absolution to Huon. Then appears Amaury with a false story, making Huon the aggressor. Charlemagne forgets all about the absolution and snatches up a knife, and is with difficulty calmed by his wise men.

The ordeal of battle has to decide between the two parties; there are elaborate preparations and preliminaries, obviously of the most vivid interest to the audience. The demeanour of the Abbot of Clugni ought not to be passed over: he vows that if Heaven permits any mischance to come upon Huon, he, the Abbot, will make it good on St. Peter himself, and batter his holy shrine till the gold flies.

In the combat Huon is victorious; but unhappily a last treacherous effort of his enemy, after he has yielded and confessed, makes Huon cut off his head in too great a hurry before the confession is heard by the Emperor or any witnesses:—

> Le teste fist voler ens el larris:
> Hues le voit, mais ce fu sans jehir.

The head went flying over the lea, but it had no more words to speak.

Huon is not forgiven by the Emperor; the Emperor spares his life, indeed, but sends him on a hopeless expedition.

And there the first part of the story ends. The present version is dated in the early part of the reign of St. Louis; it is contemporary with Snorri Sturluson and Sturla his nephew, and exhibits, though not quite in the Icelandic manner, the principal motives of early unruly society, without much fanciful addition, and with a very strong hold upon the tragic situation, and upon the types of character. As in *Raoul de Cambrai*, right and wrong are mixed; the Emperor has a real grievance against Huon, and Huon, with little fault of his own, is put apparently in the wrong. The interests involved are of the strongest possible. There was not a single lord among those to whom the minstrel repeated his story who did not know that he might have to look out for encroachments and injustice—interference at any rate—from the king, and treachery from his neighbours. No one hoped to leave his castles and lands in peace to his son, who did not also fear that his son might be left defenceless and his lands exposed to competition; a fear most touchingly expressed in the lament of William of Poitiers, when he set out on the first Crusade.[1]

Whatever general influences of law or politics or social economy are supposed to be at work in the story of *Huon of Bordeaux*,—and all this earlier part of it is a story of feudal politics and legal problems,—

[1] "Pos de chantar m'es pres talens:"—Raynouard, *Choix des poésies des Troubadours*, iv. p. 83; Bartsch, *Chrestomathie provençale*.

these influences were also present in the real world in which the maker and the hearers of the poem had their life. It is plain and serious dealing with matter of fact.

But after the ordeal of battle in which Huon kills the traitor, the tone changes with great abruptness and a new story begins.

The commission laid upon Huon by the implacable and doting Emperor is nothing less than that which afterwards was made a byword for all impossible enterprises—"to take the Great Turk by the beard." He is to go to Babylon and, literally, to beard the Admiral there, and carry off the Admiral's daughter. The audience is led away into the wide world of Romance. Huon goes to the East by way of Rome and Brindisi—naturally enough—but the real world ends at Brindisi; beyond that everything is magical.