

The Story of King Constant

translated by Eugene Mason

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Now telleth the tale that once upon a time there lived an Emperor of Byzantium, the which town is now called Constantinople, but in ancient days it was called Byzantium. In days long since there reigned in this city an Emperor; a Paynim he was, and was held to be a great clerk in the laws of his religion. He was learned in a science called astronomy, and knew the courses of the stars, the planets and the moon; moreover, in the stars he read many marvels; he had knowledge of many things which the Paynims study deeply, and had faith in divinations, and in the answers of the Evil One—that is to say, the Adversary. He knew, besides, much of enchantments and sorceries, as many a Paynim doth to this very day.

Now it chanced that the Emperor Muselin fared forth one night, he and a certain lord of his together, and went their ways about this city of Constantinople, and the moon shone very clear. They heard a Christian woman, travailing of child, cry aloud as they passed before her house; but the husband of this dame was set in the terrace upon his roof, and now he prayed God to deliver her from her peril, and again he prayed that she might not be delivered. When the Emperor had listened to his words for a long time, he said to the knight—

"Have you heard this caitif who prays now that his wife may not be delivered of her child, and again that she may be delivered? Surely he is viler than any thief, for every man should show pity to woman, and the greater pity to her in pain with child. But may Mahound and Termagaunt aid me never if I hang him not by the neck, so he give me not fair reason for this deed. Let us now go to him."

So they went, and the Emperor spake him thus,. "Caitif, tell me truly why thou prayest thy God in this fashion, now that He should deliver thy wife in her labour, and again that she should not be delivered; this must I know!"

"Sire," answered he, "I will tell you readily. Truly I am a clerk, and know much of a science that men call astrology. I have learned, too, the courses of the stars and the planets, and thus I knew well that were my wife delivered in that hour when I prayed God to close her womb, then the child must be for ever lost, and certainly would he be hanged, or drowned, or set within the fire. But when I saw the hour was good, and the case fair, then I prayed God that she might be delivered; and I cried to Him, so that of His mercy He heard my prayer, and now the boy is born to a goodly heritage; blessed be God and praised be His Name."

"Now tell me," said the King, "to what fair heritage is this child born?"

"Sire," said he, "with all my heart. Know, sire, of a truth that the child born in this place shall have to wife the daughter of the Emperor of this town, she who was born but eight days since, and shall become Emperor and lord of this city, and of the whole world."

"Caitif," cried the Emperor, "never can it come to pass as thou sayest."

"Sire," answered he, "so shall it be seen, and thus behoveth it to be."

"Certes," said the Emperor, "great faith hath he who receives it."

Then they went from the house, but the Emperor commanded his knight that he should bear away the child in so privy a manner, if he were able, that none should see the deed. The knight came again to the house, and found two women in the chamber, diligently tending the mother in her bed, but the child was wrapt in linen clothes, and was laid upon a stool. Thereupon the knight entered the room, and set hands upon the child, and placed him on a certain table used for chess, and carried him to the Emperor, in so secret a fashion that neither nurse nor mother saw aught thereof. Then the Emperor struck the child with a knife, wounding him from the stomach to the navel, protesting to the knight that never should son of such a miscreant have his daughter to wife, nor come to sit upon his throne. He would even have plucked the heart from out the breast, but the knight dissuaded him, saying—

"Ah, sire, for the love of God, what is this thing that you would do!"

Such a deed becomes you naught, and if men heard thereof, great reproach would be yours. Enough have you done, for he is more than dead already. But if it be your pleasure to take further trouble in the matter, give him to me, and I will cast him in the sea."

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"Yea," cried the Emperor, "throw him in the water, for I hate him too much."

The knight took the child, wrapped him in a piece of brodered silk, and went with him towards the water. But on his way, pity came into his heart, and he thought within himself that never should new-born babe be drowned by him; so he set him, swathed in the silken cloth, on a warm muck-heap, before the gate of a certain abbey of monks, who at that hour were chanting matins. When the monks kept silence from their singing, they heard the crying of the child, and carried him to the Lord Abbot, who commanded that so fair a boy should be cherished of them. So they unswathed him from the piece of stuff, and saw the grisly wound upon his body. As soon, therefore, as it was day the Abbot sent for physicians, and inquired of them at what cost they would cure the child of his hurt; and they asked of him one hundred pieces of gold. But he answered that such a sum was beyond his means, and that the saving of the child would prove too costly. Then he made a bargain with the surgeons to heal the child of his wound for eighty golden pieces; and afterwards he brought him to the font, and caused him to be named Constant, because of his costing the abbey so great a sum to be made whole.

Whilst the doctors were about this business, the Abbot sought out a healthy nurse, in whose breast the infant lay till he was healed of his hurt, for his flesh was soft and tender, and the knife wound grew together quickly, but ever after on his body showed the gash. The child grew in stature, and to great beauty. When he was seven years old the Abbot put him to school, where he proved so fair a scholar that he passed all his class-mates in aptness and knowledge. When he was twelve years of age the boy had come to marvellous beauty; no fairer could you find in all the land; and when the Abbot saw how comely was the lad and how gracious, he caused him to ride in his train when he went abroad.

Now it chanced that the Abbot wished to complain to the Emperor of a certain wrong that his servants had done to the abbey. So the Abbot made ready a rich present, for the abbey and monastery were his vassals, although this Emperor was but a Saracen. When the Abbot had proffered his goodly gift, the Emperor appointed a time, three days thence, to inquire into the matter, when he would lie at a castle of his, some three miles out from the city of Byzantium. On the day fixed by the Emperor, the Abbot got to horse, with his chaplain, his squire, and his train; and amongst them rode Constant, so goodly in every whit that all men praised his exceeding beauty, and said amongst themselves that certainly he came of high peerage, and would rise to rank and wealth. Thus rode the Abbot towards the castle where the Emperor lay, and when they met, he greeted him and did him homage, and the Emperor bade him to enter within the castle, where he would speak with him of his wrong.

The Abbot bowed before him and answered—

"Sire, as God wills."

The Abbot called Constant to him, for the lad carried the prelate's hat of felt, whilst he talked with the Emperor, and the Emperor gazed on the varlet, and saw him so comely and winning, that never before had he seen so fair a person. Then he asked who the boy was; and the Abbot answered that he knew little, save that he was his man, and that the abbey had nourished him from his birth—"and truly were this business of ours finished, I could relate fine marvels concerning him."

"Is this so?" said the Emperor; "come now with me to the castle, and there you shall tell me the truth."

The Emperor returned to the castle, and the Abbot was ever at his side, as one who had a heavy business, and he made the best bargain that he might, for the Emperor was his lord and suzerain. But the matter did not put from the Emperor's mind the great beauty of the lad, and he commanded the Abbot to bring the varlet before him. So the boy was sent for, and came with speed. When Constant stood in the presence, the Emperor praised his beauty, and said to the Abbot that it was a great pity that so fair a child should be a Christian. The Abbot replied that it was rather a great happiness, for one day he would render to God an unspotted soul. When the Emperor heard this thing he laughed at his folly, saying the laws of Christ were of nothing worth, and that hell was the portion of such as put faith in them. Sorely grieved was the Abbot when he heard the Paynim jest in this fashion, but he dared not to answer as he wished, and spake soft words to him right humbly.

"Sire, so it pleases the Almighty, such souls are not lost, for, with all sinners, they go to the mercy of the Merciful."

The Emperor inquired when the boy came to his hands, and the Abbot replied that fifteen years before he was found by night on the muck-heap before the abbey door.

"Our monks heard the wail of a tiny child as they came from chanting matins, so they searched for him, and carried him to me. I looked on the child, and he was very fair, so that I bade them to take him to the font and to

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cherish him duly. He was swathed in a rich stuff of scarlet silk, and when he was unwrapped I saw on his stomach a grievous wound; so I sent for doctors and surgeons, and bargained with them to cure him of his hurt for eighty pieces of gold. Afterwards we baptized him, and gave him the name of Coustant, because of his costing so great a sum to be made whole. Yet, though he be healed of his wound, never will his body lose the mark of that grisly gash."

When the Emperor heard this story he knew well that it was the child whom he had sought to slay in so felon a fashion; so he prayed the Abbot to give the lad to his charge. Then replied the Abbot that he would put the matter before his Chapter, but that for his own part the boy should be given to the King very willingly. Never a word, for good or evil, spake the King; so the Abbot took leave, and returned to the monastery, and calling a Chapter of his monks, told them that the Emperor demanded Constant from their hands.

"But I answered that I must speak to you to know your pleasure therein. Now answer if I have done aright."

"What, sire, done rightly!" cried the gravest and wisest of all the monks; "evilly and foolishly have you done in not giving him just what he asked at once. If you will hear our counsel, send Constant to him now as he requires, lest he be angry with us, for quickly can he do us much mischief."

Since it seemed to all the Chapter good that Constant should be sent to the Emperor, the Abbot bade the prior to go upon this errand, and he obeyed, saying, "As God pleases."

He got to horse, and Constant with him, and riding to the Emperor, greeted him in the name of the Abbot and the abbey; then taking Constant by the hand, gave him to the Emperor formally, in such names and in their stead. The Paynim received him as one angered that a nameless man and vagabond must have a king's daughter to wife, and well he thought in his heart to serve him some evil turn.

When the Emperor held Constant in his power, he pondered deeply how he might slay him, and no man speak a word. It chanced at this time that the Emperor had business which called him to the frontier of his realm, a very long way off, a full twelve days' journey. He set forth, carrying Constant in his train, yet brooding how to do him to death; and presently he caused letters to be written in this wise to the castellan of Byzantium.

"I, the Emperor of Byzantium, and lord of Greece, make him, the governor of my city, to know that as soon as he shall read this letter he shall slay, or cause to be slain, the bearer of this letter, forthwith upon the delivery thereof. As your proper body to you is dear, so fail not this command."

Such was the letter Constant carried, and little he knew that it was his death he held in hand. He took the warrant, which was closely sealed, and set out upon his way, riding in such manner that in less than fifteen days he reached Byzantium, the town we now call Constantinople. When the varlet rode through the gate it was the dinner-hour, so (by the will of God) he thought he would not carry his letter to table, but would wait till men had dined. He came with his horse to the palace garden, and the weather was very hot, for it was near to Midsummer Day. The pleasaunce was deep and beautiful, and the lad unbitted his horse, loosened the saddle, and let him graze; then he threw himself down beneath the shelter of a tree, and in that sweet and peaceful place presently fell sound asleep.

Now it happened that when the fair daughter of the Emperor had dined, she entered the garden, and with her four of her maidens, and soon they began to run one after the other, in such play as is the wont of damsels when alone. Playing thus, the fair daughter of the Emperor found herself beneath the tree where Constant lay sleeping, and he was flushed as any rose. When the Princess saw him, she would not willingly withdraw her eyes, saying to her own heart that never in her life had she beheld so comely a person. Then she called to her that one of her companions who was her closest friend, and made excuses to send the others forth from the garden. The fair maiden took her playfellow by the hand, and brought her towards the slumbering youth, saying—

"Sweet friend, here is rich and hidden treasure. Certes, never in all my days have I seen so gracious a person. He is the bearer of letters, and right willingly would I learn his news."

The two damsels came near the sleeping lad, and softly withdrew the letter. When the Princess read the warrant she began to weep very bitterly, and said to her companion, "Certainly this is a heavy matter."

"Ah, madame," said her fellow, "tell me all the case."

"Truly," answered the Princess, "could I but trust you fully, such heaviness should soon be turned to joy."

"Lady," replied she, "surely you may trust me; never will I make known that which you desire to be hid."

So that maiden, the daughter of the Emperor, caused her fellow to pledge faith by all that she held most dear, and then she revealed what the letter held; and the girl answered her—

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"Lady, what would you do herein?"

"I will tell you readily," said the Princess. "I will put within his girdle another letter from my father in place of this, bidding the castellan to give me as wife to this comely youth, and to call all the people of this realm to the wedding banquet; for be sure that the youth is loyal and true, and a man of peerage."

When the maiden heard this she said within herself that such a turn were good to play.

"But, Lady, how may you get the seal of your father to the letter?"

"Very easily," answered the Princess; "ere my father left for the marches he gave me eight sheets of parchment, sealed at the foot with his seal, but with nothing written thereon, and there will I set all that I have told you."

"Lady," said she, "right wisely have you spoken; but lose no time, and hasten lest he awake."

"I will go now," said the Princess.

The fair maiden, the daughter of the Emperor, went straight to her wedding chest, and drew there from one of the sealed parchments left her by her father, so that she might borrow moneys in his name should occasion arise. For, always was this king and his people at war with felon and mighty princes whose frontiers were upon his borders. Thereon she wrote her letter in such manner as this—

"I, King Muselin, Emperor of Greece and of Byzantium the great city, to my Castellan of Byzantium greeting. I command you to give the bearer of this letter to my fair daughter in marriage, according to our holy law; for I have heard, and am well persuaded, that he is of noble descent and right worthy the daughter of a king. And, moreover, at such time grant holiday and proclaim high festival to all burgesses of the city, and throughout my realm."

In such fashion wrote and witnessed the letter of that fair maiden the daughter of the Emperor. So when her letter was finished she hastened to the garden, she and her playmate together, and finding Constant yet asleep, placed privily the letter beneath his girdle. Then the two girls began to sing and to make such stir as must needs arouse him. The lad awoke from his slumber, and was all amazed at the beauty of the lady and her companion. They drew near, and the Princess gave him gracious greeting, whereupon Constant got to his feet and returned her salutation right courteously. She inquired of him as to his name and his business, and he answered that he was the bearer of letters from the Emperor to the governor of the city. The girl replied that she would bring him at once to the presence of the castellan; so she took him by the hand and led him within the palace; and all within the hall rose at the girl's approach, and did reverence to their Lady.

The demoiselle sought after the castellan, who was in his chamber, and there she brought the varlet, who held forth his letter, and added thereto the Emperor's greeting. The seneschal made much of the lad, kissing his hand; but the maid for her part kissed both letter and seal, as one moved with delight, for it was long since she had learned her father's news. Afterwards she said to the governor that it were well to read the dispatch in counsel together, and this she said innocently as one who knew nothing of what was therein. To this the castellan agreed, so he and the maiden passed to the council chamber alone. Thereupon the girl unfolded the letter, and made it known to the governor, and she seemed altogether amazed and distraught as she read. But the castellan took her to task.

"Lady, certainly the will of my lord your father must be done; otherwise will his blame come upon us with a heavy hand."

But the girl made answer to this—

"How, then, should I be married, and my lord and father far away?"

A strange thing this would be; and certainly will I not be wed."

"Ah, lady," cried the castellan, "what words are these? Your father's letter biddeth you to marry, so give not nay for yea."

"Sire," said the demoiselle, to whom time went heavy till all was done—"speak you to the lords and dignitaries of this realm, and take counsel together. So they deem that thus it must be, who am I to gainsay them?"

The castellan approved such modest and becoming words, so he took counsel with the barons, and showed them his letter, and all agreed that the letter must be obeyed, and the commandment of the Emperor done.

Thus was wedded according to Paynim ritual Constant, that comely lad, to the fair daughter of the Emperor. The marriage feast lasted fifteen days, and all Byzantium kept holiday and high festival; no business was thought of in the city, save that of eating and drinking and making merry. This was all the work men did.

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The Emperor tarried a long time in the borders of his land, but when his task was ended he returned towards Byzantium. Whilst he was about two days' journey from the city, there met him a messenger with letters of moment. The King inquired of him as to the news of the capital, and the messenger made answer that there men thought of nought else but drinking and eating and taking their ease, and had so done for a whole fortnight.

"Why is this?" asked the Emperor.

"Why, sire, do you not remember?"

"Truly, no," said the Emperor; "so tell me the reason."

"Sire," replied the varlet, "you sent to your castellan a certain comely lad, and he bore with him letters from you commanding that he should be wed to your daughter, the fair Princess, since after your death he would be Emperor in your stead, for he was a man of lineage, and well worthy so high a bride. But your daughter refused to marry such an one, till the castellan had spoken with the lords; so he showed the council your letter, and they all advised him to carry out your will. When your daughter knew that they were all of one mind, she dared no longer to withstand you, and consented to your purpose. In just such manner as this was your daughter wedded, and a merrier city than yours could no man wish to see."

When the Emperor heard this thing from the messenger, he marvelled beyond measure, and turned it over in his thoughts; so presently he inquired of the varlet how long it was since Constant had wedded his daughter, and whether he had bedded with her.

"Yea, sire," answered the varlet, "and since it is more than three weeks that they were married, perchance one day will she be mother as well as wife."

"Truly it were a happy hazard," said the Emperor, "and since the thing has fallen thus, let me endure it with a smiling face, for nothing else is left to do."

The Emperor went on his way until he reached Byzantium, and all the city gave him loyal greeting. Amongst those who came to meet him was the fair Princess with her husband, Constant, so gracious in person that no man was ever goodlier. The Emperor, who was a wise prince, made much of both of them, and laid his two hands on their two heads, and held them so for long, for such is the fashion of blessing amongst the Paynim. That night the Emperor considered this strange adventure, and how it must have chanced, and so deeply did he think upon it that well he knew that the game had been played him by his daughter. He did not reproach her, but bade them bring the letter he sent to the governor, and when it was shown him he read the writing therein, and saw that it was sealed with his very seal. So, seeing the way in which the thing had come to pass, he said within himself that he had striven against those things which were written in the stars.

After this the Emperor made Constant, his newly wedded son, a belted knight, and gave and delivered to him his whole realm in heritage after his death. Constant bore himself wisely and well, as became a good knight, bold and chivalrous, and defended the land right well against all its foes. In no long while his lord the Emperor died, and was laid in the grave, according to Paynim ritual, with great pomp and ceremony. The Emperor Constant reigned in his stead, and greatly he loved and honoured the Abbot who had cherished him, and he made him Chancellor of his kingdom. Then, by the advice of the Abbot, and according to the will of God, the All Powerful, the Emperor Constant brought his wife to the font, and caused all men of that realm to be converted to the law of Jesus Christ. He begot on his wife an heir, whom he christened Constantine, and who became true Christian and a very perfect knight. In his day was the city first called Constantinople, because of Constant his father, who cost the abbey so great a sum, but before then was the city known as Byzantium.

So endeth in this place the story of King Constant, the Emperor.