

THE MUBBLEFUBBLES:

A TOOTHY TANGLE

THE 2ND VOLUME
OF THE
MEDIEVAL MUDDLES

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

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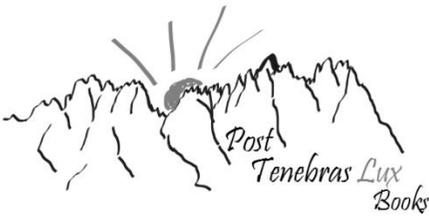
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A BORING INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Welcome to another tale time has forgotten. Many might call this fortunate, but hold your judgment until the end. These “fortunately forgotten histories” are historical fantasy. They are fairy tales *loosely* anchored in history. History is fantastic... Sometimes, almost literally. The dusty pages of God’s dealing with mankind that form history are constructed from tens of thousands of fascinating tales. Many of them would be unbelievable in a fantasy novel. And so, even while telling a fairy tale, I could not refrain from anchoring it in the real world of the 13th century. It intersects with our history at times, but is also made up out of my own strange brain. The trick, of course, is in figuring out which parts are history and which are fairy tale.

Beorcholt, “Land of Mything Links,” is a country you might have read about in an earlier time. It used to lie across the English Channel† from the place this tale begins. But Beorcholt’s populace (both human and otherwise) have much to do with it. If you read the book before this° you may recall a fellow by the name of Alaric promising a certain Egyptian emissary the names of two men qualified to slay a dragon. The incredible adventures of those two men are the subject of the pages that follow.

~J. Aaron Gruben, DVM.*

†That is, it did before it slid off into the ocean and was never heard from for a thousand years (which is convenient for guys like me who write quasi-fantasy-mangled-histories).

°And if you did not... For shame, for shame! Go buy it immediately. This is my completely unbiased advice.

*Doctor of Vernacular Manipulation (and possibly, but much less interestingly, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine).

A BORING HISTORICAL NOTE

Because this is quasi-historic fiction, I feel the strange urge to include a boring introductory note, full of names and dates you will not recognize. I'm just going to make them all up on the spot, so you may as well skip it and go to Chapter One.

The period in which this story takes place was a period of fluctuation and struggle. In the west the infamous wars over the Norman throne were just reaching their ebb, the great Morovian and Aquitainian schism rent the Franks into fractions, and the lords of the river Sur-Mer vied for power. Duke Guilleme “the Ancient” (r. 1111-1698) annexed nearly the whole of Buldovia, tipping the balance of power in the north to favor his beloved Antiochene monks of the order of St. Scatha. In the east the Bulgars and Quipchaks harried the Empire of Eastern Rome, the Green and Baby Blue factions struggled for power over the young emperor, and Alexis Triathalon wrote his famed *Historia Eastonia Wackyatricka* which started a literary revolution among the elite of Byzantium. Ali Zin-Babza, the great Pasha of Scanduc rose to power in 1243, putting the entire Absuyid royal family to the sword. Along the Nile, Bayuk “the Grandiose” built his fleet which was destined to sail to Greece and steal the secrets of the gyro and baklava.

But in the midst of all these spurious events was a real change. This was the change in the taste of the people of southern France to the relatively new and upstart “courtly love songs”—and it is this change that really begins our tale.

ONE

A shape, black as a hell-shade, slithered silently beneath the salt waves. Its forty feet of misshapen, scaly, natural disaster, had roamed far from the land of its spawning. It sensed now the thrum of breakers on a shoreline and slid toward the vibrations. The wooden curve of a ship's keel glided above it. A gurgling growl emanated slowly from its monstrous gizzard (or whatever organ sea monster growls generally emanate from), while men above gaped and quivered at its massive shadow. It would not stop for one ship when it sensed there were many of them ahead. It was too hungry for just one morsel.

But our tale doesn't begin with this nightmarish beast...

No...

This tale begins in the fairest part of the earth, wherein the sun glistens like wine upon the sparkling verdure fields, its rivers fair and placid as that River Ocean of old, and whose inhabitants dwell closer than any upon the center of earth's great disk to the eternal blitheness of those famed and envied Hyperboreans¹ beyond the northern hills. Here surely those gods of our pagan grandsires would have fain crossed their cloud gates (patrolled by the seasons fair upon Mount Olympus), to see the cause of that great mirth, that cheer, that love springing eternal in the hearts of the men and ladies fair...

At least, that is what Alphonse would have told you.

Alphonse was a troubadour in a place called Toulouse, in southern France. He lived during that golden old age when great lords and fair ladies held court in giant stone castles and needed people to sing songs and tell stories because movies hadn't been invented yet.

¹ There are some words I actually did not make up in this book. The definitions are in the glossary. (Not the glossary in Appendix A. I advise you to close your eyes, turn the page, and avoid looking at Appendix A at all. It is just embarrassing.)

Alphonse had long and carefully combed hair flowing down to his shoulders, and a trim mustache riding over his thin lips. He was muscular like a chimpanzee is muscular: with wiry arms deceptively strong enough to hold himself from a tree branch for a full hour. Though Alphonse never hung from tree branches. That might tear his expensive clothes. He dressed in the brightest colors, and showiest trimmings. Folk usually mistook him either for a great lord or a great lord's idiot. But Alphonse more than compensated for his gaudy looks by his skillful music. He played upon a golden harp and sung with a golden voice, and his love songs were famed near to far, and back around to near again.

You see, this was a time in that particular part of France when the grisly old chansons, all about heroes and daring warlike prowess, were replaced by fashionable songs and poems of courtly love. Lords and ladies no longer wanted to hear about bold Roland, who could split a Saracen in two and kill his horse beneath him with one blow of his sword, merely because he happened to be at war. Nope. If it had to be war-like at all, what they wanted to hear went more like this:

“And Miramont fair, smote his breast in the agony of passion while he waited on the list, the gentle token of his lady wound about his arm like the hand of Eros herself flung from her egg of night to create our great earth with her kindly arrows. Then, with thundering hooves, his steed Falandalel sprung him forth and, lowering his lance with great skill, so that it seemed the very tip of iron must have moved like unto some great work of Vulcan, smote he the black knight and sent him to his ruin whilst his lady cheered. He turned him and rode toward her, and she, knowing him to have lent his prowess in the service of her love, blew him a kiss.”

Folk those days preferred, even more, a peaceful poem or a song praising the virtues of any particular lady...

“Oh, Anaïs, fairest of virgins on the earth!
Thy hand, swan-white and soft, can only grant me mirth.
Thy smile is brightness in these halls.
Thy hair a pure stream gently falls.
Your love, a tyrant, holds me thrall.
For your slightest whim, I yield my all!”

All pretty disgusting stuff, really. But at the time it was all the rage, and Alphonse was a master at it. Yes, Alphonse was a bard in high demand indeed.

But, now that I think about it, this story does not begin with Alphonse either. It begins with his cousin, Theudebald, who was also a troubadour.

I doubt if there were ever two cousins less alike than Alphonse and Theudebald. Where Alphonse was tall, Theudebald was short. Where Alphonse was thin as an aspen and had the build of a vegan marathoner, Theudebald was thick as an oak with a broad chest like a carnivorous pro-wrestler. He sometimes had to go on a diet just to shift over old muscles to make room for new ones. Alphonse’s face was gentle and nearly angelic,² Theudebald’s was shaggy like a half-shaven baboon—with dark bulging eyes that stuck out above high cheekbones, hidden deep within a shaggy black beard. If Alphonse was like a heavenly angel, Theudebald was a bit more like those creepy, multi-orbed seraphim in the Old Testament with lots of wings. While the features of Alphonse might have been chiseled from stone by some Greek poet, those of Theudebald might have been scratched with charcoal by pre-diluvium man.

And in keeping with his looks, Theudebald was a jongleur of the old school at heart and had absolutely no talent or inclination for the new fashion of courtly love songs. As a matter of pure fact, he hated the stuff. He much preferred to sing great ballads of his hero, Count Raymond IV of Toulouse, and

² Though his father would have used a different metaphor.

praise that worthy's bold prowess upon the walls of Antioch in the most vivid and grisly terms. But he had to eat,³ and folk seemed to have no use for the songs he would like to sing. So he tried his very best at being romantic. But he just did not have the knack. He was too dark and somber.

His last attempt had been a song composed for the praise of the lady-love of a great lord in Montpellier, and I'm sorry to say the following is an accurate translation...

“Ah, Ophelia, fairest of maids,
Thy hair, like sword steel, barely fades.
Thy skin, the hue of whitest starch.
Thy toes, like soldiers, gently march.
Endearing love shall be my cry,
For thee, I'd give my pasty-pie.”

Needless to say, he was hied from the castle without hesitation—or pay. It was not long before Theudebald's service was only required when someone wanted a joke.

The day this particular story begins Thisdane, Lord of Narbonne and a particularly ardent patron of the art of courtly love, called upon the services of Theudebald and Alphonse to entertain his guests.⁴ Alphonse had just dazzled the court with a song to the lady of the manor which won him sighs from the entire audience, and caused one or two ladies to swoon—and incidentally brought showers of bezants upon his head. It was at this juncture the lady of the house got up from her seat upon the dais and spoke thus-wise:

³ Quite a bit actually, in order to keep those many muscles fueled.

⁴ You should be thankful, dear reader, you were not born a lord of those days—for it was a longstanding expectation any lord with a castle be beset by hundreds of moochers, who would descend like locusts, filling their halls and emptying their larders, and demanding entertainment at their expense.

“Well and sweetly sung, fair troubadour! Your fame has bespoken of you aright. However, methinks my ears have been overfilled with courtly love songs of late, and I wouldst hear some of those ghastly chansons my grandfather used to like. Knowest thou any of these?” Whereupon the rest of the guests in the court began to shift uneasily, as people of all ages do when they realize *that* guy is about to show up at the party and make everything really, really awkward. Alphonse (as always) had a smooth reply.

“Oh my lady, I wouldst be glad to oblige you in any way, so fair is your face and comely your form, so kind your words, so wondrous your graces, so...” at this point, Alphonse noted the lord of the manor glaring suspiciously, and broke off his colloquy. “But methinks my good cousin, Theudebald the Strong, who was raised on his father’s knee from a babe,⁵ in the hearing of those great tales of mighty daring, would be best qualified to delight you most with such a song.”

Theudebald stood abruptly and his eyes shot sparks of excitement. He approached the dais with unslung harp, looking so hard from beneath his bushy beard at the lord and lady that they backed up a few inches in their chairs. A few gentlefolk who had been around the court scene long enough to encounter Theudebald before groaned and slapped their palms to their fair faces. Theudebald did not seem to notice, but spoke in a firm voice, as he struck a minor cord that rebounded off the walls of the hall.

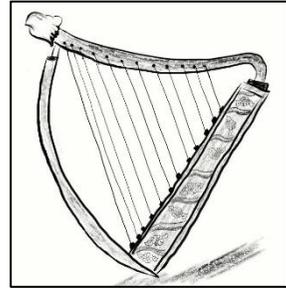
“Ah! Right gladly will I tell thee the tale of a great hero,
A man that the Germans adore,
Who smote a dragon in all his gore!
Siegfried strong a hero was,

⁵ This is not quite what Alphonse meant. Though perfect in his bard-dom in every other respect, he was apt to misplace his modifiers when he got excited. This is a common mistake for people tending to pile a hundred words into every sentence.

Of the Niebelungs, a prince,
And guardian of fabulous wealth that glints.
The worm, full vile, guarded this hoard.”

Here one of the bolder guests laughed aloud. “A worm, eh? I’m surprised, bard. Children’s fay-tales of imaginary dragons little befit your reputation for...er...realism!” Laughter echoed through the hall. Theudebald bore a sly look and, unfortunately, took up the challenge for more realism.

“Siegfried bold took up his sword!
With cat-like tread, he stole close,
One sturdy blow the worm he smote,
And out like cheese curds flowéd forth
Gallon upon gallon, the blood forth streamed
Like sticky...”



He did not notice the lady of the manor’s eyes grow large as a saucer full of rancid blood-pudding, or her face turn white as a three-day-old corpse. As the grisly descriptions continued to flow like spurting arteries, she let out a shriek of terror and fell to the ground in an abrupt faint.⁶ Most of the guests spat out their food in disgust. Theudebald continued on obliviously. Alphonse, a bit more in tune with the tastes of the gentle folk, stepped forward quickly. Snatching Theudebald’s harp from the still singing bard, he looked down and addressed the lord of the manor (who was kneeling on the ground trying to revive his lady).

“I beg pardon, my liege, but my cousin and I must haste to depart to another manor for I just remembered we are engaged in the next county, and we

⁶ Just to be clear, this was a very different kind of faint from the Alphonse-induced syncopal episodes mentioned earlier.

will be tardy if we do not leave posthaste! Come, Theudebald!” This he said in a voice rising higher and higher for Theudebald continued his grisly ballad, loath to quit now he finally had a chance to sing what he loved. “Posthaste!” Alphonse repeated and tugged on his cousin’s cloak to drag him to the door. Theudebald shouted out his verses, growing more and more desperate as his cousin jerked him through the door and slammed it in place.

Once outside the castle, Alphonse stopped and mopped his brow in relief, leaning against the wall. “Whew! That was a close shave, my bold cousin!”

The rage of a thousand long-dead heroes fired Theudebald’s eyes.

“Why did you stop me, coz? At last a lady requested something other than those disgusting poems. It was my moment of fame, and you stopped me!”

Alphonse looked indulgently at his cousin. “No coz, ‘twas your moment of infamy. Think first ere you vex the ears of a gentle lady with your gory ballads! The noble folk don’t truly want such things.”

Theudebald stared at his cousin for roughly 2.45 second before he ran to jump on his horse and gallop through the castle gates. Alphonse, when he had recovered from the shock of the swift departure, ran to his horse and followed. Theudebald raced uncaring over the brilliant meadows and vineyards (squishing grapes and causing peasants to leap out of his way in alarm). He rushed on till he was forced to come to a halt by a high cliff that overlooked the sea. Alphonse reined in and dismounted beside his cousin to find him staring upon the setting sun as it shimmered along the placid waves of the French coastline. Three fishing boats lay at sea with their nets thrown into the water as peaceful villagers from L’fishe (a little known, and very possibly made up, village near Narbonne) lounged upon the wharf. Alphonse was surprised to see the glitter of what could have been a tear in his rough cousin’s eye.

“Fie, coz! You led a merry chase!” quoth⁷ Alphonse, blowing hard.

⁷ Alphonse had a tendency to “quoth” more than “said.”

Theudebald looked upon him uncaring. “Why chase after a failure, Alphonse? You should leave me to die! Alone. A has-been. A pauper... In pence and in prose.”

Alphonse nobly refrained from chuckling at his cousin’s melodrama. This was an ironic role reversal for the two cousins. It was generally Alphonse who tended toward morbid introspection and depressing blues, a state of mind medieval folk sometimes called “the mubblefubbles.”⁸ But Theudebald was as much of an artist in his own way as Alphonse. And artists have always been sensitive souls, and their deep feelings shall always be the strongest magnet for the mubblefubbles among mankind.

“Where’s that merry spirit you used to show when you were but a babe in yon village, a-frighting all the girls and making the dogs bark when ere you lifted your face out of the bassinet? Where’s the lad whose gladsome pranks folk here still remember, eh? The bishop talks to this day with horror of that painted goat you slipped into the baptismal on the night Lady Grizwelda’s baby was christened. Where’s that brute of a fellow boisterous enough to argue perpetually with me about the merits of venery⁹ over noble hawking?” The merry twinkle in Alphonse’s eyes faded as he searched in vain beneath his cousin’s bushy beard for a sign of merriment.

Theudebald snorted and waved his hand dismissively. “I’m in no mood for jest! I am a failure. Whenever I try to sing a love song they laugh, and when I

⁸ In my opinion this should immediately be reintroduced into every modern dictionary. It’s loads of fun to say “Oy! I’ve got the mubblefubbles!” Try it. I’m sure you’ll agree.

⁹ In medieval times this was hunting with hounds. (A modern, completely unrelated, definition is “indulging in lascivious pleasure,” so be careful how you use the word!) There was a raging medieval debate about whether hunting with dogs or hawks was more fun. It was serious business to menfolk of those days, who did not have pro-sports teams or social media. When your typical 12th century noble was not fighting he would be hunting... And maybe after that he would spend time with his wife and kids. So the preference of venery (more brutal and warlike and risky) over hawking (more intricate and technically demanding) may have been worth coming to blows over. Certainly the cousins had suffered bloodied noses more than once over the topic.

sing a ballad they spit out their food! I was born a jongleur for an older age, and my name is but a joke. If I wish to redeem it, I must find a new path for my great, burly feet.” He stroked his beard and stared at his burly feet thoughtfully, “Hm, perhaps that’s it...”

Alphonse recognized the gesture. He pointed a finger and blurted, “Ah, I like not the look of that shaggy head of thine!”

Theudebald, used to his cousin’s overused adjectives, did not bat an eye at this apparent insult. “If you meant you don’t like what I’m thinking—” His words were cut off by a strangled scream from below the cliff and a rending and crashing of wood. One of the three fishing boats flew twenty feet above a boiling sea, in a sudden shower of splinters. Both cousins stood rooted, the conversation utterly quashed by an unbelievable sight.

The thrashing waves were entirely filled with the writhing, serpentine neck of a vast sea dragon! The creature’s slimy skin flashed in the sunlight, thick as armor over its hellish heart. Its great maw flung open to the heavens, revealing a tangle of wicked, needle-like teeth pointing this way and that around its flailing tongue. A great crashing, grating roar echoed off the cliff face and over the rolling seaside. It was as though all the sea were boiling in the brute’s stomach and needed to let out steam. The bards covered their ears and their two horses raced off in terror.

“By the rood!” Alphonse whispered. “That cannot be possible.”

Theudebald could scarce speak in astonishment. He pointed a trembling finger at the forms of flailing fisherman. They disappeared beneath the mountainous waves, which sprung up as the great serpent plunged its monstrous head into the water. Its body rose behind the submerging neck like some high hill, revealing four great fins like giant galley oars before it slipped under the boiling waves and became a colossal shadow under the surface of the harbor.

“That was Berinon’s boat!” Alphonse heard the heartbroken croak from his cousin just before he saw Theudebald leap over the cliff.

“Theudebald!” shrieked Alphonse as a hairy form flew through the air. Theudebald straightened to dive into the icy waters just before he met the thrashing waves. Alphonse ran as fast as he could down the tiny footpath toward the village, trembling and cursing his crazy cousin under his breath. Alphonse had grown up as Theudebald’s constant companion and loved him like a brother. He knew well Theudebald was sometimes more seal than human, having spent the majority of his childhood swimming from his brother Berinon’s fishing boat.

Alphonse (who swam more like a rock than a seal) was forced to commandeered a small skiff at the shoreline. This was not difficult, for every villager had abandoned their boats and sprinted toward the safety of the village. With trembling hands, the fair-haired bard maneuvered the craft over the boisterous waves as it tipped and wobbled, nearly capsizing again and again. But though he could not swim (or perhaps because of this) Alphonse was rather good at handling oars, and the bard kept the little boat afloat over the roiling eddies. He glided steadily toward Theudebald’s bobbing head. Theudebald was treading water amid the splinters and wreckage of his brother’s boat and calling Berinon’s name wildly. The only answer was a great rumble from beneath the salty waters, gargantuan and visceral, as if the ocean had a tummy ache. A monstrous shadow passed below the rough bard’s flailing feet, and he fought to keep from being pulled under by the deep current. Berinon’s hat bobbed to the surface.

Alphonse watched in a trance as the shadow slid toward the edge of the harbor and gradually faded away. Then the bard remembered himself and tugged his cousin into the boat.

“Theudebald! Come on, Theudebald!” As he was dragged into the boat, they noted a floating form to the right. It was the broken body of Berinon. They pulled it from the cold salt waters with shaking fingers. Theudebald laid the limp head on his lap, a single tear falling down his rough beard. He was

silent as a stone while they pulled to shore, and even Alphonse did not know what to say. So he said nothing. The little craft struck the shore. Theudebald carried the corpse, and an aged sailor who had been bold enough to stay and watch the unnatural spectacle of the sea monster's attack, helped him lay the body down. Alphonse dragged the boat onto the sandy beach and reached them a moment later. He found his cousin facing the still raging sea with clenched fists and trembling frame. A rage more intense than Alphonse had ever seen fairly sparked from his cousin's dark eyes.

"Curse you, foul beast!" Theudebald shouted suddenly into the silent wind. "Curse your monstrous heart! Curse your slimy scales! Berinon shall be avenged. I'll slay you!"

Alphonse put a hand upon his cousin's shoulder. "Come now coz, there's no vengeance to be had on the brute beast."

"Aye!" it was the old sailor who spoke, in a voice cracked and aged like the rocks along the shore. "It be plain fadoodle t' blore 'gainst the 'and of Judgment." He continued his unsolicited but sage advice, with all the proper odd and arcane words an old medieval fisherman ought to use. "Oi ain't no hufty-tufty, but me wink-a-peeps 'ave looked on one other serpent of the deep, years ago: an' t'were on the self-same ship on which a murtherer took berth. Mark me, lad: dragons, whether they swim in the sea or tromp upon villages, be real. But they be no mere beasts. They be the Judgment o' God, in a serpent's carcass! Aye, more! Some says they's more likely the ol' killbuck devil 'imself than animal of flesh an' blood. An' there's no use a-railin' and a-cursin' that sort of fiend now, is there?"

Theudebald stared blankly at the man for a moment. "Think you," he said at last, his voice subdued with a mysterious intensity, "that a beast without flesh and blood could splinter a boat, and slay every man-jack aboard? Think you it would send the waves all a-choppy as that creature did? Think you it would rumble in its throat if it had none, or cast a shadow, or...? Nay, aged father,

you err. That brute was as much flesh and blood as any man-jack, and with less of the devil in him.” He looked down upon the dead form of his brother with a deep frown and darkened expression. “He...he was a good brother. He did not have to die! I will slay that monster!”

“But coz, you speak utter folly! Even could you slay that...that...thing, you could never hope to find it. The sea is a great and wide place, and sea serpents, if the tales are true (which I doubted until today) are seen but seldom. You’ve as much chance of finding a book of logic in a princess’ bower, as finding this same serpent.”

Theudebald recovered somewhat and wrung his beard in agitation, which had the double benefit of looking distraught and wringing out seawater. “Your point is a good one.” He began to pace down the beach with his big hands clasped behind him. Alphonse followed, finding it harder to keep up with his furious muttering than to keep up with the great strides.

“I can never avenge my brother,” he heard Theudebald say. “I am again a failure!” Mumbled sentences and hushed exclamations slurred together. Alphonse heard, however, something like “if there’s one there’ll be others” and “’tis a big world” and “I’ll make a name for myself.” He was starting to fear his strange cousin had, at last, lost all reason.

Theudebald stopped abruptly and turned to stare at the sea. The sun was setting, and the fading light shimmered like living gold on the calming waters. Villagers were combing the beach, and weeping around the remains of their fisherman fathers. The hint of a grim gleam in Theudebald’s mad eyes made Alphonse’s heart sink.

“What goes on in that head of yours, Theudebald?” he queried querulously,¹⁰ but Theudebald ignored him. Just as Alphonse was about to speak again, his cousin burst out in a gruff voice, so abrupt it made Alphonse jump.

¹⁰ Alphonse would sometimes query as well as quoth. He seldom ever simply asked. That would be far too bland a thing for him.

“I’ll do it! Not only will I get vengeance for what was done my brother by this beast, but I will make me a good name. No more will noble folk laugh at the sound of my name, but they will delight to hear it. And jongleurs will make songs about *me*, I shouldn’t be surprised. They’ll talk of me like Siegfried of old!”

“What thought’s in that head, Theudebald?” Alphonse queried the question, now more concerned than ever. Theudebald turned sharply. A look of absolute determination almost bathed him: as if what he were about to say was a matter of fact and not a resolution he had just made.

“Today I change careers. I shall henceforth be a dragon slayer!”

And with that, Theudebald of L’fishe turned and stalked down the beach, leaving his cousin aghast and agape (as the old fisherman would have said) in the fading light. Visions of his mad cousin, all vestige of respectability lost completely, roaming the woods in search of mythical monsters flooded his head.

“Are...are there really enough dragons to make a career?” was all he could think to quoth at the fading form.

Thanks for your interest in *The Mubblefubbles!*

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