

Sir Isumbras

anon

a fourteenth century Middle English verse romance

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by**

Richard Scott-Robinson

This tale has been translated and retold from: Harriet Hudson, 2006. *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Tryamour*. Second edition. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. From Gonville and Caius College Cambridge MS 175 (1425–50) with a missing page filled in from British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1450–1500).

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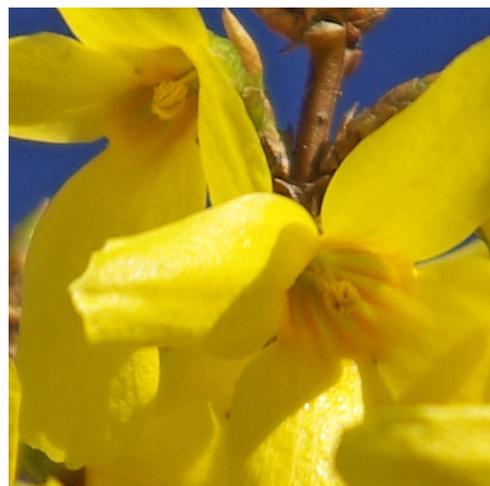
Hende in halle and ye wole her · Off eldres that before us wer · That lyfede in are thede · Jhesu Cryst, hevene kynge · Geve hem alle hys blessing · And hevene unto oure mede – Noblemen! If you will listen to this tale of our ancestors, may Christ give you all His blessing and reward us with the Joy of Heaven! I will tell you of a valiant knight. His name was Sir Isumbras and he was without equal.

Sir Isumbras was strong, tall and very handsome. He liked to hear minstrels singing in his hall and would reward all of them with fine robes, gold and generous gifts of land. He was the most courteous of all the young noblemen at the time and the food at his table fed anyone who wanted it. His lady was as fair as the fairest and they had three children, as delightful as any in this world. But he was so proud that he gave no thought to Christ, and at last God decided to send him a warning.

It happened in a strange way. One day Sir Isumbras went to visit his forest to hunt and as he was passing a tree in a very secluded part of the woodland he heard a bird singing. The bird suddenly spoke to him. ‘Welcome, Sir Isumbras!’ it said. ‘Through pride at your extensive income and your great wealth you have lost sight of who you really are. The King of Heaven greets you and asks you now to make a choice. Would you rather be penniless and destitute in your youth, or in your old age? Choose one or the other.’

In sudden anxiety, Sir Isumbras fell upon his knees and held up his hands. ‘I will give my soul to Jesus Christ!’ he exclaimed at once. ‘I shall reject all my worldly wealth now. In youth I can run and dance and ride horses and make love to my wife and in old age my stiff joints will let me do none of these things. So Lord, if you desire, send me poverty in my youth and a comfortable life in my old age!’

The bird flew away at once, leaving Sir Isumbras alone to dwell upon what had just happened. And when the bird had gone, the horse that Sir Isumbras was riding, which had been such a swift and agile steed, suddenly fell down dead beneath him. His hounds and his hawks, startled by this sudden trauma, took flight into the forest as though they had gone mad and soon he was left entirely alone. If he was a little upset at all this, is there any wonder? He had to continue on foot. This hunting trip had turned out to be a disaster!



As he made his way along the edge of the woodland, a little boy arrived breathlessly with a message for him: ‘Sir, forgive me if I come to the point quickly – but all your buildings have caught fire and most of your men are dead, your manor is destroyed and there is no one left alive at your hall except for your wife and your children.’

‘My family is safe, when all about them is burnt and destroyed? Then this is the happiest day of my life!’ exclaimed Sir Isumbras. But as he made his way back to his burnt-out manor, he came across his herdsman and stock-keepers. ‘What’s wrong?’ he called out to them when he saw the look in their eyes.

‘Thieves have stolen all your animals,’ they replied. ‘There is not one horse left to pull a plough!’ and they all broke down and wept. But Sir Isumbras told them to control themselves and to listen: ‘Do not blame yourselves for this,’ he said with authority. ‘God giveth and God taketh away, and He causes men to be rich and poor at His will.’

But soon Sir Isumbras came upon a distressing sight – his wife and his three children standing naked before him, charred and burnt from their flight through the hot flames. He had been able to treat his misfortune lightly until now, but when he saw them standing there, without their expensive clothes, without any clothes on at all, he began to break down. The lady was consoling her children: ‘Do not fear,’ she comforted them, ‘for I can see your father standing over there.’

They all wept together and Sir Isumbras urged them not to be too upset. ‘All the sorrow that we find ourselves in is caused by the sins we have committed,’ he instructed them. ‘We have deserved as much, and still more. But now that my power is destroyed, our friends will not support us and so I think it is best that we leave immediately. I do not care for myself, but I can neither feed nor reward anyone who might work for me, and this is my greatest regret.’

Sir Isumbras took off his outer mantel and covered his wife with the expensive cloth. Then he tore his rich surcoat into three pieces and draped them over his naked children. ‘Let us do as I advise,’ he said. ‘We shall seek the place where God lived and died for us, shedding His blood for us on the cross. For Jesus Christ in His mercy will provide food for us if we beg while we travel along.’ And with his knife Sir Isumbras cut the figure of Christ’s cross into the flesh of his shoulder to proclaim, in an extreme way, his desire to travel as a pilgrim to Jerusalem, as the story tells us. And all those who had been their friends, wept and sighed and tried to talk them out of it. But the knight and his noble lady took their leave of them all and began a long journey to the Holy Land.

Everybody wept to see them go, both young and old, for they were taking nothing with them, neither gold nor food nor any means of buying anything. They would beg for their meals, wherever any food was to be had, and live on charity. And as Christ willed, their journey took them through two kingdoms. Sir Isumbras, his wife and their three children made a sorrowful sight. They travelled for six days without eating, crying out with hunger as they went along, and at the end of these six days they arrived at the banks of a great river. They would gladly have been able to cross it. This was a worrying development for them.

Sir Isumbras carried his eldest son on his back over the water and laid him beside a thicket of broom. ‘Dear son, lie here quietly,’ he instructed, ‘whilst I go back for your brother. Play with the things close to you until I return. Play with these flowers.’

Sir Isumbras was healthy and strong and had no difficulty swimming back across the river again. There he picked up his second son and started to swim with him through the raging current; but before he could reach the other bank, a lion carried his eldest son away! Sir Isumbras was distraught! And as he was returning across the water once again, a leopard carried off the son that he had just left behind! His wife shrieked and wailed from the far bank and looked as though she was about to take her own life. ‘Be quiet!’ said Sir Isumbras when he reached her. ‘It is God’s will that this is happening.’

No wonder, though, that they are both distressed. Their two eldest sons had been lost!

Sir Isumbras carried his dear wife across the water with his youngest son and, on dry land once again,

Although shorter than most Middle English Romances of the fourteenth century, the story of Sir Isumbras was popular in its time and comes from a similar mould to that of Octavian and Sir Eglamour of Artois; the turning of the Wheel of Fortune in ways, it can be argued, that use Christian piety to mask a wholly pagan message. Those who already understand the allegory will be unsurprised at the bizarre nature of a final reunion between Sir Isumbras and his three sons.

Sir Isumbras exists in a number of late-Medieval manuscripts; the story told below is taken from Gonville and Caius College Cambridge MS 175 (1425–50) with a missing page filled in from British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1450–1500).

they travelled for three days through some lonely woodland, until they came at last to the sea. It was the Aegean sea. They fell down onto their knees and wept; and as they walked along the shore, they watched three hundred ships sail quickly past them along the coast, finely constructed and decked out with splendid castles and many flags, looking magnificent and proud. A heathen king was leading them, with the intention of spreading terror across the land and defeating all Christendom! Sir Isumbras thought that he and his wife should seek shelter at a harbour that lay where the forest met the sea, but here they encountered more men than they could number, running and riding this way and that. Sir Isumbras raised his voice above the noise and asked his wife: 'Who are all these strange people? We have travelled for more than a week through a forest with nothing to eat and we must ask for food, if it pleases Christ to let us receive any.'

So they made their way to the most magnificent ship they could find, the one which the Sultan had made his headquarters, and begged for some food: 'For the love of Christ who died for us!' they implored – but as soon as he heard this, the Sultan accused them of being spies and had them beaten away. 'They are unbelievers,' he cried to his guards, 'by Muhammad, who died for you!' But then a knight spoke up: 'Sir, this is a strange thing to see, that such a poor man should be so tall and strongly built and with such bright, grey eyes. He is a fine figure of a man and I think he must be a gentleman. He looks like a knight to me and his wife is as white as a whalebone, and as pale as pear blossom. I'll wager she's never had to work in the glare of the sun.'

The Sultan agreed, thought it a shame and ordered that they be brought to him. 'I want to see them for myself,' he said. And when they stood before him he was saddened by their plight and appalled at the rags they were wearing.

'Embrace my faith,' he urged Sir Isumbras. 'Renounce Christianity and help me to win this fight! I shall reward you with red gold if you prove to be a good warrior, and I shall knight you myself.'

Sir Isumbras froze to the spot, recognising that this man was a heathen. 'Sir,' he said. 'No! God has commanded me that never again should I act against His wishes. We have travelled through a forest with neither food nor drink for more than a week now and we ask only for something to eat, for the love of Christ, and then let us be on our way.'

But while Sir Isumbras spoke, the Sultan had been eyeing up the lady standing beside him; she looked to him like an angel who had come down from heaven! 'My friend,' he said, thoughtfully. 'I would give you more wealth and property than you can imagine if you were to sell me this woman. I'll give you a hundred pounds in gold coin and seven fine robes for her. And she shall be the queen of my country and men will take her by the hand and bow low to her and be obedient to her every command.'

'No!' exclaimed Sir Isumbras. 'I will not sell you my wife. You will have to kill me first! I married her in the sight of God and vowed to remain with her until my dying day, in sickness and in health.'

Nevertheless, the heathens counted out the gold coins upon Sir Isumbras's cloak and handed them to him wrapped in the cloth. Then they seized his wife; and afterwards they threw Sir Isumbras off the ship and punched and kicked him until he was bruised black and blue. The Sultan crowned the lady and made preparations for her to be sent away by ship. He drew up a formal document to the effect that if she arrived safely in his land, she should be acknowledged as his queen.

When Sir Isumbras was able to stand again, he took his son by the hand and prepared to continue his pilgrimage. By now a ship was almost ready to carry his wife to the Sultan's kingdom. When the vessel was about to embark the lady wept and moaned and fell before the Sultan: 'Sir!' she implored. 'For mercy, allow me a request before I sail. Let my husband speak with me one last time before I cross the sea; let us speak together alone and in private.' The Sultan agreed to this, had the man seized once again and there was a tearful meeting between Sir Isumbras and his wife and many kind words spoken. They hugged and kissed one another and she gave her husband a ring: 'My lord,' she said, 'I would rather that I had been drowned in that river than have to leave you like this. But try your hardest to come to

the land where I shall be taken, and there we shall kill the Sultan. Then you shall become king of that country and all its men will bow before you and all our misfortunes will be over!’

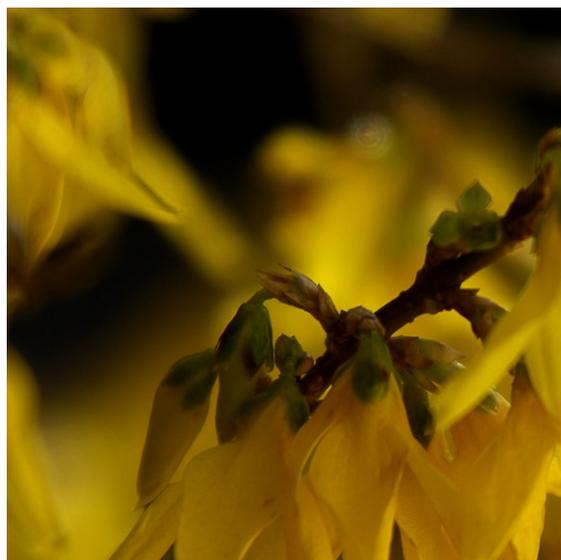
She gave Sir Isumbras food and wine enough to sustain him for another week, he and their little son, and then this gentle lady hugged and kissed her lord and kissed her little child and fainted three times at the trauma of it all. Then the sailors hauled up the magnificent, colourful sails, the wind blew strongly and Sir Isumbras was left alone on the shore, miserable, forlorn and dejected as he watched the ship that carried his wife vanishing over the horizon.

Sir Isumbras took his son by the hand and walked inland, through some secluded and ancient forest. They sat at last beneath a tree, barely able to see one another, their eyes were so sore from weeping for a lost wife and mother. They took out some of the food that she had given to them, and when Sir Isumbras had eaten, he wept again. Then he placed the bread amongst the gold coins in his scarlet cloak and carried them along with him.

They came to a mountain and thought to spend the night upon its slopes, for they could endure no more walking that day, they were so weary. And when morning broke the next day an eagle spotted the red cloak that Sir Isumbras had with him and carried it away with the gold. Sir Isumbras was sorrowful then. He followed the eagle back towards the coast; but then a unicorn came and carried away his son!

Sir Isumbras’s mood had swung from acceptance to despair and back again many times but he had never felt quite so hopeless nor so desperate as now. He sat on a stone and said: ‘Lord! I am so utterly miserable! I have lost my wife and all my children and now I am entirely alone. Sweet Mary, lady of Heaven, dazzling in your radiance, flower of women and the Queen of Heaven, to you I make my complaint. But Jesus, as you wear the Crown of Heaven, please guide me to some town, for I am now completely lost.’

And as he passed a hill Sir Isumbras heard the sound of a working smithy and saw the flames from the forges and the blacksmiths busy at their tasks. He asked them for some food and they replied that he could work for some if he liked: ‘Since we have to do so, why shouldn’t you?’ they said. ‘We have no other way of earning our meals.’



‘I would be delighted to work for my bread,’ Sir Isumbras replied and he quickly began to lift and carry for them. They soon gave him food and drink and taught him all the menial, unskilled jobs that he could do for them. He worked like this for a year, toiling almost beyond his endurance, doing the work of two men, but by the end of this time he could lay the coals of a forge to their satisfaction and get it to a white heat and was ready to count himself an apprentice smith. Sir Isumbras stayed at this forge working for these craftsmen for seven years and then for two further months; and by the end of this time he had learnt so much that he was able to make a suit of armour for himself and weapons fit for a knight to ride into battle with.

Now all this time, the Sultan had been rampaging around Christendom, causing mayhem and destruction everywhere. The Christian kings had been fleeing for a long while and had only now regrouped, having raised an army large enough to feel confident about being drawn into battle. The day of the engagement was set. The Christian and the heathen armies would meet one another in deadly struggle not far from where they were now camped. Sir Isumbras, wearing his home-made armour and wielding the weapons that he had fashioned for himself, rode towards this battlefield on a horse that was more used to carrying coals than a knight in full armour. He came to where the two armies faced one another.

er, each on a hill overlooking a plain where the battle was to take place, and he could hear the sound of trumpets and see weapons being held high in the air. This gracious and noble knight dismounted, knelt down upon the ground and prayed to Jesus that He might send him enough skill and good fortune this day to allow him to repay these heathen dogs for all the pain and misfortune they had given him.

Sir Isumbras was noble and virtuous. He remounted, spurred his horse into a gallop and, as the battle began, he charged three times and tested himself to the full in the melee. He swung his sword and turned about in the saddle as swiftly as a spark from a flint and no knight was able to withstand his blows nor the sharpness of his sword – that is, until his sorry horse was killed from under him. And when he had tumbled to the earth he was rescued by an earl who took him to a high mountain. There he changed all his clothes and armour and on a new steed he rode down into the fierce fighting once again. And it can still be seen where his horse went, for the scars on the landscape will be recognised in folk legend forevermore. Just as a spark spits from a coal, so Sir Isumbras wielded his sword and inflicted many horrific wounds upon his enemies. He pursued them up into the hills and killed the Sultan, and many who were with him. The battle lasted all day and Sir Isumbras won the victory there.

When the Sultan had been killed, the Christian king was overjoyed and ordered gold and lands to be given to the knight who had slain him. ‘But where is this knight who has given such a splendid account of himself in this battle? Why can I not see him here?’ inquired the king.

Knights and squires were sent out to search for Sir Isumbras and they found him badly wounded, but despite this, they brought him before the king. The king asked him his name and, rather than revealing who he really was, he said: ‘Sir, I work at a blacksmith’s forge. What will you do with me?’

‘I have never before seen a man who works at a blacksmith’s forge conduct himself so well in battle,’ said the king, incredulously.

‘Please could I have some food and water, replied Sir Isumbras, modestly. ‘Anything else I may think of asking you for can wait until I have recovered from these wounds.’

The king then swore a great oath that he would dub this man a knight when his wounds were healed and he was whole again. Then they led Sir Isumbras to a nunnery to rest, and to receive treatment for the horrific injuries to his head that he had received in the battle.

The nuns were very pleased to receive Sir Isumbras into their care; he was such a fine warrior and the one who had killed the Sultan! They wept at the severity of his wounds, salved them every day and soon his injuries began to heal. They gave him medicines to drink and Sir Isumbras was quickly on the road to recovery. But to be frank, he could not wait to get out of the place. He took his leave of them as soon as he could, and thanking the prioress and all her nuns, obtained for himself a wooden staff and a bag that marked him out as a pilgrim, and prepared to continue his journey to the Holy Land. And by the will of God, he followed a road that led in the right direction until he came once more to the Aegean Sea. And here he found a ship waiting to sail to Acre on the coast of Palestine and he quickly arranged for his passage.

When Sir Isumbras arrived at Acre, he made his way into the city to rest his weary bones. He stayed there for seven years in poverty and hunger, as the book tells us. And as he lived during the day, so he spent the nights, in filth and destitution. But he gave no thought to this suffering, for it was God’s will, he knew, to punish him for his former pride and excess. Sir Isumbras found it hard to find food and shelter, though he had walked the entire city of Acre many times, and so at last he made his way to Jerusalem and lay one day beside a spring of fresh water that was welling up from the ground outside the city; and here he lay weeping for his sins. And as he sat there, at about midnight, a shining and beautiful creature appeared before him, holding some bread and wine. ‘Palmer,’ said this angel. ‘Fear not. The King of Heaven greets you and sends me to tell you that your sins are now forgiven. Rest easy,

Sir Isumbras, for your suffering is over. The King of Heaven gives you His blessing and urges you to go out once more into the world.'

Sir Isumbras fell onto his knees and wept for joy. But he had nowhere else to go and unless he could find a way out of this poverty he was in, he could see no other way but to continue to beg in the streets as before. So he walked through an entire land until he came to a wealthy city in which there stood a magnificent castle. A queen lived there, he soon learned, a beautiful and generous lady whose fame had spread far and wide. Every day she would give money to the poor from the gatehouse of her castle. 'I would do well to be able to obtain one of her florins,' said Sir Isumbras to himself. 'Then I might be able to buy myself a proper meal!'

So he arrived at the gatehouse and found many poor men there who had also come to get some gold; each was holding a shiny bright florin in his hand and Sir Isumbras was delighted to see this. Now, it was the case that the lady who was the ruler of these lands was accustomed to bringing the elderly and disabled into her castle, fifty or more at a time. Sir Isumbras looked so destitute that he was quickly taken inside for pity. The queen sat in her hall surrounded by all her servants and courtiers. Knights in fine clothes were attending to her every wish. There was an exquisite carpet on the floor. 'This poor palmer,' said the steward, 'shall sit at the top table.' They brought food and wine to him, though he did not eat anything but sat looking around instead, at the merriment and at the finery and remembering how it had once been with him, and tears came to his eyes. The queen wondered why this fellow was not eating, beckoned a knight over to her and said: 'Take a chair and a cushion and let me sit beside that palmer, so that I can hear all about the things that he has heard of and seen, in far off lands, and in the many forgotten corners of the world where I am sure that he has been.' So a chair was brought over and the queen sat in it and the palmer told her of all the things that he had seen. He told her some entertaining tales and she asked if he would like anything to eat. Some fine dishes were brought to him and the queen wondered why he would not eat from them. 'For the sake of my lord's soul and for his memory,' she said, 'or if he still lives then for his love, I shall provide good food and clothes for you, a room within the castle perimeter and a boy to serve you.'

The palmer lived there in the castle until he was fit and strong once more, and he served in the hall. He was tall and handsome and everybody loved him, so willing was he to remain in attendance and to serve. And when knights went to practice at jousting he liked to join them in their games and put them all to shame. And so they organised a tournament and put him on a dreadful horse, and yet despite this handicap he conquered every one of them! In all honesty, I tell you, he killed many heathens that day! When Sir Isumbras was in the field there was no one on horseback so mighty nor so accomplished. To one poor knight he gave such a dreadful blow that both the man's eyes fell out of their sockets! He dealt terrible wounds to many and thrust Saracens down slopes and into ditches beneath the castle walls with broken necks and shattered backs. Many fled from him in terror. The queen sat and laughed at this. 'My palmer is good enough!' she said. 'He earns his supper!'

Sir Isumbras went off one day to amuse himself hunting alone in the forests and wild places, doing those things it had once been his custom to do, and he came upon an eagle's nest on a mountain. Hanging from it and waving back and forth in the wind was a red cloth. Sir Isumbras climbed up to the nest and found his own cloak entangled there, along with all the gold that he had been given in exchange for his wife, all those many years before. When he saw this, the memories came flooding back to him. He carried the gold to his chamber, put it under his bed and went about the castle in tears. The gold reminded him of his lost wife and his three lost children and it caused him so much anguish and distress that, although he was usually such a cheerful fellow, he went about weeping all that day. His unhappiness lasted for so long that the whole castle came to know of it and it was mentioned to the queen.

One day Sir Isumbras went out to be alone with his thoughts and squires broke down the door of his chamber, saw the gold lying there and took it to show to the queen. When she saw the gold, this radiant lady fell to the floor in a faint, for she recognised it. She kissed it and cried: 'Alas! This was my lord

Sir Isumbras's gold – the man who was once my husband!' and she told her knights everything – how she had been sold for this money and how: 'My lord was given such a beating for it!' she exclaimed. 'When you see the palmer, ask him to come and speak with me, for I long to hear him explain to me what this all means.'

When Sir Isumbras entered the hall that evening the queen summoned him to her side and, broaching the subject directly she said: 'Where did you get all that gold that has been found in your room? Have you ever been a knight?'

Sir Isumbras tensed. His brow began to sweat. And with a doleful countenance he replied: 'Let me explain.' And on his bended knees he recounted all that had happened to him up to the point where his wife had been taken away in a sailing ship. 'My wife was sold,' he said, 'and I was beaten and kicked. I have lost three children, and my cloak with all the gold in it was carried away by an eagle. But I discovered the cloak again recently in an eagle's nest that I found hereabouts.'

'Tell me, palmer,' replied the queen, 'before you go; was there any token made between you and your wife, just before you were separated from one another?'

'A ring,' replied Sir Isumbras. 'That's all.'

The lady sighed and said: 'Let me see that ring.'

'I have it here,' replied Sir Isumbras.

The lady produced a purse and in it was the other half of the ring. She put the two pieces together and they fitted perfectly.



'God be praised,' she said softly.

Then the lady knelt and thanked the grace of God that after all these years she had found her husband. Then there was joy enough! – hugging and kissing and holding each other in their arms! And they could not keep the joy to themselves, no, they told all the knights in the hall, and commanded a wedding! It was attended by all who cared to come and witness this joyful occasion, rich and poor alike. Sir Isumbras was crowned king of the entire land, that worthy knight. Sir Isumbras was king, and wealthier than he had ever been. He was rescued from all his troubles. He began to talk about his faith and he commanded everybody who was a heathen to be quickly baptized and christened.

But the heathens were unanimous as they whispered angrily together – this false king should be destroyed. Seize him, if we can, burn him – exterminate him and everyone else who is a Christian! A day of battle was decided upon. Heathens against Christians. Sir Isumbras was to be killed. A Saracen army was raised, commanded by two heathen kings from neighbouring lands. Sir Isumbras prepared himself for battle but when he arrived on the field of combat he found that he was all by himself. Mounted upon his steed, his men were nowhere to be seen. They had all fled. So brave Sir Isumbras said goodbye to his wife and with many deep sighs: 'Madam,' he said, 'may luck and health be yours, for now and evermore, for I must do what has to be done.'

'Help me to arm myself,' replied his wife. 'Let me dress in a suit of armour and carry a sword and a lance as though I am a knight, and let me ride with you on the battlefield. And if God sends us grace enough that we should be killed together and lie side by side, then I will have found happiness enough.'

The lady was soon dressed in a fine suit of armour and Sir Isumbras gave her a lance and a shield. The two sides were readied for the engagement. Against thirty thousand Saracens stood only these two knights, alone. But just as their death seemed imminent, three more knights came riding onto the battlefield. Each was mounted upon a wild beast: one on a leopard, another on a unicorn and a third on a lion. The one on the lion was their eldest son.

These knights fought as though they were berserk, destroying everything in their path. It was marvelous to see! They killed both of the heathen kings and scores of other Saracens as well; over twenty thousand, I think. Afterwards Sir Isumbras invited them to spend the night as his guests. They replied very courteously: 'Sir, the grace of God has sent us to you, and you should know that we are your children.'

There was a town nearby and Sir Isumbras quickly made for it, leading his sons through the outer wall. And in a well-lit and well-furnished room they changed out of their armour into more comfortable clothes and every kind of meat was prepared for them; lamb, beef and venison was set at the table for these fine young warriors. Sir Isumbras was wealthier now than he had ever been! He was High King over three heathen lands.

Sir Isumbras crowned each of his sons to rule under him, let each choose the country he liked best and then each was given this land to rule over. And when they had established their rule they caused all the people to be christened, as the book relates. And they upheld justice and the rule of God's law and their souls went to heaven when they died.

Jesus Christ, King of Heaven, give us your blessing and shield us from all harm.