

## THE GOLDEN LEGEND.



*EGENDA Aurea*, or the *Golden Legend* was originally written in Latin in the thirteenth century by Jacobus de Voragine, a Dominican friar, and translated into English by William

Caxton, in the fifteenth century. This Legend is one of exquisite beauty. In substance, it is as follows: During the times of the early Crusaders, there lived a certain wealthy prince who became afflicted on a sudden, with what was apparently an incurable malady. He consulted all the learned doctors of the time, to no avail. A remedy indeed was prescribed, but it was of such a nature, that the poor prince had almost despaired of being cured. However, Lucifer, the arch-fiend, always intent on evil, contrived to bring about the acceptance of the remedy, which required that some young and virtuous girl should offer her own life's blood voluntarily, and the prince would live. A young girl, the daughter of one of the prince's tenants, scarcely more than a child in years, but really a woman in tenderness and devotion, resolved to sacrifice her life for the cure of the prince. The prince knew full well that his religion would not sanction such a deed, but Lucifer disguised as a monk ratified the deed and absolved him from all its consequences. The journey was made to the place of sacrifice. At the last moment, the prince's nobler-self prevailed; he determined rather to die than to purchase life so ignobly. He was cured afterwards in a miraculous manner by means of the relics of St. Matthew; and married the maiden who had so generously offered her life to save him.

Here was excellent material to work upon, provided that the artist who took it in hand, was possessed of the necessary talent and discrimination. Longfellow who has essayed the task, has moulded this legend of the Middle Ages into a drama, bearing the same name, which,

beyond doubt, contains passages vieing in beauty of sentiment and diction with those of any poet, although he has been justly censured for too closely imitating Goethe's *Faust*. He choose a sublime drama as a model; and in this he was correct. He entirely forgot to disguise his material; and in this he was at fault.

We always hear the inventive faculty of man lauded to the skies, as if originality were the only proofs of genius; and yet many of our greatest minds have stolen their plots from others. Virgil was a great imitator; Shakespeare and Scott in most cases simply rebrunished old metals. We have to admit, however, that they had the art of disguising the original by the brilliancy of their polish. Who knows but some genius in the future will treat the world to a new *Hamlet*? The great American poet was deficient in this power. Hence his efforts—and they are of a high order—do not appear to a proper advantage. But this fault is outweighed by the other excellencies of the *Golden Legend*. In respect of melody, feeling, pathos and that simplicity of expression which is the criterion of a genuine poet, Longfellow need not shun comparison with anyone. He has in spite of violent opposition, chosen meters hitherto unused by English poets, and has proved of what wonderful flexibility our language is capable. On the appearance of *Evangeline*, several critics openly wished that it would be a failure; because in their opinion, the hexameter was completely foreign to our ears.

As in Homer of old we find mortals elevated by contact with the gods, so in the *Golden Legend*, we find a supernatural agent, not from on high, but from the depths below. His satanic majesty has much to do and say. With consummate skill has he been kept in his proper sphere, causing nothing but evil; and for this our poet is entitled to praise. To be planning and doing evil is essential to Lucifer; though in the hands of some masters, Milton for instance, he is represented as a