

LEGENDS

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Legends by Amy Lowell

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AMY LOWELL

LEGENDS

Books by **AMY LOWELL**
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Poetry

WHAT'S O'CLOCK

LEGENDS

PICTURES OF THE FLOATING WORLD

CAN GRANDE'S CASTLE

MEN, WOMEN AND GHOSTS

SWORD BLADES AND POPPY SEED

A DOME OF MANY-COLOURED GLASS

A CRITICAL FABLE

(IN COLLABORATION WITH FLORENCE ATSOUGH)

FIR-FLOWER TABLETS: POEMS TRANSLATED

FROM THE CHINESE

Prose

TENDENCIES IN MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

SIX FRENCH POETS: STUDIES IN CONTEMPO-


RARY LITERATURE

JOHN KEATS

LEGENDS

BY
AMY LOWELL

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PREFACE

A **LEGEND** is something which nobody has written and everybody has written, and which anybody is at liberty to rewrite. It may be altered, it may be viewed from any angle, it may assume what dress the author pleases, yet it remains essentially the same because it is attached to the very fibres of the heart of man. Civilization is the study of man about himself, his powers, limitations, and endurances; it is the slowly acquired knowledge of how he can best exist in company with his fellows on the planet called Earth. As man learns, he becomes conscious, first of an immense curiosity, and then of a measure of understanding, and, immediately after, of a desire to express both; and the simplest form of expression is by means of the tale or (hateful word!) allegory. Hence legends; they

are bits of fact, or guesses at fact, pressed into the form of a story and flung out into the world as markers of how much ground has been travelled. If science be proven truth (and I believe it is), legends might be described as speculative or apprehended truth. When legends deal with natural phenomena, they may be — in fact, in the end, always are — superseded by science, but they retain the same charm for races which fairy-stories have for individuals, we love them because we once loved them. When they deal with humanity, they are extremely apt to strike us as sharply as they did our forbears. Man is a strangely alike animal, as the prevalence of certain legends among a wide variety of peoples abundantly proves.

This book, then, is a book of legends. The stories in it are neither new, nor old; they are perennial, this is my version, as the next man will have his and so on forever. Some I have left more or less in the settings in which I found them,

to others I have given a new environment, some I have never either read or heard, they come out of an atavistic memory, I suppose. Stories, as such, they emphatically are not, since all have that curious substratum of reality, speculative or apprehended, of which I have spoken. But searchers for exact folk-lore need not look to me, there is nothing exact to be found here. I have changed, added, subtracted, jumbled several together at will, left out portions; in short, made them over to suit my particular vision. A poet is the most contradictory creature imaginable, he respects nothing and reveres everything, but what he loves he makes his own. And this then is just the touchstone of the true legend, it can be made over in any image, but always remains itself.

As for the original impulse, in some cases I have forgotten it, in others I do not know what it was. For instance, I remember that "A Legend of Porcelain" was composed of three

distinct legends, but I do not know where I found them, probably in Dr. Stephen W. Bushell's "Description of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain" or in the "Histoire et Fabrication de la Porcelaine Chinoise" by M. Stanislas Julien, the volume which gave Lafcadio Hearn the material of his "Tale of the Porcelain God." Both these books consist principally of translations of Chinese treatises, Julien's of the "King-te-tchin T'ao Lu," or "History of the King-te-tchin Porcelains," the original work was published in 1815; Bushell's of the "T'ao Shuo" or "Description of Pottery," by Chu Yen, an eighteenth century official, who held an appointment under the jurisdiction of the Governor of the Province of Kiangsi. King-te-tchin, the city in which the Imperial porcelain factories were situated, was in this province, and Chu Yen made a personal investigation of the processes of the manufacture of porcelain during his residence there. His book was published in 1774. It is a