

FRENCH MEDIAEVAL ROMANCES

FROM THE LAYS OF MARIE DE FRANCE

TRANSLATED BY

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1911



Figure 1Marie de france, from an illuminated manuscript¹

¹ http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AMarie_de_France_1.tif

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THE LAY OF GUIGEMAR



FIGURE 2 HUNTING A STAG IN THE FOREST, 1430²

² *Hunting A Stag In The Forest*. Illuminated Manuscript. 1430. The Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. *Book of Hours of Marguerite d'Orléans*. Web. 22 May 2006.

Hearken, oh gentles, to the words of Marie. When the minstrel tells his tale, let the folk about the fire heed him willingly. For his part the singer must be wary not to spoil good music with unseemly words. Listen, oh lordlings, to the words of Marie, for she pains herself grievously not to forget this thing. The craft is hard—then approve the more sweetly him who carols the tune. But this is the way of the world, that when a man or woman sings more tunably³ than his fellows, those about the fire fall upon him, pell-mell, for reason of their envy. They rehearse diligently the faults of his song, and steal away his praise with evil words. I will brand these folk as they deserve. They, and such as they, are like mad dogs—cowardly and felon—who traitorously bring to death men better than themselves. Now let the japer, and the smiler with his knife, do me what harm they may. Verily they are in their right to speak ill of me.

Hearken, oh gentles, to the tale I set before you, for thereof the Bretons already have made a Lay. I will not do it harm by many words, and here is the commencement of the matter. According to text and scripture, now I relate a certain adventure, which bechanced in the realm of Brittany, in days long gone before.

In that time when Arthur maintained his realm, the now in peace, the now in war, the King counted amongst his vassals a certain baron, named Oridial. This knight was lord of Leon, and was very near to his prince's heart, both in council chamber and in field. From his wife he had gotten two children, the one a son and the other a fair daughter. Nogent, he had called the damsel at the font, and the dansellon⁴ was named Guigemar—no goodlier might be found in any realm. His mother had set all her love upon the lad, and his father shewed him every good that he was able. When the varlet was no more a child, Oridial sent him to the King, to be trained as a page in the courtesies of the Court. Right serviceable was he in his station, and meetly praised of all. The term of his service having come, and he being found of fitting years and knowledge, the King made him knight with his own hand, and armed him in rich harness, according to his wish. So Guigemar gave gifts to all those about his person, and bidding farewell, took leave, and departed from the Court. Guigemar went his way to Flanders, being desirous of advancement, for in that kingdom ever they have strife and war. Neither in Loraine nor Burgundy, Anjou nor Gascony, might be found in that day a better knight than he, no, nor one his peer. He had but one fault, since of love he took no care. There was neither dame nor maiden beneath the sky, however dainty and kind, to whom he gave thought or heed, though had he required her love of any damsel, very willingly would she have granted his desire. Many there were who prayed him for his love, but might have no kiss in return. So seeing that he refrained his heart in this fashion, men deemed him a strange man, and one fallen into a perilous case.

In the flower of his deeds the good knight returned to his own land, that he might see again his father and lord, his mother and his sister, even as he very tenderly desired. He lodged with them for the space of a long month, and at the end of that time had envy to hunt within the wood. The night being come, Guigemar summoned his prickers⁵ and his squires,⁶ and early in the morning rode within the forest. Great pleasure had Guigemar in the woodland, and much he delighted in the chase. A tall stag was presently started, and the hounds being uncoupled, all hastened in pursuit—the huntsmen before, and the good knight following after, winding upon his horn. Guigemar rode at a great pace after the quarry, a varlet riding beside, bearing his bow, his arrows and his spear. He followed so hotly that he over-passed the chase. Gazing about him he marked, within a thicket, a doe hiding with her fawn. Very white and wonderful was this beast, for she was without spot, and bore antlers upon her head. The hounds bayed about her, but might not pull her down. Guigemar bent his bow, and loosed a shaft at the quarry. He wounded the deer a little above the hoof, so that presently she fell upon her side. But the arrow glanced away, and returning upon itself, struck Guigemar in the thigh, so grievously, that straightway he fell from his horse upon the ground. Guigemar lay upon the grass, beside the deer which he had wounded

³ On key, in tune.

⁴ A-N, dancel; boy

⁵ Whippers, the boys who keep the hunting dogs on the trail.

⁶ A-N, La nuit somunt ses chevaliers, Ses veneürs e ses berniers; (At night, he summoned his horsemen, his huntsmen, and his whippers)

to his hurt. He heard her sighs and groans, and perceived the bitterness of her pity. Then with mortal speech the doe spake to the wounded man in such fashion as this, "Alas, my sorrow, for now am I slain. But thou, Vassal, who hast done me this great wrong, do not think to hide from the vengeance of thy destiny. Never may surgeon and his medicine heal your hurt. Neither herb nor root nor potion can ever cure the wound within your flesh: For that there is no healing. The only balm to close that sore must be brought by a woman, who for her love will suffer such pain and sorrow as no woman in the world has endured before. And to the dolorous lady, dolorous knight. For your part you shall do and suffer so great things for her, that not a lover beneath the sun, or lovers who are dead, or lovers who yet shall have their day, but shall marvel at the tale. Now, go from hence, and let me die in peace."

Guigemar was wounded twice over—by the arrow, and by the words he was dismayed to hear. He considered within himself to what land he must go to find this healing for his hurt, for he was yet too young to die. He saw clearly, and told it to his heart, that there was no lady in his life to whom he could run for pity, and be made whole of his wound. He called his varlet before him,

"Friend," said he, "go forthwith, and bring my comrades to this place, for I have to speak with them."

The varlet went upon his errand, leaving his master sick with the heat and fever of his hurt. When he was gone, Guigemar tore the hem from his shirt, and bound it straitly⁷ about his wound. He climbed painfully upon the saddle, and departed without more ado, for he was desirous to be gone before any could come to stay him from his purpose. A green path led through the deep forest to the plain, and his way across the plain brought him to a cliff, exceeding high, and to the sea. Guigemar looked upon the water, which was very still, for this fair harbourage was land-locked from the main. Upon this harbour lay one only vessel, bearing a rich pavilion of silk, daintily furnished both without and within, and well it seemed to Guigemar that he had seen this ship before. Beneath the sky was no ship so rich or precious, for there was not a sail but was spun of silk, and not a plank, from keel to mast, but showed of ebony. Too fair was the nave for mortal man, and Guigemar held it in sore displeasure. He marvelled greatly from what country it had come, and wondered long concerning this harbour, and the ship that lay therein. Guigemar got him down from his horse upon the shore, and with mighty pain and labour climbed within the ship. He trusted to find merchantmen and sailors therein, but there was none to guard, and none he saw. Now within the pavilion was a very rich bed, carved by cunning workmen in the days of King Solomon. This fair bed was wrought of cypress wood and white ivory, adorned with gold and gems most precious. Right sweet were the linen cloths upon the bed, and so soft the pillow, that he who lay thereon would sleep, were he sadder than any other in the world. The counterpane was of purple from the vats of Alexandria, and overall was set a right fair coverlet of cloth of gold. The pavilion was litten⁸ by two great waxen torches, placed in candlesticks of fine gold, decked with jewels worth a lord's ransom. So the wounded knight looked on ship and pavilion, bed and candle, and marvelled greatly. Guigemar sat him down upon the bed for a little, because of the anguish of his wound. After he had rested a space he got upon his feet, that he might quit the vessel, but he found that for him there was no return. A gentle wind had filled the sails, and already he was in the open sea. When Guigemar saw that he was far from land, he was very heavy and sorrowful. He knew not what to do, by reason of the mightiness of his hurt. But he must endure the adventure as best he was able; so he prayed to God to take him in His keeping, and in His good pleasure to bring him safe to port, and deliver him from the peril of death. Then climbing upon the couch, he laid his head upon the pillow, and slept as one dead, until, with vespers, the ship drew to that haven where he might find the healing for his hurt.

Guigemar had come to an ancient city, where the King of that realm held his court and state. This King was full of years, and was wedded to a dame of high degree. The lady was of tender age, passing fresh and fair, and sweet of speech to all. Therefore was the King jealous of his wife beyond all measure. Such is the wont of age,

⁷ immediately

⁸ lit

for much it fears that old and young cannot mate together, and that youth will turn to youth. This is the death in life of the old.

The castle of this ancient lord had a mighty keep. Beneath this tower was a right fair orchard, together with a close, shut in by a wall of green marble, very strong and high. This wall had one only gate, and the door was watched of warders, both night and day. On the other side of this garden was the sea, so that none might do his errand in the castle therefrom, save in a boat. To hold his dame in the greater surety, the King had built a bower within the wall; there was no fairer chamber beneath the sun. The first room was the Queen's chapel. Beyond this was the lady's bedchamber, painted all over with shapes and colours most wonderful to behold. On one wall might be seen Dame Venus, the goddess of Love, sweetly flushed as when she walked the water, lovely as life, teaching men how they should bear them in loyal service to their lady. On another wall, the goddess threw Ovid's book within a fire of coals. A scroll issuing from her lips proclaimed that those who read therein, and strove to ease them of their pains, would find from her neither service nor favour. In this chamber the lady was put in ward, and with her a certain maiden to hold her company. This damsels was her niece, since she was her sister's child, and there was great love betwixt the twain. When the Queen walked within the garden, or went abroad, this maiden was ever by her side, and came again with her to the house. Save this damsels, neither man nor woman entered in the bower, nor issued forth from out the wall. One only man possessed the key of the postern, an aged priest, very white and frail. This priest recited the service of God within the chapel, and served the Queen's plate and cup when she ate meat at table.

Now, on a day, the Queen had fallen asleep after meat, and on her awaking would walk a little in the garden. She called her companion to her, and the two went forth to be glad amongst the flowers. As they looked across the sea they marked a ship drawing near the land, rising and falling upon the waves. Very fearful was the Queen thereat, for the vessel came to anchorage, though there was no helmsman to direct her course. The dame's face became sanguine for dread, and she turned her about to flee, because of her exceeding fear. Her maiden, who was of more courage than she, stayed her mistress with many comforting words. For her part she was very desirous to know what this thing meant. She hastened to the shore, and laying aside her mantle, climbed within this wondrous vessel. Thereon she found no living soul, save only the knight sleeping fast within the pavilion. The damsels looked long upon the knight, for pale he was as wax, and well she deemed him dead. She returned forthwith to the Queen, and told her of this marvel, and of the good knight who was slain.

"Let us go together on the ship," replied the lady. "If he be dead we may give him fitting burial, and the priest shall pray meetly for his soul. Should he be yet alive perchance he will speak, and tell us of his case."

Without more tarrying the two damsels mounted on the ship, the lady before, and her maiden following after. When the Queen entered in the pavilion she stayed her feet before the bed, for joy and grief of what she saw. She might not refrain her eyes from gazing on the knight, for her heart was ravished with his beauty, and she sorrowed beyond measure, because of his grievous hurt. To herself she said, "In a bad hour cometh the goodly youth." She drew near the bed, and placing her hand upon his breast, found that the flesh was warm, and that the heart beat strongly in his side. Guigemar awoke at the touch, and saluted the dame as sweetly as he was able, for well he knew that he had come to a Christian land. The lady, full of thought, returned him his salutation right courteously, though the tears were yet in her eyes. Straightway she asked of him from what realm he came, and of what people, and in what war he had taken his hurt.

"Lady," answered Guigemar, "in no battle I received this wound. If it pleases you to hear my tale I will tell you the truth, and in nothing will I lie. I am a knight of Little Brittany. Yesterday I chased a wonderful white deer within the forest. The shaft with which I struck her to my hurt, returned again on me, and caused this wound upon my thigh, which may never be cured, nor made whole. For this wondrous Beast raised her plaint in a mortal tongue. She cursed me loudly, with many evil words, swearing that never might this sore be healed, save by one only damsels in the world, and her I know not where to find. When I heard my luckless fate I left the wood with what speed I might, and coming to a harbour, not far from thence, I lighted on this ship. For my sins

I climbed therein. Then without oars or helm this boat ravished me from shore; so that I know not where I have come, nor what is the name of this city. Fair lady, for God's love, counsel me of your good grace, for I know not where to turn, nor how to govern the ship."

The lady made answer, "Fair sir, willingly shall I give you such good counsel as I may. This realm and city are the appanage⁹ of my husband. He is a right rich lord, of high lineage, but old and very full of years. Also he is jealous beyond all measure; therefore it is that I see you now. By reason of his jealousy he has shut me fast between high walls, entered by one narrow door, with an ancient priest to keep the key. May God requite him for his deed. Night and day I am guarded in this prison, from whence I may never go forth, without the knowledge of my lord. Here are my chamber and my chapel, and here I live, with this, my maiden, to bear me company. If it pleases you to dwell here for a little, till you may pass upon your way, right gladly we shall receive you, and with a good heart we will tend your wound, till you are healed."

When Guigemar heard this speech he rejoiced greatly. He thanked the lady with many sweet words, and consented to sojourn in her hall awhile. He raised himself upon his couch, and by the courtesy of the damsels left the ship. Leaning heavily upon the lady, at the end he won to her maiden's chamber, where there was a fair bed covered with a rich dossal of broidered silk, edged with fur. When he was entered in this bed, the damsels came bearing clear water in basins of gold, for the cleansing of his hurt. They stanched the blood with a towel of fine linen, and bound the wound strictly, to his exceeding comfort. So after the vesper meal was eaten, the lady departed to her own chamber, leaving the knight in much ease and content.

Now Guigemar set his love so fondly upon the lady that he forgot his father's house. He thought no more of the anguish of his hurt, because of another wound that was beneath his breast. He tossed and sighed in his unrest, and prayed the maiden of his service to depart, so that he might sleep a little. When the maid was gone, Guigemar considered within himself whether he might seek the dame, to know whether her heart was warmed by any ember of the flame that burned in his. He turned it this way and that, and knew not what to do. This only was clear, that if the lady refused to cure his wound, death, for him, was sure and speedy.

"Alas," said he, "what shall I do! Shall I go to my lady, and pray her pity on the wretch who has none to give him counsel? If she refuse my prayer, because of her hardness and pride, I shall know there is nought for me but to die in my sorrow, or, at least, to go heavily all the days of my life."

Then he sighed, and in his sighing lighted on a better purpose; for he said within himself that doubtless he was born to suffer, and that the best of him was tears. All the long night he spent in vigil and groanings and watchfulness. To himself he told over her words and her semblance. He remembered the eyes and the fair mouth of his lady, and all the grace and the sweetness, which had struck like a knife at his heart. Between his teeth he cried on her for pity, and for a little more would have called her to his side. Ah, had he but known the fever of the lady, and how terrible a lord to her was Love, how great had been his joy and solace. His visage would have been the more sanguine, which was now so pale of colour, because of the dolour that was his. But if the knight was sick by reason of his love, the dame had small cause to boast herself of health. The lady rose early from her bed, since she might not sleep. She complained of her unrest, and of Love who rode her so hardly. The maiden, who was of her company, saw clearly enough that all her lady's thoughts were set upon the knight, who, for his healing, sojourned in the chamber. She did not know whether his thoughts were given again to the dame. When, therefore, the lady had entered in the chapel, the damsel went straightway to the knight. He welcomed her gladly, and bade her be seated near the bed. Then he inquired, "Friend, where now is my lady, and why did she rise so early from her bed?"

Having spoken so far, he became silent, and sighed.

⁹ A gift of land, an official position, or money given to the younger children of kings and princes to provide for their maintenance. (OED)

"Sir," replied the maiden softly, "you love, and are discreet, but be not too discreet therein. In such a love as yours there is nothing to be ashamed. He who may win my lady's favour has every reason to be proud of his fortune. Altogether seemly would be your friendship, for you are young, and she is fair."

The knight made answer to the maiden, "I am so fast in the snare, that I pray the fowler to slay me, if she may not free me from the net. Counsel me, fair sweet friend, if I may hope of kindness at her hand."

Then the maiden of her sweetness comforted the knight, and assured him of all the good that she was able. So courteous and refined was the maid.

When the lady had heard Mass, she hastened back to the chamber. She had not forgotten her friend, and greatly she desired to know whether he was awake or asleep, of whom her heart was fain. She bade her maiden to summon him to her chamber, for she had a certain thing in her heart to show him at leisure, were it for the joy or the sorrow of their days.

Guigemar saluted the lady, and the dame returned the knight his courtesy, but their hearts were too fearful for speech. The knight dared ask nothing of his lady, for reason that he was a stranger in a strange land, and was adread to show her his love. But—as says the proverb—he who will not tell of his sore, may not hope for balm to his hurt. Love is a privy wound within the heart, and none knoweth of that bitterness but the heart alone. Love is an evil which may last for a whole life long, because of man and his constant heart. Many there be who make of Love a gibe and a jest, and with specious words defame him by boastful tales. But theirs is not love. Rather it is folly and lightness, and the tune of a merry song. But let him who has found a constant lover prize her above rubies, and serve her with loyal service, being altogether at her will. Guigemar loved in this fashion, and therefore Love came swiftly to his aid. Love put words in his mouth, and courage in his heart, so that his hope might be made plain.

"Lady," said he, "I die for your love. I am in fever because of my wound, and if you care not to heal my hurt I would rather die. Fair friend, I pray you for grace. Do not gainsay me with evil words."

The lady hearkened with a smile to Guigemar's speech. Right daintily and sweetly she replied, "Friend, yea is not a word of two letters. I do not grant such a prayer every day of the week, and must you have your gift so quickly?"

"Lady," cried he, "for God's sake pity me, and take it not amiss. She, who loves lightly, may make her lover pray for long, so that she may hide how often her feet have trodden the pathway with another friend. But the honest dame, when she has once given her heart to a friend, will not deny his wish because of pride. The rather she will find her pride in humbleness, and love him again with the same love he has set on her. So they will be glad together, and since none will have knowledge or hearing of the matter, they will rejoice in their youth. Fair, sweet lady, be this thy pleasure?"

When the lady heard these words well she found them honest and true. Therefore without further prayings and ado she granted Guigemar her love and her kiss. Henceforward Guigemar lived greatly at his ease, for he had sight and speech of his friend, and many a time she granted him her embrace and tenderness, as is the wont of lovers when alone.

For a year and a half Guigemar dwelt with his lady, in solace and great delight. Then Fortune turned her wheel, and in a trice cast those down, whose seat had been so high. Thus it chanced to them, for they were spied upon and seen.

On a morning in summer time the Queen and her beau sat fondly together. The knight embraced her, eyes and face, but the lady stayed him, saying, "Fair sweet friend, my heart tells me that I shall lose you soon, for this hidden thing will quickly be made clear. If you are slain, may the same sword kill me. But if you win forth, well I

know that you will find another love, and that I shall be left alone with my thoughts. Were I parted from you, may God give me neither joy, nor rest, nor peace, if I would seek another friend. Of that you need have no fear. Friend, for surety and comfort of my heart deliver me now some sark¹⁰ of thine. Therein I will set a knot, and make this covenant with you, that never will you put your love on dame or maiden, save only on her who shall first unfasten this knot. Then you will ever keep faith with me, for so cunning shall be my craft, that no woman may hope to unravel that coil, either by force or guile, or even with her knife."

So the knight rendered the sark to his lady, and made such bargain as she wished, for the peace and assurance of her mind. For his part the knight took a fair girdle,¹¹ and girt it closely about the lady's middle. Right secret was the clasp and buckle of this girdle. Therefore he required of the dame that she would never grant her love, save to him only, who might free her from the strictness of this bond, without injury to band or clasp. Then they kissed together, and entered into such covenant as you have heard.

That very day their hidden love was made plain to men. A certain chamberlain was sent by that ancient lord with a message to the Queen. This unlucky wretch, finding that in no wise could he enter within the chamber, looked through the window, and saw. Forthwith he hastened to the King, and told him that which he had seen. When the agèd lord understood these words, never was there a sadder man than he. He called together the most trusty sergeants of his guard, and coming with them to the Queen's chamber, bade them to thrust in the door. When Guigemar was found therein, the King commanded that he should be slain with the sword, by reason of the anguish that was his. Guigemar was in no whit dismayed by the threat. He started to his feet, and gazing round, marked a stout rod of fir, on which it is the use for linen to be hung. This he took in hand, and faced his foes, bidding them have a care, for he would do a mischief to them all. The King looked earnestly upon the fearless knight, inquiring of him who he was, and where he was born, and in what manner he came to dwell within his house. So Guigemar told over to him this story of his fate. He showed him of the Beast that he had wounded to his hurt; of the ship, and of his bitter wound; of how he came within the realm, and of the lady's surgery. He told all to the ancient lord, to the last moment when he stood within his power. The King replied that he gave no credence to his word, nor believed that the story ran as he had said. If, however, the vessel might be found, he would commit the knight again to the waves. He would go the more heavily for the knight's saving, and a glad day would it be if he made shipwreck at sea. When they had entered into this covenant together, they went forth to the harbour, and there discovered the barge, even as Guigemar had said. So they set him thereon, and prayed him to return unto his own realm.

Without sail or oar the ship parted from that coast, with no further tarrying. The knight wept and wrung his hands, complaining of his lady's loss, and of her cherishing. He prayed the mighty God to grant him speedy death, and never to bring him home, save to meet again with her who was more desirable than life. Whilst he was yet at his orisons, the ship drew again to that port, from whence she had first come. Guigemar made haste to get him from the vessel, so that he might the more swiftly return to his own land. He had gone but a little way when he was aware of a squire of his household, riding in the company of a certain knight. This squire held the bridle of a destrier¹² in his hand, though no man rode thereon. Guigemar called to him by name, so that the varlet looking upon him, knew again his lord. He got him to his feet, and bringing the destrier to his master, set the knight thereon. Great was the joy, and merry was the feast, when Guigemar returned to his own realm. But though his friends did all that they were able, neither song nor game could cheer the knight, nor turn him from dwelling in his unhappy thoughts. For peace of mind they urged that he took to himself a wife, but Guigemar would have none of their counsel. Never would he wed a wife, on any day, either for love or for wealth, save only that she might first unloose the knot within his shirt. When this news was noised about the country, there was neither dame nor damsel in the realm of Brittany, but essayed to unfasten the knot. But there was no lady who could gain to her wish, whether by force or guile.

¹⁰ Shirt or chemise

¹¹ belt

¹² War horse

Now will I show of that lady, whom Guigemar so fondly loved. By the counsel of a certain baron the ancient King set his wife in prison. She was shut fast in a tower of grey marble, where her days were bad, and her nights worse. No man could make clear to you the great pain, the anguish and the dolour, that she suffered in this tower, wherein, I protest, she died daily. Two years and more she lay bound in prison, where warders came, but never joy or delight. Often she thought upon her friend.

"Guigemar, dear lord, in an evil hour I saw you with my eyes. Better for me that I die quickly, than endure longer my evil lot. Fair friend, if I could but win to that coast whence you sailed, very swiftly would I fling myself in the sea, and end my wretched life." When she had said these words she rose to her feet, and coming to the door was amazed to find therein neither bolt nor key. She issued forth, without challenge from sergeant or warder, and hastening to the harbour, found there her lover's ship, made fast to that very rock, from which she would cast her down. When she saw the barge she climbed thereon, but presently bethought her that on this ship her friend had gone to perish in the sea. At this thought she would have fled again to the shore, but her bones were as water, and she fell upon the deck. So in sore travail and sorrow, the vessel carried her across the waves, to a port of Brittany, guarded by a castle, strong and very fair. Now the lord of this castle was named Meriadus. He was a right warlike prince, and had made him ready to fight with the prince of a country nearby. He had risen very early in the morning, to send forth a great company of spears, the more easily to ravage this neighbour's realm. Meriadus looked forth from his window, and marked the ship which came to port. He hastened down the steps of the perron,¹³ and calling to his chamberlain, came with what speed he might to the ship. Then mounting the ladder he stood upon the deck. When Meriadus found within the ship a dame, who for beauty seemed rather a fay¹⁴ than a mere earthly woman, he seized her by her mantle, and brought her swiftly to his keep. Right joyous was he because of his good fortune, for lovely was the lady beyond mortal measure. He made no question as to who had set her on the barge. He knew only that she was fair, and of high lineage, and that his heart turned towards her with so hot a love as never before had he put on dame or damsel. Now there dwelt within the castle a sister of this lord, who was yet unwed. Meriadus bestowed the lady in his sister's chamber, because it was the fairest in the tower. Moreover he commanded that she should be meetly served, and held in all reverence. But though the dame was so richly clothed and cherished, ever was she sad and deep in thought. Meriadus came often to cheer her with mirth and speech, by reason that he wished to gain her love as a free gift, and not by force. It was in vain that he prayed her for grace, since she had no balm for his wound. For answer she showed him the girdle about her body, saying that never would she give her love to man, save only to him who might unloose the buckle of that girdle, without harm to belt or clasp. When Meriadus heard these words, he spoke in haste and said, "Lady, there dwells in this country a very worthy knight, who will take no woman as wife, except she first untie a certain crafty knot in the hem of a shirt, and that without force or knife. For a little I would wager that it was you who tied this knot."

When the lady heard thereof her breath went from her, and near she came to falling on the ground. Meriadus caught her in his arms, and cut the laces of her bodice, that she might have the more air. He strove to unfasten her girdle, but might not dissever the clasp. Yea, though every knight in the realm essayed to unfasten that cincture, it would not yield, except to one alone.

Now Meriadus made the lists ready for a great jousting, and called to that tournament all the knights who would aid him in his war. Many a lord came at his bidding, and with them Guigemar, amongst the first. Meriadus had sent letters to the knight, beseeching him, as friend and companion, not to fail him in this business. So Guigemar hastened to the need of his lord, and at his back more than one hundred spears. All these Meriadus welcomed very gladly, and gave them lodging within his tower. In honour of his guest, the prince sent two gentlemen to his sister, praying her to attire herself richly, and come to hall, together with the dame whom he loved so dearly well. These did as they were bidden, and arrayed in their sweetest vesture, presently entered in the hall, holding each other by the hand. Very pale and pensive was the lady, but when she heard her lover's

¹³ an exterior set of steps and a platform at the main entrance to a large building such as a church or mansion.(OED)

¹⁴ fairy

name her feet failed beneath her, and had not the maiden held her fast, she would have fallen on the floor. Guigemar rose from his seat at the sight of the dame, her fashion and her semblance, and stood staring upon her. He went a little apart, and said within himself, "Can this be my sweet friend, my hope, my heart, my life, the fair lady who gave me the grace of her love? From whence comes she; who might have brought her to this far land? But I speak in my folly, for well I know that this is not my dear. A little red, a little white, and all women are thus shapen. My thoughts are troubled, by reason that the sweetness of this lady resembles the sweetness of that other, for whom my heart sighs and trembles. Yet needs must that I have speech of the lady."

Guigemar drew near to the dame. He kissed her courteously, and found no word to utter, save to pray that he might be seated at her side. Meriadus spied upon them closely, and was the more heavy because of their trouble. Therefore he feigned mirth.

"Guigemar, dear lord, if it pleases you, let this damsel essay to untie the knot of your sark, if so be she may loosen the coil."

Guigemar made answer that very willingly he would do this thing. He called to him a squire who had the shirt in keeping, and bade him seek his charge, and deliver it to the dame. The lady took the sark in hand. Well she knew the knot that she had tied so cunningly, and was so willing to unloose; but for reason of the trouble at her heart, she did not dare essay. Meriadus marked the distress of the damsel, and was more sorrowful than ever was lover before.

"Lady," said he, "do all that you are able to unfasten this coil."

So at his commandment she took again to her the hem of the shirt, and lightly and easily unravelled the tie.

Guigemar marvelled greatly when he saw this thing. His heart told him that of a truth this was his lady, but he could not give faith to his eyes.

"Friend, are you indeed the sweet comrade I have known? Tell me truly now, is there about your body the girdle with which I girt you in your own realm?"

He set his hands to her waist, and found that the secret belt was yet about her sides.

"Fair sweet friend, tell me now by what adventure I find you here, and who has brought you to this tower?"

So the lady told over to her friend the pain and the anguish and the dolour of the prison in which she was held; of how it chanced that she fled from her dungeon, and lighting upon a ship, entered therein, and came to this fair haven; of how Meriadus took her from the barge, but kept her in all honour, save only that ever he sought for her love; "but now, fair friend, all is well, for you hold your lady in your arms."

Guigemar stood upon his feet, and beckoned with his hand.

"Lords," he cried, "hearken now to me. I have found my friend, whom I have lost for a great while. Before you all I pray and require of Meriadus to yield me my own. For this grace I give him open thanks. Moreover I will kneel down, and become his liege man. For two years, or three, if he will, I will bargain to serve in his quarrels, and with me, of riders, a hundred or more at my back."

Then answered Meriadus, "Guigemar, fair friend, I am not yet so shaken or overborne in war, that I must do as you wish, right humbly. This woman is my captive. I found her: I hold her: and I will defend my right against you and all your power."

When Guigemar heard these proud words he got to horse speedily, him and all his company. He threw down his glove, and parted in anger from the tower. But he went right heavily, since he must leave behind his friend.

In his train rode all those knights who had drawn together to that town for the great tournament. Not a knight of them all but plighted faith to follow where he led, and to hold himself recreant and shamed if he failed his oath.

That same night the band came to the castle of the prince with whom Meriadus was at war. He welcomed them very gladly, and gave them lodging in his tower. By their aid he had good hope to bring this quarrel to an end. Very early in the morning the host came together to set the battle in array. With clash of mail and noise of horns they issued from the city gate, Guigemar riding at their head. They drew before the castle where Meriadus lay in strength, and sought to take it by storm. But the keep was very strong, and Meriadus bore himself as a stout and valiant knight. So Guigemar, like a wary captain, sat himself down before the town, till all the folk of that place were deemed by friend and sergeant to be weak with hunger. Then they took that high keep with the sword, and burnt it with fire. The lord thereof they slew in his own hall; but Guigemar came forth, after such labours as you have heard, bearing his lady with him, to return in peace to his own land.

From this adventure that I have told you, has come the Lay that minstrels chant to harp and viol—fair is that song and sweet the tune.

THE LAY OF SIR LAUNFAL

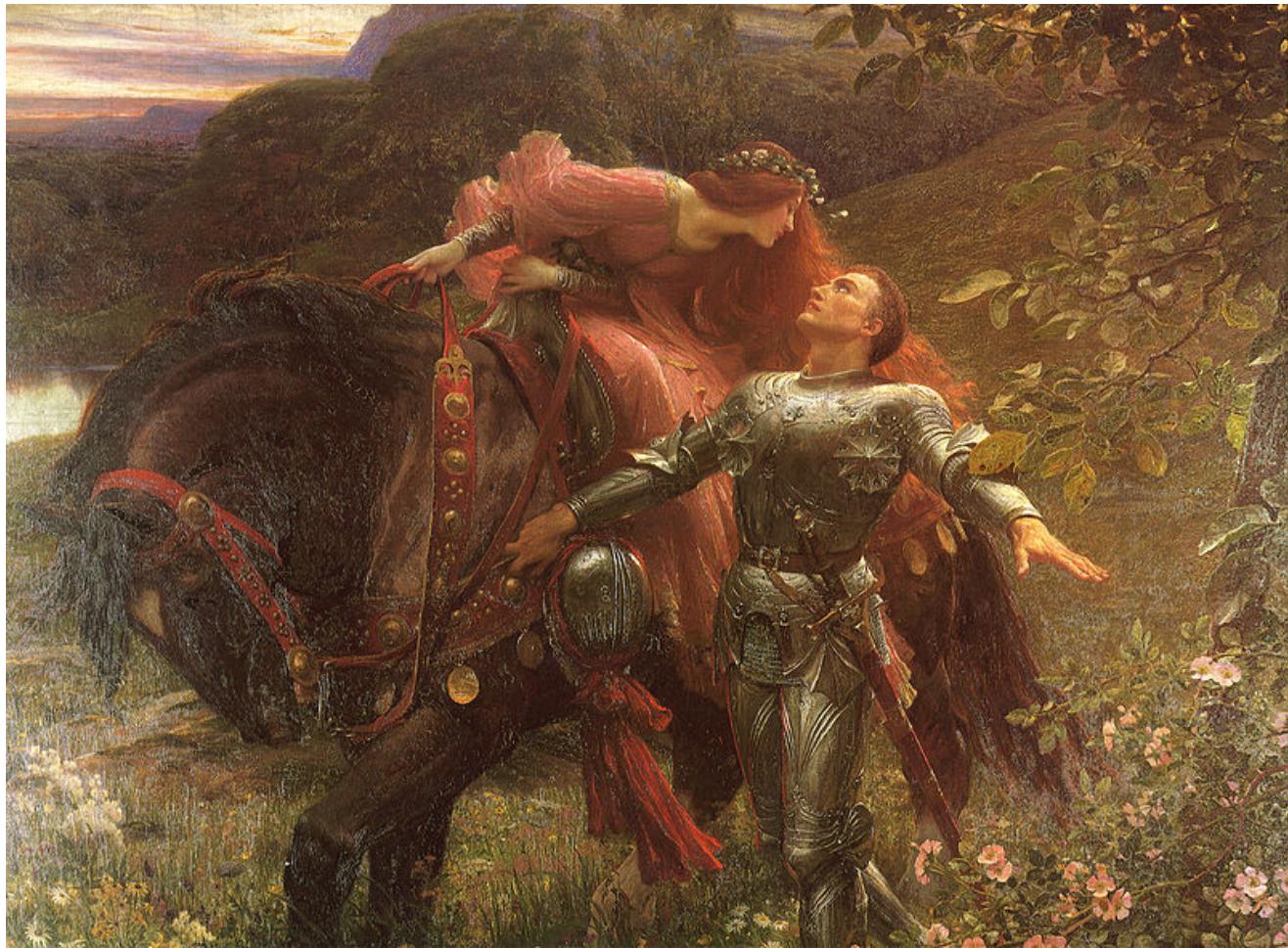


FIGURE 3 FRANK DICKSEE, *LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI*, 1901¹⁵

I will tell you the story of another Lay. It relates the adventures of a rich and mighty baron, and the Breton calls it, the Lay of Sir Launfal.

King Arthur—that fearless knight and courteous lord—removed to Wales, and lodged at Caerleon-on-Usk, since the Picts and Scots did much mischief in the land. For it was the wont of the wild people of the north to enter in the realm of Logres, and burn and damage at their will. At the time of Pentecost, the King cried a great feast. Thereat he gave many rich gifts to his counts and barons, and to the Knights of the Round Table. Never were such worship and bounty shown before at any feast, for Arthur bestowed honours and lands on all his servants—save only on one. This lord, who was forgotten and disliked of the King, was named Launfal. He was beloved by many of the Court, because of his beauty and prowess, for he was a worthy knight, open of heart and heavy of hand. These lords, to whom their comrade was dear, felt little joy to see so stout a knight misprized. Sir Launfal was son to a King of high descent, though his heritage was in a distant land. He was of the King's household, but since Arthur gave him naught, and he was of too proud a mind to pray for his due, he had spent all that he had. Right heavy was Sir Launfal, when he considered these things, for he knew himself taken in the toils. Gentles, marvel not overmuch hereat. Ever must the pilgrim go heavily in a strange land, where there is none to counsel and direct him in the path.

¹⁵ Dicksee, Frank. *La Belle dame sans Merci*. Oil on Canvas. 1901. Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Bristol. Frank Dicksee [Public domain or Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. Web. 22 May 2014.

Now, on a day, Sir Launfal got him on his horse, that he might take his pleasure for a little. He came forth from the city, alone, attended by neither servant nor squire. He went his way through a green mead, till he stood by a river of clear running water. Sir Launfal would have crossed this stream, without thought of pass or ford, but he might not do so, for reason that his horse was all fearful and trembling. Seeing that he was hindered in this fashion, Launfal unbitted his steed, and let him pasture in that fair meadow, where they had come. Then he folded his cloak to serve him as a pillow, and lay upon the ground. Launfal lay in great misere, because of his heavy thoughts, and the discomfort of his bed. He

turned from side to side, and might not sleep. Now as the knight looked towards the river he saw two damsels coming towards him; fairer maidens Launfal had never seen. These two maidens were richly dressed in kirtles closely laced and shapen to their persons and wore mantles of a goodly purple hue. Sweet and dainty were the damsels, alike in raiment and in face. The elder of these ladies carried in her hands a basin of pure gold, cunningly wrought by some crafty smith—very fair and precious was the cup; and the younger bore a towel of soft white linen. These maidens turned neither to the right hand nor to the left, but went directly to the place where Launfal lay. When Launfal saw that their business was with him, he stood upon his feet, like a discreet and courteous gentleman. After they had greeted the knight, one of the maidens delivered the message with which she was charged.

"Sir Launfal, my demoiselle, as gracious as she is fair, prays that you will follow us, her messengers, as she has a certain word to speak with you. We will lead you swiftly to her pavilion, for our lady is very near at hand. If you but lift your eyes you may see where her tent is spread."

Right glad was the knight to do the bidding of the maidens. He gave no heed to his horse, but left him at his provand in the meadow. All his desire was to go with the damsels, to that pavilion of silk and divers colours, pitched in so fair a place. Certainly neither Semiramis in the days of her most wanton power, nor Octavian, the Emperor of all the West, had so gracious a covering from sun and rain. Above the tent was set an eagle of gold, so rich and precious, that none might count the cost. The cords and fringes thereof were of silken thread, and the lances which bore aloft the pavilion were of refined gold. No King on earth might have so sweet a shelter, not though he gave in fee the value of his realm. Within this pavilion Launfal came upon the Maiden. Whiter she was than any altar lily, and more sweetly flushed than the new born rose in time of summer heat. She lay upon a bed with napery and coverlet of richer worth than could be furnished by a castle's spoil. Very fresh and slender showed the lady in her vesture of spotless linen. About her person she had drawn a mantle of ermine, edged with purple dye from the vats of Alexandria. By reason of the heat her raiment was unfastened for a little, and her throat and the rondure of her bosom showed whiter and more untouched than hawthorn in May. The knight came before the bed, and stood gazing on so sweet a sight. The Maiden beckoned him to draw near, and when he had seated himself at the foot of her couch, spoke her mind.

"Launfal," she said, "fair friend, it is for you that I have come from my own far land. I bring you my love. If you are prudent and discreet, as you are goodly to the view, there is no emperor nor count, nor king, whose day shall be so filled with riches and with mirth as yours."

When Launfal heard these words he rejoiced greatly, for his heart was litten by another's torch.

"Fair lady," he answered, "since it pleases you to be so gracious, and to dower so graceless a knight with your love, there is naught that you may bid me do—right or wrong, evil or good—that I will not do to the utmost of my power. I will observe your commandment, and serve in your quarrels. For you I renounce my father and my father's house. This only I pray, that I may dwell with you in your lodging, and that you will never send me from your side."

When the Maiden heard the words of him whom so fondly she desired to love, she was altogether moved, and granted him forthwith her heart and her tenderness. To her bounty she added another gift besides. Never

might Launfal be desirous of aught, but he would have according to his wish. He might waste and spend at will and pleasure, but in his purse ever there was to spare. No more was Launfal sad. Right merry was the pilgrim, since one had set him on the way, with such a gift, that the more pennies he bestowed, the more silver and gold were in his pouch.

But the Maiden had yet a word to say.

"Friend," she said, "hearken to my counsel. I lay this charge upon you, and pray you urgently, that you tell not to any man the secret of our love. If you show this matter, you will lose your friend, forever and a day. Never again may you see my face. Never again will you have seisin¹⁶ of that body, which is now so tender in your eyes."

Launfal plighted faith, that right strictly he would observe this commandment. So the Maiden granted him her kiss and her embrace, and very sweetly in that fair lodging passed the day till evensong was come.

Right loath was Launfal to depart from the pavilion at the vesper hour, and gladly would he have stayed, had he been able, and his lady wished.

"Fair friend," said she, "rise up, for no longer may you tarry. The hour is come that we must part. But one thing I have to say before you go. When you would speak with me I shall hasten to come before your wish. Well I deem that you will only call your friend where she may be found without reproach or shame of men. You may see me at your pleasure; my voice shall speak softly in your ear at will; but I must never be known of your comrades, nor must they ever learn my speech."

Right joyous was Launfal to hear this thing. He sealed the covenant with a kiss, and stood upon his feet. Then there entered the two maidens who had led him to the pavilion, bringing with them rich raiment, fitting for a knight's apparel. When Launfal had clothed himself therewith, there seemed no goodlier varlet under heaven, for certainly he was fair and true. After these maidens had refreshed him with clear water, and dried his hands upon the napkin, Launfal went to meat. His friend sat at table with him, and small will had he to refuse her courtesy. Very serviceably the damsels bore the meats, and Launfal and the Maiden ate and drank with mirth and content. But one dish was more to the knight's relish than any other. Sweeter than the dainties within his mouth, was the lady's kiss upon his lips.

When supper was ended, Launfal rose from table, for his horse stood waiting without the pavilion. The destrier was newly saddled and bridled, and showed proudly in his rich gay trappings. So Launfal kissed, and bade farewell, and went his way. He rode back towards the city at a slow pace. Often he checked his steed, and looked behind him, for he was filled with amazement, and all bemused concerning this adventure. In his heart he doubted that it was but a dream. He was altogether astonished, and knew not what to do. He feared that pavilion and Maiden alike were from the realm of faery.

Launfal returned to his lodging, and was greeted by servitors, clad no longer in ragged raiment. He fared richly, lay softly, and spent largely, but never knew how his purse was filled. There was no lord who had need of a lodging in the town, but Launfal brought him to his hall, for refreshment and delight. Launfal bestowed rich gifts. Launfal redeemed the poor captive. Launfal clothed in scarlet the minstrel. Launfal gave honour where honour was due. Stranger and friend alike he comforted at need. So, whether by night or by day, Launfal lived greatly at his ease. His lady, she came at will and pleasure, and, for the rest, all was added unto him.

Now it chanced, the same year, about the feast of St. John, a company of knights came, for their solace, to an orchard, beneath that tower where dwelt the Queen. Together with these lords went Gawain and his cousin, Yvain the fair. Then said Gawain, that goodly knight, beloved and dear to all,

¹⁶ possession

"Lords, we do wrong to disport ourselves in this pleasaunce without our comrade Launfal. It is not well to slight a prince as brave as he is courteous, and of a lineage prouder than our own."

Then certain of the lords returned to the city, and finding Launfal within his hostel, entreated him to take his pastime with them in that fair meadow. The Queen looked out from a window in her tower, she and three ladies of her fellowship. They saw the lords at their pleasure, and Launfal also, whom well they knew. So the Queen chose of her

Court thirty damsels—the sweetest of face and most dainty of fashion—and commanded that they should descend with her to take their delight in the garden. When the knights beheld this gay company of ladies come down the steps of the perron, they rejoiced beyond measure. They hastened before to lead them by the hand, and said such words in their ear as were seemly and pleasant to be spoken. Amongst these merry and courteous lords hasted not Sir Launfal. He drew apart from the throng, for with him time went heavily, till he might have clasp and greeting of his friend. The ladies of the Queen's fellowship seemed but kitchen wenches to his sight, in comparison with the loveliness of the maiden. When the Queen marked Launfal go aside, she went his way, and seating herself upon the herb, called the knight before her. Then she opened out her heart.

"Launfal, I have honoured you for long as a worthy knight, and have praised and cherished you very dearly. You may receive a queen's whole love, if such be your care. Be content: he to whom my heart is given, has small reason to complain him of the alms."

"Lady," answered the knight, "grant me leave to go, for this grace is not for me. I am the King's man, and dare not break my troth. Not for the highest lady in the world, not even for her love, will I set this reproach upon my lord."

When the Queen heard this, she was full of wrath, and spoke many hot and bitter words.

"Launfal," she cried, "well I know that you think little of woman and her love. There are sins more black that a man may have upon his soul. Traitor you are, and false. Right evil counsel gave they to my lord, who prayed him to suffer you about his person. You remain only for his harm and loss."

Launfal was very dolent to hear this thing. He was not slow to take up the Queen's glove, and in his haste spake words that he repented long, and with tears.

"Lady," said he, "I am not of that guild of which you speak. Neither am I a despiser of woman, since I love, and am loved, of one who would bear the prize from all the ladies in the land. Dame, know now and be persuaded, that she, whom I serve, is so rich in state, that the very meanest of her maidens, excels you, Lady Queen, as much in clerkly skill and goodness, as in sweetness of body and face, and in every virtue."

The Queen rose straightway to her feet, and fled to her chamber, weeping. Right wrathful and heavy was she, because of the words that had besmirched her. She lay sick upon her bed, from which, she said, she would never rise, till the King had done her justice, and righted this bitter wrong. Now the King that day had taken his pleasure within the woods. He returned from the chase towards evening, and sought the chamber of the Queen. When the lady saw him, she sprang from her bed, and kneeling at his feet, pleaded for grace and pity. Launfal—she said—had shamed her, since he required her love. When she had put him by, very foully had he reviled her, boasting that his love was already set on a lady, so proud and noble, that her meanest wench went more richly, and smiled more sweetly, than the Queen. Thereat the King waxed marvellously wrathful, and swore a great oath that he would set Launfal within a fire, or hang him from a tree, if he could not deny this thing, before his peers.

Arthur came forth from the Queen's chamber, and called to him three of his lords. These he sent to seek the knight who so evilly had entreated the Queen. Launfal, for his part, had returned to his lodging, in a sad and

sorrowful case. He saw very clearly that he had lost his friend, since he had declared their love to men. Launfal sat within his chamber, sick and heavy of thought. Often he called upon his friend, but the lady would not hear his voice. He bewailed his evil lot, with tears; for grief he came nigh to swoon; a hundred times he implored the Maiden that she would deign to speak with her knight. Then, since the lady yet refrained from speech, Launfal cursed his hot and unruly tongue. Very near he came to ending all this trouble with his knife. Naught he found to do but to wring his hands, and call upon the Maiden, begging her to forgive his trespass, and to talk with him again, as friend to friend.

But little peace is there for him who is harassed by a King. There came presently to Launfal's hostel those three barons from the Court. These bade the knight forthwith to go with them to Arthur's presence, to acquit him of this wrong against the Queen. Launfal went forth, to his own deep sorrow. Had any man slain him on the road, he would have counted him his friend. He stood before the King, downcast and speechless, being dumb by reason of that great grief, of which he showed the picture and image.

Arthur looked upon his captive very evilly.

"Vassal," said he, harshly, "you have done me a bitter wrong. It was a foul deed to seek to shame me in this ugly fashion, and to smirch the honour of the Queen. Is it folly or lightness which leads you to boast of that lady, the least of whose maidens is fairer, and goes more richly, than the Queen?"

Launfal protested that never had he set such shame upon his lord. Word by word he told the tale of how he denied the Queen, within the orchard. But concerning that which he had spoken of the lady, he owned the truth, and his folly. The love of which he bragged was now lost to him, by his own exceeding fault. He cared little for his life, and was content to obey the judgment of the Court.

Right wrathful was the King at Launfal's words. He conjured his barons to give him such wise counsel herein, that wrong might be done to none. The lords did the King's bidding, whether good came of the matter, or evil. They gathered themselves together, and appointed a certain day that Launfal should abide the judgment of his peers. For his part Launfal must give pledge and surety to his lord, that he would come before this judgment in his own body. If he might not give such surety then he should be held captive till the appointed day. When the lords of the King's household returned to tell him of their counsel, Arthur demanded that Launfal should put such pledge in his hand, as they had said. Launfal was altogether mazed and bewildered at this judgment, for he had neither friend nor kindred in the land. He would have been set in prison, but Gawain came first to offer himself as his surety, and with him, all the knights of his fellowship. These gave into the King's hand as pledge, the fiefs and lands that they held of his Crown. The King having taken pledges from the sureties, Launfal returned to his lodging, and with him certain knights of his company. They blamed him greatly because of his foolish love, and chastened him grievously by reason of the sorrow he made before men. Every day they came to his chamber, to know of his meat and drink, for much they feared that presently he would become mad.

The lords of the household came together on the day appointed for this judgment. The King was on his chair, with the Queen sitting at his side. The sureties brought Launfal within the hall, and rendered him into the hands of his peers. Right sorrowful were they because of his plight. A great company of his fellowship did all that they were able to acquit him of this charge. When all was set out, the King demanded the judgment of the Court, according to the accusation and the answer. The barons went forth in much trouble and thought to consider this matter. Many amongst them grieved for the peril of a good knight in a strange land; others held that it were well for Launfal to suffer, because of the wish and malice of their lord. Whilst they were thus perplexed, the Duke of Cornwall rose in the council, and said,

"Lords, the King pursues Launfal as a traitor, and would slay him with the sword, by reason that he bragged of the beauty of his maiden, and roused the jealousy of the Queen. By the faith that I owe this company, none complains of Launfal, save only the King. For our part we would know the truth of this business, and do justice

between the King and his man. We would also show proper reverence to our own liege lord. Now, if it be according to Arthur's will, let us take oath of Launfal, that he seek this lady, who has put such strife between him and the Queen. If her beauty be such as he has told us, the Queen will have no cause for wrath. She must pardon Launfal for his rudeness, since it will be plain that he did not speak out of a malicious heart. Should Launfal fail his word, and not return with the lady, or should her fairness fall beneath his boast, then let him be cast off from our fellowship, and be sent forth from the service of the King."

This counsel seemed good to the lords of the household. They sent certain of his friends to Launfal, to acquaint him with their judgment, bidding him to pray his damsel to the Court, that he might be acquitted of this blame. The knight made answer that in no wise could he do this thing. So the sureties returned before the judges, saying that Launfal hoped neither for refuge nor for succour from the lady, and Arthur urged them to a speedy ending, because of the prompting of the Queen.

The judges were about to give sentence upon Launfal, when they saw two maidens come riding towards the palace, upon two white ambling palfreys. Very sweet and dainty were these maidens, and richly clothed in garments of crimson sendal,¹⁷ closely girt and fashioned to their bodies. All men, old and young, looked willingly upon them, for fair they were to see. Gawain, and three knights of his company, went straight to Launfal, and showed him these maidens, praying him to say which of them was his friend. But he answered never a word. The maidens dismounted from their palfreys, and coming before the dais where the King was seated, spake him fairly, as they were fair.

"Sire, prepare now a chamber, hung with silken cloths, where it is seemly for my lady to dwell; for she would lodge with you awhile."

This gift the King granted gladly. He called to him two knights of his household, and bade them bestow the maidens in such chambers as were fitting to their degree. The maidens being gone, the King required of his barons to proceed with their judgment, saying that he had sore displeasure at the slowness of the cause.

"Sire," replied the barons, "we rose from Council, because of the damsels who entered in the hall. We will at once resume the sitting, and give our judgment without more delay."

The barons again were gathered together, in much thought and trouble, to consider this matter. There was great strife and dissension amongst them, for they knew not what to do. In the midst of all this noise and tumult, there came two other damsels riding to the hall on two Spanish mules. Very richly arrayed were these damsels in raiment of fine needlework, and their kirtles were covered by fresh fair mantles, embroidered with gold. Great joy had Launfal's comrades when they marked these ladies. They said between themselves that doubtless they came for the succour of the good knight. Gawain, and certain of his company, made haste to Launfal, and said, "Sir, be not cast down. Two ladies are near at hand, right dainty of dress, and gracious of person. Tell us truly, for the love of God, is one of these your friend?"

But Launfal answered very simply that never before had he seen these damsels with his eyes, nor known and loved them in his heart.

The maidens dismounted from their mules, and stood before Arthur, in the sight of all. Greatly were they praised of many, because of their beauty, and of the colour of their face and hair. Some there were who deemed already that the Queen was overborne.

The elder of the damsels carried herself modestly and well, and sweetly told over the message wherewith she was charged.

¹⁷ silk

"Sire, make ready for us chambers, where we may abide with our lady, for even now she comes to speak with thee."

The King commanded that the ladies should be led to their companions, and bestowed in the same honourable fashion as they. Then he bade the lords of his household to consider their judgment, since he would endure no further respite. The Court already had given too much time to the business, and the Queen was growing wrathful, because of the blame

that was hers. Now the judges were about to proclaim their sentence, when, amidst the tumult of the town, there came riding to the palace the flower of all the ladies of the world. She came mounted upon a palfrey, white as snow, which carried her softly, as though she loved her burthen. Beneath the sky was no goodlier steed, nor one more gentle to the hand. The harness of the palfrey was so rich, that no king on earth might hope to buy trappings so precious, unless he sold or set his realm in pledge. The Maiden herself showed such as I will tell you. Passing slim was the lady, sweet of bodice and slender of girdle. Her throat was whiter than snow on branch, and her eyes were like flowers in the pallor of her face. She had a witching mouth, a dainty nose, and an open brow. Her eyebrows were brown, and her golden hair parted in two soft waves upon her head. She was clad in a shift of spotless linen, and above her snowy kirtle was set a mantle of royal purple, clasped upon her breast. She carried a hooded falcon upon her glove, and a greyhound followed closely after. As the Maiden rode at a slow pace through the streets of the city, there was none, neither great nor small, youth nor sergeant, but ran forth from his house, that he might content his heart with so great beauty. Every man that saw her with his eyes, marvelled at a fairness beyond that of any earthly woman. Little he cared for any mortal maiden, after he had seen this sight. The friends of Sir Launfal hastened to the knight, to tell him of his lady's succour, if so it were according to God's will.

"Sir comrade, truly is not this your friend? This lady is neither black nor golden, mean nor tall. She is only the most lovely thing in all the world."

When Launfal heard this, he sighed, for by their words he knew again his friend. He raised his head, and as the blood rushed to his face, speech flowed from his lips.

"By my faith," cried he, "yes, she is indeed my friend. It is a small matter now whether men slay me, or set me free; for I am made whole of my hurt just by looking on her face."

The Maiden entered in the palace—where none so fair had come before—and stood before the King, in the presence of his household. She loosed the clasp of her mantle, so that men might the more easily perceive the grace of her person. The courteous King advanced to meet her, and all the Court got them on their feet, and pained themselves in her service. When the lords had gazed upon her for a space, and praised the sum of her beauty, the lady spake to Arthur in this fashion, for she was anxious to begone.

"Sire, I have loved one of thy vassals,—the knight who stands in bonds, Sir Launfal. He was always misprized in thy Court, and his every action turned to blame. What he said, that thou knowest; for over hasty was his tongue before the Queen. But he never craved her in love, however loud his boasting. I cannot choose that he should come to hurt or harm by me. In the hope of freeing Launfal from his bonds, I have obeyed thy summons. Let now thy barons look boldly upon my face, and deal justly in this quarrel between the Queen and me."

The King commanded that this should be done, and looking upon her eyes, not one of the judges but was persuaded that her favour exceeded that of the Queen.

Since then Launfal had not spoken in malice against his lady, the lords of the household gave him again his sword. When the trial had come thus to an end the Maiden took her leave of the King, and made her ready to depart. Gladly would Arthur have had her lodge with him for a little, and many a lord would have rejoiced in her

service, but she might not tarry. Now without the hall stood a great stone of dull marble, where it was the wont of lords, departing from the Court, to climb into the saddle, and Launfal by the stone. The Maiden came forth from the doors of the palace, and mounting on the stone, seated herself on the palfrey, behind her friend. Then they rode across the plain together, and were no more seen.

The Bretons tell that the knight was ravished by his lady to an island, very dim and very fair, known as Avalon. But none has had speech with Launfal and his faery love since then, and for my part I can tell you no more of the matter.

THE LAY OF THE WERE-WOLF



FIGURE 4 EDWARD BURNE-JONES, LOVE AMONG THE RUINS, 1873¹⁸

Amongst the tales I tell you once again, I would not forget the Lay of the Were-Wolf. Such beasts as he are known in every land. Bisclavaret he is named in Brittany; whilst the Norman calls him Garwal.

It is a certain thing, and within the knowledge of all, that many a christened man has suffered this change, and ran wild in woods, as a Were-Wolf. The Were-Wolf is a fearsome beast. He lurks within the thick forest, mad and horrible to see. All the evil that he may, he does. He goeth to and fro, about the solitary place, seeking man, in order to devour him. Hearken, now, to the adventure of the Were-Wolf, that I have to tell.

In Brittany there dwelt a baron who was marvellously esteemed of all his fellows. He was a stout knight, and a comely, and a man of office and repute. Right private was he to the mind of his lord, and dear to the counsel of his neighbours. This baron was wedded to a very worthy dame, right fair to see, and sweet of semblance. All his love was set on her, and all her love was given again to him. One only grief had this lady. For three whole days in every week her lord was absent from her side. She knew not where he went, nor on what errand. Neither did any of his house know the business which called him forth.

On a day when this lord was come again to his house, altogether joyous and content, the lady took him to task, right sweetly, in this fashion, "Husband," said she, "and fair, sweet friend, I have a certain thing to pray of you. Right willingly would I receive this gift, but I fear to anger you in the asking. It is better for me to have an empty hand, than to gain hard words."

¹⁸ Burne-Jones, Edward. *Love among the Ruins*. Watercolor. 1873. Christies, London. *Edward Burne-Jones [Public domain]*, via Wikimedia Commons. Web. 22 May 2006.

When the lord heard this matter, he took the lady in his arms, very tenderly, and kissed her.

"Wife," he answered, "ask what you will. What would you have, for it is yours already?"

"By my faith," said the lady, "soon shall I be whole. Husband, right long and wearisome are the days that you spend away from your home. I rise from my bed in the morning, sick at heart, I know not why. So fearful am I, lest you do aught to your loss, that I may not find any comfort. Very quickly shall I die for reason of my dread. Tell me now, where you go, and on what business! How may the knowledge of one who loves so closely, bring you to harm?"

"Wife," made answer the lord, "nothing but evil can come if I tell you this secret. For the mercy of God do not require it of me. If you but knew, you would withdraw yourself from my love, and I should be lost indeed."

When the lady heard this, she was persuaded that her baron sought to put her by with jesting words. Therefore she prayed and required him the more urgently, with tender looks and speech, till he was overborne, and told her all the story, hiding naught.

"Wife, I become Bisclavaret. I enter in the forest, and live on prey and roots, within the thickest of the wood."

After she had learned his secret, she prayed and entreated the more as to whether he ran in his raiment, or went spoiled of vesture.

"Wife," said he, "I go naked as a beast."

"Tell me, for hope of grace, what you do with your clothing?"

"Fair wife, that will I never. If I should lose my raiment, or even be marked as I quit my vesture, then a Were-Wolf I must go for all the days of my life. Never again should I become man, save in that hour my clothing were given back to me. For this reason never will I show my lair."

"Husband," replied the lady to him, "I love you better than all the world. The less cause have you for doubting my faith, or hiding any tittle from me. What savour is here of friendship? How have I made forfeit of your love; for what sin do you mistrust my honour? Open now your heart, and tell what is good to be known."

So at the end, outwared and overborne by her importunity, he could no longer refrain, but told her all.

"Wife," said he, "within this wood, a little from the path, there is a hidden way, and at the end thereof an ancient chapel, where oftentimes I have bewailed my lot. Near by is a great hollow stone, concealed by a bush, and there is the secret place where I hide my raiment, till I would return to my own home."

On hearing this marvel the lady became sanguine of visage, because of her exceeding fear. She dared no longer to lie at his side, and turned over in her mind, this way and that, how best she could get her from him. Now there was a certain knight of those parts, who, for a great while, had sought and required this lady for her love. This knight had spent long years in her service, but little enough had he got thereby, not even fair words, or a promise. To him the dame wrote a letter, and meeting, made her purpose plain.

"Fair friend," said she, "be happy. That which you have coveted so long a time, I will grant without delay. Never again will I deny your suit. My heart, and all I have to give, are yours, so take me now as love and dame."

Right sweetly the knight thanked her for her grace, and pledged her faith and fealty. When she had confirmed him by an oath, then she told him all this business of her lord—why he went, and what he became, and of his ravening within the wood. So she showed him of the chapel, and of the hollow stone, and of how to spoil the Were-Wolf of his vesture. Thus, by the kiss of his wife, was Bisclavaret betrayed. Often enough had he ravished his prey in desolate places, but from this journey he never returned. His kinsfolk and acquaintance

came together to ask of his tidings, when this absence was noised abroad. Many a man, on many a day, searched the woodland, but none might find him, nor learn where Bisclavaret was gone.

The lady was wedded to the knight who had cherished her for so long a space. More than a year had passed since Bisclavaret disappeared. Then it chanced that the King would hunt in that self-same wood where the Were-Wolf lurked. When the hounds were unleashed they ran this way and that, and swiftly came upon his scent. At the view the huntsman winded on his horn, and the whole pack were at his heels. They followed him from morn to eve, till he was torn and bleeding, and was all adread lest they should pull him down. Now the King was very close to the quarry, and when Bisclavaret looked upon his master, he ran to him for pity and for grace. He took the stirrup within his paws, and fawned upon the prince's foot. The King was very fearful at this sight, but presently he called his courtiers to his aid.

"Lords," cried he, "hasten hither, and see this marvellous thing. Here is a beast who has the sense of man. He abases himself before his foe, and cries for mercy, although he cannot speak. Beat off the hounds, and let no man do him harm. We will hunt no more to-day, but return to our own place, with the wonderful quarry we have taken."

The King turned him about, and rode to his hall, Bisclavaret following at his side. Very near to his master the Were-Wolf went, like any dog, and had no care to seek again the wood. When the King had brought him safely to his own castle, he rejoiced greatly, for the beast was fair and strong, no mightier had any man seen. Much pride had the King in his marvellous beast. He held him so dear, that he bade all those who wished for his love, to cross the Wolf in naught, neither to strike him with a rod, but ever to see that he was richly fed and kennelled warm. This commandment the Court observed willingly. So all the day the Wolf sported with the lords, and at night he lay within the chamber of the

King. There was not a man who did not make much of the beast, so frank was he and debonair. None had reason to do him wrong, for ever was he about his master, and for his part did evil to none. Every day were these two companions together, and all perceived that the King loved him as his friend.

Hearken now to that which chanced.

The King held a high Court, and bade his great vassals and barons, and all the lords of his venery to the feast. Never was there a goodlier feast, nor one set forth with sweeter show and pomp. Amongst those who were bidden, came that same knight who had the wife of Bisclavaret for dame. He came to the castle, richly gowned, with a fair company, but little he deemed whom he would find so near. Bisclavaret marked his foe the moment he stood within the hall. He ran towards him, and seized him with his fangs, in the King's very presence, and to the view of all. Doubtless he would have done him much mischief, had not the King called and chidden him, and threatened him with a rod. Once, and twice, again, the Wolf set upon the knight in the very light of day. All men marvelled at his malice, for sweet and serviceable was the beast, and to that hour had shown hatred of none. With one consent the household deemed that this deed was done with full reason, and that the Wolf had suffered at the knight's hand some bitter wrong. Right wary of his foe was the knight until the feast had ended, and all the barons had taken farewell of their lord, and departed, each to his own house. With these, amongst the very first, went that lord whom Bisclavaret so fiercely had assailed. Small was the wonder that he was glad to go.

No long while after this adventure it came to pass that the courteous King would hunt in that forest where Bisclavaret was found. With the prince came his wolf, and a fair company. Now at nightfall the King abode within a certain lodge of that country, and this was known of that dame who before was the wife of Bisclavaret. In the morning the lady clothed her in her most dainty apparel, and hastened to the lodge, since she desired to speak with the King, and to offer him a rich present. When the lady entered in the chamber, neither man nor leash might restrain the fury of the Wolf. He became as a mad dog in his hatred and malice. Breaking from his

bonds he sprang at the lady's face, and bit the nose from her visage. From every side men ran to the succour¹⁹ of the dame. They beat off the wolf from his prey, and for a little would have cut him in pieces with their swords. But a certain wise counsellor said to the King,

"Sire, hearken now to me. This beast is always with you, and there is not one of us all who has not known him for long. He goes in and out amongst us, nor has molested any man, neither done wrong or felony to any, save only to this dame, one only time as we have seen. He has done evil to this lady, and to that knight, who is now the husband of the dame. Sire, she was once the wife of that lord who was so close and private to your heart, but who went, and none might find where he had gone. Now, therefore, put the dame in a sure place, and question her straitly, so that she may tell—if perchance she knows thereof—for what reason this Beast holds her in such mortal hate. For many a strange deed has chanced, as well we know, in this marvellous land of Brittany."

The King listened to these words, and deemed the counsel good. He laid hands upon the knight, and put the dame in surety in another place. He caused them to be questioned right straitly, so that their torment was very grievous. At the end, partly because of her distress, and partly by reason of her exceeding fear, the lady's lips were loosed, and she told her tale. She showed them of the betrayal of her lord, and how his raiment was stolen from the hollow stone. Since then she knew not where he went, nor what had befallen him, for he had never come again to his own land. Only, in her heart, well she deemed and was persuaded, that Bisclavaret was he.

Straightway the King demanded the vesture of his baron, whether this were to the wish of the lady, or whether it were against her wish. When the raiment was brought him, he caused it to be spread before Bisclavaret, but the Wolf made as though he had not seen. Then that cunning and crafty counsellor took the King apart, that he might give him a fresh rede.²⁰

"Sire," said he, "you do not wisely, nor well, to set this raiment before Bisclavaret, in the sight of all. In shame and much tribulation must he lay aside the beast, and again become man. Carry your wolf within your most secret chamber, and put his vestment therein. Then close the door upon him, and leave him alone for a space. So we shall see presently whether the ravening beast may indeed return to human shape."

The King carried the Wolf to his chamber, and shut the doors upon him fast. He delayed for a brief while, and taking two lords of his fellowship with him, came again to the room. Entering therein, all three, softly together, they found the knight sleeping in the King's bed, like a little child. The King ran swiftly to the bed and taking his friend in his arms, embraced and kissed him fondly, above a hundred times. When man's speech returned once more, he told him of his adventure. Then the King restored to his friend the fief that was stolen from him, and gave such rich gifts, moreover, as I cannot tell. As for the wife who had betrayed Bisclavaret, he bade her avoid his country, and chased her from the realm. So she went forth, she and her second lord together, to seek a more abiding city, and were no more seen.

The adventure that you have heard is no vain fable. Verily and indeed it chanced as I have said. The Lay of the Were-Wolf, truly, was written that it should ever be borne in mind.

¹⁹ aid

²⁰ counsel