

Sir Launfal

Thomas Chestre

*a fourteenth century Middle English Breton lai, adapting
Marie de France's twelfth century lai Lanval*

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This lai has been translated and retold from: Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Eds), 1995. *The Middle English Breton Lays*. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. From the only surviving manuscript copy, in British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii of the early-fifteenth century.

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Sir Launfal

Thomas Chestre

late fourteenth century

Be doughty Artours dawes · that helde Englonð yn god lawes · ther fell a wondyr cas · of a ley that was Bysette · that hyght Launval and hatte yette · Now herkeneth how hyt was – In the days of mighty King Arthur, who governed England well and maintained good justice, some marvellous things once happened which were written down and made into a lai that was called *Launfal*, then as now. Listen, while I tell you what occurred! King Arthur was staying at Carlisle in great splendour and in good spirits once, with all his knights of the Round Table in attendance. No finer gathering had ever been seen. Sir Perceval was there, Sir Gawain and his brothers Sir Gaheris and Sir Agravaine, Sir Lancelot was there, Sir Kay and Sir Yvain, who could both hold their own on any battlefield, and also King Ban and King Bors, who were renowned and considered to be without equal. Sir Gallifrey was present, and also Sir Launfal, whose story shall now make for a fine tale!

King Arthur had this knight Sir Launfal at his court, a bachelor knight who had been there for many years and was very free in the giving of fine clothes and silver and gold and other gifts to knights and to squires. And for this great largesse King Arthur had made him his steward, and he had held this rank for ten years. Sir Launfal was always the most generous of all the knights of the Round Table.

It came about, in the tenth year of Sir Launfal's appointment as steward, that Merlin, who was advising King Arthur on matters of state, urged him to travel to King Ryons of Ireland to bring back the king's beautiful daughter Guinevere to wed.

King Arthur did this and brought Guinevere home with him. But she and Sir Launfal did not hit it off at all, and neither was she liked by any other of King Arthur's most praiseworthy knights, it must be said, for she had soon gained a reputation for promiscuity, with an endless succession of lovers besides King Arthur.

But King Arthur and Guinevere were married, on a Whit Sunday, with many fine princes in attendance. And it is beyond a man's power to describe fully the faces, the manners and the customs of the people who were there at the wedding; the guests came from far and wide and none was lower in rank than a prelate or a baronet. But wherever they sat at the bridal feast, at the top table or on the lowest bench, the service was exemplary.

When the meal was finished and the tablecloths had been taken from the boards, the butlers sent wine out to all the lords and princes, with great alacrity. Queen Guinevere distributed gifts, some fine gold, silver and precious stones, to demonstrate her generosity, and every knight received from her a brooch or a ring. But to Sir Launfal she gave nothing, which upset him a little. When the wedding feast had come to an end, Sir Launfal asked King Arthur for leave to depart. He said that a letter had just arrived informing him of his father's death and that he must go to arrange the funeral and to see to his father's affairs.

The story of Sir Launfal is a late-fourteenth century Middle English adaptation of one of Marie de France's twelfth century Breton lais, a poem called Lanval. The immediate sources used by Thomas Chestre to create this story – and yes, the author's name is revealed in this poem, unusually – are an earlier Middle English rendering of Lanval called Sir Landevale, an Old French lai called Graellent and a hypothetical work containing a battle with a giant named Sir Valentine, now lost. Only one manuscript copy of Thomas Chestre's Sir Launfal survives, in British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii of the early-fifteenth century.

'Launfal,' replied King Arthur. 'If you must go like this, take with you some gold and silver to spend, and take my two nephews along with you as well, so that they can make sure you return as quickly as possible.'

Sir Launfal took his leave, said farewell to all the knights of the Round Table and set out on his journey, arriving at last in Caerleon. He went at once to the mayor's house to instruct him upon how matters stood. The mayor went to greet his master as Sir Launfal approached on his horse surrounded by the two knights and by his servants and baggage.



'Sir! How wonderful to see you!' exclaimed the mayor. 'How is our king – tell me!'

'As well as any man, thank God!' replied Sir Launfal. 'But Sir mayor, I have left his service, much to my great regret. There is not a single fellow there, of any degree, who honours me any more, for King Arthur's love. And Sir mayor, I ask you, for your love of me, will you give me lodging and a roof over my head for a while? We are old friends after all.'

The mayor hesitated and stood thinking for a while, and then said: 'Sir, seven knights of Brittany already have their lodgings here and I must keep their rooms free for them in case they return.'

Sir Launfal turned, laughing, to his two companion knights and said: 'Now you can see how much service a knight receives when he is down on his luck!' And he turned his horse as if to ride away. But the mayor called after him.

'Sir! Wait! There is a building beside my orchard. You could stay there in some small comfort, if it would please you to.'

Sir Launfal and his two knights took up residence in their new lodgings. And so generously did he give away his wealth during the weeks and months that followed that by the end of a year Sir Launfal had spent all his money and placed himself in serious debt. And when the year had passed, at the Feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost had once manifested itself to mankind, Sir Hue and Sir John reluctantly took their leave of Sir Launfal.

'Sir, our clothes are all shabby and torn. We look a complete mess, and your coffers are empty!'

'For the love of God, let no man know of my poverty!' Sir Launfal implored them.

The knights assured him that they would betray him to nobody, not for all the world. Then they rode away, to Glastonbury I think, where the king was staying. King Arthur spotted these two knights approaching and rode out to meet them, since they were his nephews. They were wearing the same clothes that they had been wearing on the day they departed, and by now these garments were torn and threadbare.

Queen Guinevere said with malice: 'How does it go with that proud knight Sir Launfal? Can he still swing a sword?'

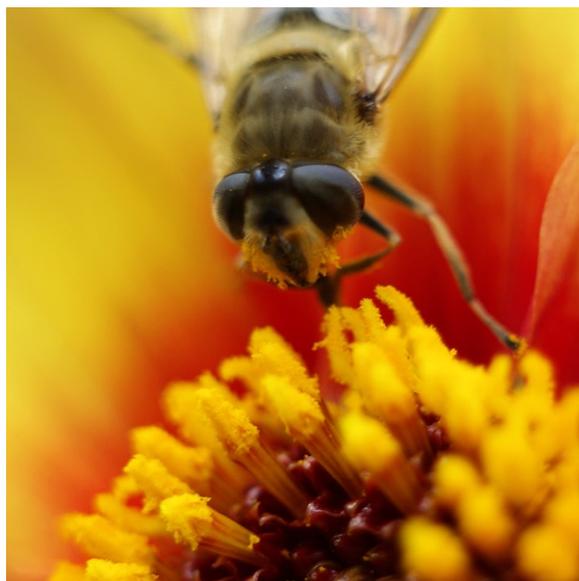
'Of course, madam,' replied the knights. 'He is as well as any man, may God prevent it from being otherwise!' And they went on to tell King Arthur and Queen Guinevere how fine and honourable Sir Launfal's life now was. 'He loved us so much that he wanted us to stay indefinitely. But on a stormy day we went out hunting with Sir Launfal, in an ancient forest, and because of this we decided to wear all our old clothes and we are still wearing these now, since we said farewell to him at the end of that hunting trip.'

King Arthur was very pleased to hear that Sir Launfal was getting on so well, but Queen Guinevere was not happy about it at all: she would far rather have been told that Sir Launfal was ill and his health deteriorating badly.

A week after Whit Sunday, on Trinity Sunday, a royal feast was arranged in Caerleon. Earls and barons from the four corners of the land were invited, and all the ladies and dignitaries of the city, both young and old, were invited as well. But Launfal, because he was so poor, was not invited. His local reputation had sunk to new lows. The mayor was expected to attend the feast, of course, and his daughter went to see Sir Launfal to ask if he would like to dine with her in the hall that day.

‘Damsel,’ Sir Launfal replied, ‘I am afraid not. I have no heart to dine in company. Three days have passed since I last ate anything and I have had nothing to drink but water, and all for lack of money. And I would have gone to church today but I have no hose or shoes, and no clean linen under-breeches and no shirt to wear; and for lack of clothing I could not possibly be seen in public. Can you believe how this pains me? But one thing I would ask. Could you lend me a saddle and a bridle so that I can ride out and find a little solitary comfort, in a clearing in the forest near to this city, this morning.’

Sir Launfal readied his horse and rode away in some dishevelment, without anyone to accompany him. His horse slipped and stumbled and fell into a bog, much to the amusement and derision of everybody who saw it. Sir Launfal, in his embarrassment, climbed awkwardly back into the saddle. In order to flee the laughing faces he cantered quickly westwards. In the heat of the day, he dismounted in a quiet forest. The sun was hot and he folded his cloak as a pillow and lay down beneath a broad tree to rest for a while in the shade.



As he lay in utter misery and despair, he saw coming out of the ancient woodland two beautiful maidens. Their gowns were of silk, exquisitely laced, perfectly made and partially covered by a cloak of green velvet bordered with gold and ermine. Each wore a fine coronet on her head with at least sixty bright gemstones sparkling within it, and a net of gold wire to keep her hair in place. Their faces were as white as snow, their cheeks were rosy, their eyes brown. I have never heard of maidens like them. One was holding a gold basin, the other a white, silk towel. Sir Launfal began to sigh at their presence. But as they approached him, he was courteous and rose to greet them.

‘God keep you, damsels!’ he said.

‘Sir knight,’ they replied. ‘This is your lucky day! Our lady, Dame Tryamour, wishes that you come to speak with her at once, if this should please you, Sir.’

Sir Launfal courteously acceded to their request and went quietly along with them. They were as white as a flower, as pale as the lily. And when they had made their way through some thick woodland they came suddenly upon a wonderful pavilion. It was very beautifully made and seemed to have been erected in an eastern, pagan style. The tent poles were topped with crystal knobs and at the apex was an eagle of burnished gold, decorated with coloured glass and enamel. Each of the eagle’s eyes was a precious stone that shone like the moon at night, emitting light from itself. Neither Alexander the Great nor King Arthur in his finest regalia was able to boast such a jewel.

Inside the pavilion, Sir Launfal found the daughter of the king of a distant isle. Dame Tryamour was her name. Her powerful father was the King of Faeryland, in the west, a far distant place that can always be reached before nightfall! In this pavilion Sir Launfal found a rich bed covered with purple

sheets and on this bed lay the noble lady who had sent for him. She looked irresistibly lovely. The air was very warm, and she let her dress fall from her shoulders to her waist and remained there uncovered for him. She was as white as a lily in spring, or the fresh snow on a winter's day. Sir Launfal had never seen a woman so beautiful before. A red rose would have seemed colourless in comparison to the freshness of her complexion, of this I am certain. Her hair shone like gold thread and as for the rest of her body, well – no man can describe or even imagine it!

'Launfal, my sweet knight,' she said. 'I am in distress over you, my darling! There is no man in Christendom I love so much as you, no king and no emperor!'

Sir Launfal looked at this beautiful creature sitting before him and fell in love with her at once. He sat beside her on the bed and kissed that sweet flower. 'Darling, come what may, I am yours,' he said sincerely.

'Sir knight, I know how things are with you,' she replied. 'But by your gentility and your nobility, don't be ashamed in my presence. If you will take me as your faithful lover and if you promise to forsake all other women, I will make you rich. I will give you a purse made of silk and gold with three beautiful images embroidered on it, and as often as you put your hand inside it, you will find a gold mark in



there, wherever you are. Also I shall give you Blaun-
chard, my loyal steed, and Gyffre, my servant. And a banner with my arms emblazoned upon it, of three white ermines, to use in battle and in tournament. And no knight will be able to harm you, I shall look after you so well.'

'Thank you, my beautiful creature!' replied Sir Launfal, joyfully. 'This is more than I could ever have dreamed of.'

The damsel rose from the bed and instructed her maidens to fetch water so that she could wash her hands. A jug was quickly brought, then a table was set up, a cloth laid over it and they both sat down to a meal. There was some wonderful food and some fine wines, as might be expected; wine of the spiced

sort and a white wine from the Rhine. And when they had finished eating and the day was drawing to a close, they quickly retired to bed together; and little sleep was had by them that night! They spent most of the hours of darkness in lovemaking, and in the morning, when dawn broke, Dame Tryamour urged Sir Launfal to get out of bed.

'Sir gentle knight,' she said. 'Whenever you wish to see me again, go to a secluded spot somewhere and I will come to you without anybody noticing me. I shall be as inconspicuous as a stone.'

Sir Launfal was a happy man indeed. His joy was beyond description! He kissed her lovingly before she continued: 'But I must warn you of one thing,' she cautioned. 'Do not boast of me to anyone, or let anyone know of my existence even. Not for any inducement! For if you do, you will lose my love at once.'

Sir Launfal took his leave and Gyffre showed him how courteous and well-educated he was by fetching his horse. The knight leapt up into the saddle and rode home to Caerleon, still wearing all his shabby clothes. But his heart was joyful enough. All his anxieties had melted away in the summer sun. He spent the rest of the morning asleep in his room. Then ten riders appeared at the edge of the city, armed and riding packhorses laden with silver and gold intended for Sir Launfal. With fine clothes and shining armour they asked where they could find this knight, and where he lived. These young men were clothed in the most expensive garments and behind them rode Gyffre, mounted upon Blaun-
chard, a

milk-white steed.

‘Where’s all this stuff going?’ called out a boy who was standing in the market. ‘Tell us, for charity! What’s going to happen to all that?’

‘It is a gift for Sir Launfal, who has been living of late in some distress and penury,’ he was told.

‘He’s nothing but a down-and-out!’ replied the boy, derisively. ‘Who would want to send anything to that nobody? You’ll find him at the mayor’s house.’

So they dismounted outside the mayor’s house and presented to Sir Launfal all the things that had been sent to him. And when the mayor saw all this wealth and Sir Launfal’s obviously improved fortunes, he felt disparaged and uncomfortable.

‘Sir Launfal, for charity!’ said the mayor. ‘Come and eat with me in the hall today. Yesterday I meant to ask you to come along to the feast with me, but you had disappeared before I had a chance to.’

‘Sir Mayor, may God reward you!’ replied Sir Launfal. ‘While I was destitute, you never once asked me to dine with you. And now, because of the things my friends have sent to me, I have more gold and income than you or any of your family.’

The mayor shrunk away for shame. Sir Launfal adorned himself in a purple robe, trimmed with white ermine; and regarding all the money that he had borrowed, Gyffre tallied it all up and repaid it in full. Then Sir Launfal put on some lavish feasts, invited fifty very poor people in to eat with him, bought fifty strong horses, gave fifty fine robes to knights and to squires, contributed money to fifty communities of monks, released fifty debtors from prison and paid off all that they owed, clothed fifty minstrels and honoured a huge number of people in many places, far and wide.

All the lords of Caerleon declared that a tournament should be announced in honour of Sir Launfal, and to test Blauncharde, to see how this horse would fare, for he looked very well-built and powerful. When the day came for the jousting to take place, all the knights rode quickly out onto the field. The trumpets blew and all the great lords rode out of the castle side by side. Then the tournament began.

Each knight laid good blows upon his adversary, both with mace and with sword, and men saw many horses won, and many lost, and some very angry warriors that day! There had never been a better tournament since the Round Table was established, I dare say. Many a lord of Caerleon was brought down from his horse, if the truth be known. The wealthy Constable of Caerleon rode to Sir Launfal, unable to restrain himself any longer. They exchanged blows and fought grimly together, slashing to left and to right with their swords. But Sir Launfal gained the measure of his opponent at last and toppled him out of his saddle onto the ground. When the constable had fallen, Gyffre leapt onto the riderless horse and claimed the steed as booty for his master. The Earl of Chestre saw this, rode straight at Sir Launfal and angrily hit him on the very top of the helmet so that his crest flew onto the ground, as the French book tells us. But Sir Launfal was strong, and afterwards he knocked the Earl from his horse. Then a whole gang of Welsh knights crowded around Sir Launfal – so many I could not give a number to them – and there were many feats of arms for men to applaud, many shields splintered and spears shattered, and driven home, in front and behind. And by Sir Launfal’s strength, and by the skill and maneuverability of his magnificent horse Blauncharde, many knights were cast onto the ground and the prize of the tournament that day went to him, without any dissent. Sir Launfal rode into the city and brought his horse to salute outside the mayor’s house, with many lords accompanying him.



Then the noble knight Sir Launfal held a wonderful feast that lasted for a fortnight. Earls and barons attended and they were dined appropriately, entertained fittingly and robed magnificently before they left. And every night dame Tryamour came to Sir Launfal's chamber, and nobody ever saw her arrive except for Gyffre and Sir Launfal himself.

Now, there was a knight in Lombardy who, having heard of all the exploits of Sir Launfal on the tournament field, had taken a great dislike to him. His name was Sir Valentine, and he had heard Sir Launfal spoken about widely and had learnt how invincible he was, and how strong. Sir Valentine was

hugely powerful himself. He was fifteen feet tall and burned, now, with a jealous anger that could only be quenched, he knew, against Sir Launfal on the battlefield, in tournament or in war!



Sir Valentine sat in his hall, called his messenger and said that he wanted him to take a dispatch to Sir Launfal, that noble knight who was held in such high esteem everywhere. He was sending him to Britain.

'And tell him,' instructed Sir Valentine, 'for the love of his lady, if she is not a scullery maid or some other servant, that he should come to test his skill against me, to keep his armour from rusting, or else have her name sullied and his manhood denied.'

The messenger set out to convey this thoughtful message. He had a favourable wind for the journey to Britain and when he made land again he took the quickest route to where he knew he would find Sir Launfal and greeted him very calmly.

'Sir,' he said. 'My lord Sir Valentine, who is a noble warrior and a cunning tactician, has sent me to ask you, for your lady's sake and for your honour, that you may wish to try your strength against him on the jousting field.'

Sir Launfal laughed quietly to himself and told the messenger that he would be there in a fortnight, on this he had his word as a knight. And for his trouble, Sir Launfal gave the messenger a fine warhorse, a ring and a costly robe. Then Sir Launfal said goodbye to Dame Tryamour and kissed her.

'Fear nothing,' said this lovely creature. 'Sir gentle knight. You will kill Sir Valentine when you meet with him.'

Sir Launfal took with him only his horse Blanchard and Gyffre his page, nobody else. Then he boarded a ship, enjoyed a fair wind and crossed the sea into Lombardy. When he arrived at the place where the jousting was to take place, the city of Atille, he found that he had to endure, alone, the taunts of the great host of warriors whom Sir Valentine had assembled about him. But when he was fully armed and sitting upon his swift steed Blanchard, with lance, shield and helmet in place, all who saw him acknowledged that they had never seen a finer knight on horseback, in all their lives!

The two knights rode together and both their lances shattered into pieces upon impact. They collected new ones, turned and urged their steeds into a gallop once more, racing their horses towards one another. Sir Valentine knocked Sir Launfal's helmet off, and it tumbled onto the ground, as the story tells us. Sir Valentine joked and had a good laugh at this. Sir Launfal had never felt so much shame, anywhere, at any tournament. But Gyffre showed that he was quite equal to the situation. He collected the helmet and, unseen by anybody, leapt onto the back of Blanchard and replaced Sir Launfal's helmet securely onto his head without anybody seeing him, before the two knights began a third charge towards one another. Sir Launfal was delighted and thanked Gyffre profusely for this act of courage and initiative. Then they charged once again. Sir Valentine tore the shield away from Sir Launfal, as his

lance struck him, so that it flew up and away and then down towards the ground; but Gyffre caught the shield in mid-flight! Sir Launfal had it safely back around his neck again before the next turn. He turned Blanchard around once more, like the brave warrior that he was, happy to have his shield. And this time Sir Launfal's lance struck Sir Valentine so hard that both horse and man fell to the ground groaning at the severity of their injuries, which were not of the sort that could be recovered from.

The noblemen of Atille took an instant and severe dislike to Sir Launfal for this. They swore that Sir Launfal would die before he left Lombardy! He would be hanged and then his body pulled apart by horses. Sir Launfal quickly drew his large broadsword and cut them all to the ground as easily as the sun disperses the dew. And when he had slain all the noblemen of the district, he returned to Britain with great ease and acclaim.

King Arthur heard about these exploits, and about Sir Launfal's great nobility, and sent a messenger to ask Sir Launfal to join him in celebrating the feast of Saint John the Baptist, for King Arthur would be entertaining a great number of earls and barons on this day, just after midsummer. Noblemen of all degrees would be attending and he wanted Sir Launfal to be the steward of the hall, and to organise everything, since his courtesy and his instinct for largesse was widely known.

Sir Launfal took his leave of Dame Tryamour and travelled to King Arthur's court to organise the feast. And there he found laughter and courtesy, beautiful ladies adorning the court and a large number of knights. The feast lasted for forty days, with fine things to eat and drink, some royal and wholesome entertainment and everything was organised perfectly; what aim would it serve to tell a lie? And afterwards, the noblemen happily took their leave of King Arthur and set off, each with his entourage, for home.

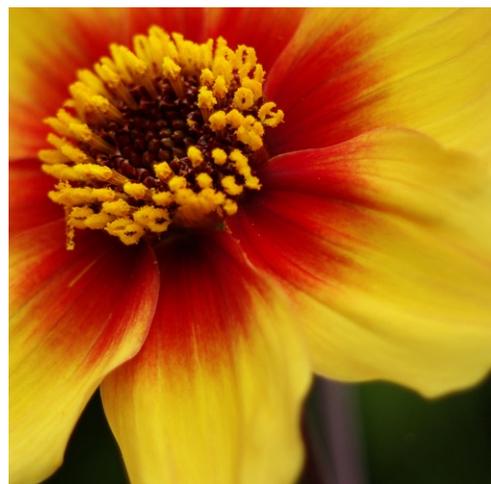
After the main meal of that day, Sir Gawain, his brothers Sir Gaheris and Sir Agravaine, and Sir Launfal as well, went to dance upon a green lawn that lay beneath a tower where Queen Guinevere sat with sixty ladies or more. Sir Launfal was asked to lead the dance, since he was loved the best for his courtliness and generosity. The queen leaned out of a window and watched the dancing.

'I can see the generous Sir Launfal there,' she said. 'I will go down to speak to him. Of all the knights that I can see, he is the fairest bachelor of them all and he has never married. Whatever may be the consequences, I will go and test the lie of his thoughts; I could love him as much as my own life.'

She took with her a group of her most beautiful ladies, sixty-five I think, and they went down onto the lawn to join in the dancing, demurely and with grace. The queen went to the end of the line, between Sir Gawain and Sir Launfal, and her ladies followed her lead, each finding a partner and they began to dance, a lady with a man, and it made for a wonderful sight. There were some accomplished minstrels there, playing the fiddle, the citole and some wind instruments; and of course, their absence would have been a disgrace, in such splendid surroundings! There they danced, in truth, after the meal on a summer's evening, until it began to get dark.

And when the dancers began to drop out to rest, the queen took Sir Launfal aside and said to him: 'Sir knight, I must tell you in all honesty that I have loved you for the last seven years. Unless you can return my love, I shall die for this affection that I hold for you. Launfal, my darling!'

'I shall never play the deceiver!' exclaimed Sir Launfal in reply. 'No, by God, who oversees everything.'



'Fy on you, then, you coward!' Guinevere spat back. 'Then you shall be hanged on the highest and most shameful beam! A curse that you were ever born! It is a pity that you have lived so long! You do not love women and no woman loves you – it is fitting that you should die.'

Sir Launfal was ashamed to be spoken to in this way and could not stop himself from saying: 'I have loved a more beautiful woman than you've ever laid eyes upon, these last seven years. Her ugliest maid would make a better queen than you!'

The queen was incandescent with rage. She turned and led her ladies back into the tower as quickly as she could. Then she lay down on her bed and was violently sick. And she swore – so might she prosper! – that she would take the most terrible revenge upon Sir Launfal, and all the land would be speaking about it before the week was out.

King Arthur returned from a day's hunting, invigorated and in good spirits, and went directly to his chamber where the queen at once laid out her complaint against Sir Launfal. 'Unless I am avenged,' she wailed, 'I shall die! My heart will break into three pieces! I spoke to Sir Launfal lightheartedly earlier, and in return he propositioned me! He wanted me to be his lover. And of another lover that he was very proud to tell me about, he said that her ugliest maid would make a better queen than me!'

King Arthur was very angry when he heard this and swore an oath to God that Sir Launfal must be killed. He went to find some knights who would go and bring Sir Launfal to him so that he could be hanged and his body pulled apart. The knights looked for Sir Launfal, but he was already in his room, seeking comfort and reassurance. Sir Launfal called his love, but she did not come, just as he had been warned. He began to fear the worst. Looking inside his purse, the one that had always contained gold



when he put his hand inside it, he found it empty. Gyffre was at this moment riding away on Blaunchar. All that he had ever possessed was melting away like snow in the sunshine. His armour, that had been as white as a lily before, was turning black.

'Alas!' he cried. 'My beautiful creature! How shall I be able to endure being separated from you? Sweet Tryamour! All my joy is gone, and you – this my greatest agony! – Oh you, my beautiful lady, gone!'

He hit himself on the body and on the head in an agony of distress and cursed his mouth for forming those ill-judged words that he had spoken to Queen Guinevere. And in sheer

despair he fell to the floor in a faint. Moments later, four knights appeared at the door, found him lying there, tied his hands together and dragged him off with them. They took him straight to King Arthur. Then was this knight in double woe!

'You disgusting, despicable deceiver!' shouted the king when Sir Launfal appeared before him. 'What prompted you to say what you did? That your lover's ugliest maid is fairer than my wife! This is a foul slur! And to try to seduce Guinevere was a misplaced arrogance, as you will soon discover!'

Sir Launfal defended himself with as much vigour as he could muster, as he stood there before the king. He said that the queen was lying. 'I have never in my life tried to seduce Queen Guinevere. She tried to seduce me! Then she accused me of not liking women, and I answered her that my lover or even her ugliest maid was more worthy to be a queen than she. And it is true! And I'm ready to do anything the court requires of me, to say how it really was and to tell the truth.'

Twelve knights who knew Queen Guinevere, and were prepared to have their views about her weighed openly in court, took an oath upon the Bible. Then each confirmed that the queen had a reputation for embarking upon illicit love affairs behind the king's back. They all agreed on this. And they affirmed

that it was more likely that Queen Guinevere had been the seducer rather than the other way around, and so they advised that Sir Launfal should be acquitted on this charge. But regarding the other accusation, that he had insulted the queen's beauty, he should be made to produce his lady – or one of her ugliest maids perhaps – to show the court that the woman was indeed more worthy to be a queen than Guinevere herself. And if he could do so, he should be acquitted on this count as well. But if he could not, he should be hanged! All the knights agreed that Sir Launfal should be made to produce his beautiful lover.

His head dropped when he heard this judgement.

'If Launfal is able to present a more beautiful lady to this court,' exclaimed Queen Guinevere, 'may both my eyes be put out!'

When this judgement had been made, Sir Launfal found two knights to guarantee his reappearance at court, upon pain of their own lives. These were Sir Gawain and Sir Perceval. And Sir Launfal was charged to appear again at King Arthur's court in a year and a fortnight's time, with his lady. The noble knight Sir Launfal, full of anxiety and despair, wrung his hands in utter desolation. He was so immersed in misery that he would gladly have drowned himself, or lost his head to the axe, and everyone was very upset to see this.

When the appointed time arrived, a year later, Sir Gawain and Sir Perceval brought him once more before King Arthur. The king had the charge read out and instructed Sir Launfal to present his lady to the court. Sir Launfal said that he could not do so, and hung his head. So the king commanded all the highest noblemen of the land to pass judgement upon Sir Launfal and to condemn him to death. But then the Earl of Cornwall spoke up and said: 'We would rather not do this, sir.' And turning to his peers, he said: 'It would bring great shame upon us to condemn to death this gentleman who has been so noble and generous in the past. Therefore, my lords, guide the king as I advise. Ask him to seek another remedy. Let Sir Launfal be banished into exile.'

But as they stood discussing this, the knights and barons saw ten maidens approaching them on horseback, all of them so demure and so beautiful that the ugliest of them could have been their queen!

'Launfal, my friend, your fears should be vanishing,' whispered Sir Gawain, that courteous knight. 'Here comes your noble lady!'

'None of them is my lady,' confided Sir Launfal, miserably.

The maidens rode up to the castle, dismounted at the gate, made their way towards King Arthur and asked him quickly to arrange that a room be made ready for their royal lady.

'Which lady is this?' asked King Arthur.

'You shall soon see,' replied one of the maidens. 'She will be arriving shortly.'

The king commanded that the best chamber in the palace be readied for her. And he sent word to his barons that they must quickly arrive at a decision concerning the fate of that despicable knight, Sir Launfal.

'We have seen these beautiful maidens,' the barons replied, 'and it shouldn't take us long to reach a decision!'

So a new debate erupted amongst these earls and barons, concerning the best way to placate their king. Some were for having Sir Launfal executed anyway, whatever the truth of the matter, since the king wanted it. Others were vehemently opposed to any injustice. Discussions became quite heated! But as they deliberated and argued, another ten maidens approached the castle, even more beautiful than the first ten. These maidens were riding Spanish mules with saddles and bridles from Champagne, the reins glittering in the sun. Their clothes were of the finest silk interwoven with gold threads, and everyone at

the court looked forward to having a closer look at these garments!

‘Launfal, here comes your sweet darling!’ whispered Sir Gawain. ‘You have nothing to fear now.’

‘I still don’t recognise any of these maidens,’ replied Sir Launfal.

The young ladies rode into the palace and dismounted in front of the high dais where King Arthur was seated upon his throne. They greeted King Arthur and Queen Guinevere and then one of them said: ‘Make ready your hall, Sir, and drape your walls with your finest hangings and tapestries, in preparation for the arrival of my lady Tryamour.’

‘By the Lord Our Saviour, you are welcome, fair maidens!’ replied King Arthur. And he commanded Sir Lancelot of the Lake to take them to the chamber where the other ten maidens had already been shown, in friendship and with honour. Queen Guinevere feared that it would not be long before Sir Launfal was acquitted and set free, if his lady arrived, so she said to King Arthur: ‘Sir, if you value your honour, and if you were at all courteous, you would see to it at once that that knight who has made me so angry is dealt with immediately. Have no mercy on Sir Launfal. Your noblemen are steering you towards disgrace, because he is so dear to them all.’



But as Queen Guinevere spoke, the barons could see a damsel riding alone towards the castle on a beautiful white horse. Never on this Earth had they seen such a lovely sight before! As at ease as a bird singing on a bough, she rode gracefully towards them with a deportment that seemed perfect in every way. As pretty as the blossom on the trees and hedges in May, she had grey eyes and a fair complexion, a healthy colour in her cheeks and hair that shone like gold thread. Upon her head she wore a crown of gold with sparkling precious stones. Her dress was purple, her figure was that of a lady of leisure, her waist slim, her cloak edged with white ermine, perfectly lined and finished, so that no finer could be found anywhere. She was stunningly attractive! The perfect saddle upon which she sat rested upon a blanket of green velvet embroidered with images and a border finished with golden bells. In front and behind, the saddle boasted two large emeralds from India – magnificent gems! Her horse’s accoutrements alone were worth an earldom. They were the finest that could be found in Lombardy! And on her raised hand she carried a falcon as she rode her white horse sedately through the streets of Caerleon, so that men might get a chance to have a good look at her. By her side ran two greyhounds, wearing collars of gold.

When Sir Launfal saw his lady approaching, he turned to all the people in the court, young and old, and cried: ‘Here comes my lady! My beautiful, beautiful lady! She will save me from this nightmare, if she has a mind to!’

Dame Tryamour rode into the hall where King Arthur was sitting with Queen Guinevere, and all her ladies-in-waiting. Her maidens came into the hall at once to receive her and to hold her stirrup as she dismounted. Dame Tryamour allowed the cloak she was wearing to fall to the floor, the better that King Arthur and his knights might enjoy the beauty of the exquisite gown she was wearing. King Arthur greeted her, and she gave a courteous reply.

Queen Guinevere jumped to her feet and all her ladies responded accordingly, to get a better look. Dame Tryamour stood with exquisite poise and refinement. She dimmed their beauty as the sun does to the moon during the day.

‘Sir,’ she said to King Arthur. ‘I have come here to exonerate Sir Launfal of any wrongdoing. He did not ask Queen Guinevere to go to bed with him, he would never have been so stupid as to do a thing like that. On the contrary, Sir King, you must be made aware that it was Queen Guinevere who tried

to seduce him, not the other way around. And his reply to this proposition was that his lover's ugliest maiden was prettier than her.'

'And everybody in the hall can see that this is true,' said King Arthur, calmly.

With this, Dame Tryamour went over to Queen Guinevere and blew a breath of air into her face that blinded her for evermore! Then she leaped up onto her white horse and wished them all a good day! At once, Gyffre appeared leading Blauncharde. He had just emerged from the forest, and he went to stand the horse beside Sir Launfal. The knight needed no further encouragement. Sir Launfal sprang into the saddle immediately, intending to ride away with his mistress. Dame Tryamour took her ladies with her and rode away in the direction she had come, with great poise and authority.

The lady rode to Carlisle, it is said, and on into a wonderful isle that is called Olyroun, that some call Avalon. And every year, upon a certain day, Sir Launfal's horse can be heard neighing, and the knight himself can be seen, and anyone who wishes to joust, to stop his arms from rusting, can joust there with Sir Launfal, when he emerges from the Otherworld!

Thus Sir Launfal, that noble knight of the Round Table, was taken into the land of Faerie. And since that time, no man has ever seen him and I can say nothing more about him, and that is the truth. Thomas Chestre made this tale of the noble and chivalrous knight Sir Launfal. May Jesus, who is King of Heaven, give us all his blessing, and his mother Mary.

Amen.