

# DESIRÉ

translated by

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(1) I will turn my talents and attention to recounting an adventure: those who lived at that time composed a *lai* to remember it. This is the *lai* of Desiré, who was so very handsome. In Scotland there is a region which is called Calatir, near the Blanche Lande, next to the sea which is so large. The beautiful Black Chapel, of which they tell stories, is there.

(13) There was once a vavassor who was greatly honored in his native land. All the territories he had he held as a vassal of the King of Scotland. He had a wife appropriate to his station, and he loved her much, for she was prudent. They were unfortunate, however, in that they had no child together. They were extremely sad at this, and they often prayed to God to comfort them, in His pity, and give them a son or a daughter. One night they lay in bed, and the lady spoke to her husband: "My lord, I have heard tell that in Provence, across the sea, there is a glorious holy relic: ladies go there with their husbands. No one requests anything from him, no matter what it might be, that he does not grant. He has such grace and power from God, especially about having children. I feel great sorrow in my heart: my lord, let us get ready and cross the sea and go there."

(39) Her lord granted her this, and they prepared for their journey. Without delay they crossed the sea and went to Saint Giles to pray. They offered him a solid silver image, worth six marks, I am sure, on the altar and asked for a son or daughter. When they had completed their prayer, they went back to their land. The lady was pregnant with a son before she had arrived home. The lord was joyful and delighted; he was happier than he had ever been, as were all his kinsfolk. At the time when their son was born, they had him called "Desired One," because they had waited so long without having a child, and now Saint Giles had performed a miracle.

(59) They nurtured and protected their son, as one they loved very much; he was handsome in body and face. When he came to the age when he could be separated from them, they sent him to serve the king. He learned the ways of forest and river, and took to it gladly. The king loved him and held him dear, and then dubbed him a knight. When

Desiré was a knight, at once he crossed the sea; he frequented Normandy and tourneyed in Brittany. He was greatly praised by the French and popular with all other people; then, knighthood was still valued! If a knight came from another country to win fame, either in tournaments or war, he was never ambushed or sold out by his companions.

(81) Desiré was there for ten years without going home. He did very well and progressed well, until the king sent for him. He came to his territories, and was welcomed honorably by the king, who held him dear for his valor and showed him great honor. He was very valiant, and handsome; everyone praised Desiré. He could never leave the king except to go to Calatir. At his father's request he went to visit his mother.

(95) It was the beginning of summer, and on the fourth day that he had been home, he rose in the morning and dressed and decked himself out elegantly. He was richly shod, as a knight should be; his shirt and breeches were of silk, whiter than any flower in April, and he was wrapped in a green mantle. He asked for his spurs, and his good horse, for he wanted to mount up to seek his amusement. The horse was large and fine, and he was noble and proper in body, face and demeanor; there was no flaw in him.

(111) He mounted the horse, and was certainly an excellent knight, with handsome legs and handsome feet. He raised himself up in his stirrups and pricked the horse with his spurs, galloping it all through the town. He set out with no companion, and headed toward the Blanche Lande. There he saw beautiful flowering trees, and he heard the calls of the birds. His blood was stirred and his mood rose, and he felt great joy in hearing the song. He rode on into the forest. In the thickest part of the woods a holy man had his hermitage. Desiré used to visit him often in his youth and share his food, when he went hunting and passed that way with his father. He decided to go to find him and speak with him.

(133) While he was going toward the Chapel, he looked and saw a maiden, dressed in a very beautiful dress of dark-colored silk. Her complexion was white and rosy, her body was fair and full. Her head was bare and her hair flowed loose; she went barefoot to enjoy the dew. She went to a fountain which rose from under a large tree, carrying two golden basins in her hands.

(144) The knight was not uncourtly: he got off his horse and seized her and wanted to make her his sweetheart. He laid her down on the fresh grass and I think he would have made her yield, when she begged

for mercy: "Knight, go away from here. You will not be more admired if you defile my body. Do me no harm, and let me alone, for the sake of a reward. I am with a young lady—in all the world there is none so beautiful. I will let you see her. If you are up to it, no matter what she says to you do not let her get away from you. For if you are well loved by her, you will not be left in need of anything: you will have plenty of gold and silver all at your command. Do not think that I am lying to you; if all this does not please you, with me you cannot fail: I will do all you please. You may be completely confident in me; I pledge you my faith, I will help you in any need, no matter what it might be."

(173) When Desiré heard her speak, he let her alone. The girl took him straight to where her young mistress was, in a leafy bower. She was stretched out on a beautiful bed, with a checkered cover on the bed, made from two kinds of costly material, as beautiful as fresh flowers. In front of her sat a maiden. The one who brought Desiré there stood at a distance, and called to him: "Vassal," she said, "look here: in that bower take what I promised you. Did you ever see such a beautiful face, such beautiful hands, such beautiful arms, or such a lovely body so well clothed, lovelier or more delicate hair, more beautifully styled and coiffed? Never has one so beautiful been born! Now I have acquitted myself well toward you. Step forward, have no fear: in you there is plenty of virtue and valor."

(197) Desiré listened to her, went over there, and tied up his good charger. As soon as the maiden saw him, she didn't wait at all, but fled from the bower and entered the thickest part of the forest. Desiré saw her and went straight after her; he was very fiery and didn't hesitate, so he soon caught her. He seized her by her right hand, and he spoke to her graciously: "Beautiful one," he said, "speak with me. Why are you fleeing me in such a great rush? I am a knight of this region; I will be your man and your sweetheart. In order to have your love, I will serve you with all my might." The maiden bowed to him and thanked him and said that she would not refuse him or reject his offer: her love was granted and he did with her as with his sweetheart.

(221) He stayed with her for a long time and left her reluctantly, but she gave him leave and taught and told him how he could find her and where he would be able to talk with her. "Desiré, my love," she said, "you will go to Calatir; I will give you a gold ring, and I will tell you one thing: be on guard against straying, and take pains to love faithfully. If you misbehave in any way, you will lose the ring at once, and if it so happens that you lose it, you will have lost me forever, and will never

get me back or see me. Be sure to behave valiantly now, and don't fall short on my account. Before you had my love you were a man of great valor. It is not right for a knight to become worse because of love." She put the ring on his finger, and he kissed her and drew her toward him. Then he mounted his horse and rode back to his lodgings.

(249) He made great expenditures and travelled much; in nothing did he fall short. He gave more away in a single month than the king did in half a year. He used to return to the forest because of his sweetheart, whom he loved, and they often talked together. They loved each other for so long that she had a son and a daughter, but she didn't tell him and he didn't know about it.

(259) Once the king sent for him and took him out of the country on important business, for a lengthy campaign. When he had returned, Desiré took his leave of the king; he returned to his country and went to Calatir, where he was born. When he arrived he rested there during the night, and in the morning he rose early and got on his horse to ride out for pleasure, straight to the White Forest, where he used to meet his sweetheart. All alone, I tell you, he came to the hermitage where lived the holy hermit, whom the knight knew well. He had one thing in mind, that he would talk with the holy man and make his confession to him; he did not know when he would come again.

(281) He opened the gate, went inside and found him in the chapel. "Sir," he said, "I have come here and I want to be confessed and absolved." The hermit granted his request; and he sat down and leaned toward him; then he revealed to him the sins of which he was sure and certain. He confessed to him about his sweetheart and how he first came to her. The hermit advised him and prescribed penance for him.

(293) When he had been absolved and blessed, he returned to his horse, mounted it by the stirrup and took the reins. He looked at his fingers and hand, but he no longer had the ring; you may be sure that this didn't please him. He realized that he had lost it; never before had he been so sad. He stayed no longer, but left there and hurried to the place where he thought he would find his sweetheart, for he wished to speak with her.

(305) He stayed there all day long without seeing her or talking with her. When he couldn't speak to her, he considered himself most wretched: "My beautiful sweetheart," said Desiré, "where are you? When will you see me? Are you angry with me? I must surely die if I don't see you! You have taken your ring from me; I know that I have lost it because of you. I will never have joy nor comfort! Alas, poor me! What

wrong have I done? I love you more than anything. Surely you are not acting well. The hermit gave me confession, but he said nothing bad about you. I begged for mercy for my sins: if I have done anything beyond what is right, beautiful one, do not be angry with me, but assign me my penance. As for what the hermit told me and the fasts he prescribed for me, I will neglect them, if you wish, and I will follow your orders.”

(329) He could not beg her for mercy enough to make her willing to talk with him. He was very sad in heart, and he harshly cursed the hermitage and the hermit whom he found there and the mouth with which he spoke and all those who visited him or ever spoke there. When he saw that all this was no use, he had to leave there; he went back to Calatir. He was extremely saddened by the sorrow which oppressed him. In a short time he became very sick. His great joy turned to sadness and his songs turned into tears. He languished for a whole year, and everybody thought he was done for: they all said he would die, and he said so himself.

(349) At the end of the year in which he lay ill, hear what happened. One day his squires and his servants left him sleeping; they all went out to amuse themselves and didn't dare to wake him. When he had slept long enough, he awoke and revived a bit; he was astonished and greatly displeased at one thing: that he was alone. While he was in such distress, his sweetheart came to talk with him. He recognized her and gazed at her: because of the joy which he had from her, he supported himself on the bed with his elbow.

(364) She called to him and said: “Desiré, you are in a very bad way, all distressed and all wasted away. Why, as if on purpose, are you dying? Make some effort, for this is pointless! If I have now hated you for a long time, you certainly deserved it: you made a confession about me! Now you will never recover. Was I such a burden to you? It was not such a great sin: I have never been married or pledged or engaged, and you have never married a wife and have never been betrothed. Now since you sought to confess, I know very well that you wanted to leave me: what good is confession for curing sins until a man is willing to give up them up? Often you have feared that I had enchanted you, but don't be worried about that: I am not some evil creature. When you go to church to hear mass and to pray to God, you will see me standing beside you and taking consecrated bread. You have erred toward me, but because I have loved you so much, I wish to give you back this much: you will be able to see me every day, to laugh with me and enjoy

yourself. Give up your grief: but you will surely have nothing more, nor will you again seek to confess."

(399) Then the knight answered her: "My beautiful sweetheart," he said, "thank you; because you comfort me I am healed and cured. I have never had so much joy in anything." He kissed her; she left at once and he remained, joyous and happy. He was wholly healed and completely happy for the joy which he received, and free from great torment. When he went to pray in church, he saw his sweetheart standing beside him, eating consecrated bread, making the cross and signing herself; she often spoke with him. He recovered and felt no sickness; he gave and spent as he had done before his sweetheart hated him.

(417) The king loved him with complete affection, and stayed with him night and day. Once they went hunting, to amuse themselves in the forest, and they had bows and arrows brought for them because they wanted to hunt in the forest. Both the king and Desiré stopped under a large tree and both shot at a large stag, but they didn't kill it or wound it. Their arrows fell on the grass near them where they could see them. They felt disappointed that they had missed it; they threw down their bows and unstrung them. They wanted to get their arrows from where they saw them fall, but they couldn't find them or see them. "God!" said the king to Desiré; "we have been enchanted! Our arrows fell right here before my very eyes, I am sure. Now we can't find them. This is surely a great marvel!"

(441) While they were walking and talking, they saw a young lad before them: he was fair, well-formed and large, and dressed in a red tunic made of the finest scarlet. He was extremely handsome and tall. He had beautiful curly hair and an attractive ruddy complexion. He was carrying the arrows in his hand. He was not uncourteous in his words. He first greeted the king and gave him his arrow, then gave Desiré his arrow and spoke to him agreeably: "My lord," he said, "you are my father, and my mother sent me here; she wants me to be with you and become acquainted with my kinsmen. When you first spoke with her in the forest where you engendered me, she gave you a gold ring then; then you lost it, and it grieved you greatly. I have brought it here with me. My lord, Put it on your finger." Desiré recognized the ring at once and took the young man in his arms and hugged him, kissing his eyes and face, his chin a hundred times over. The king and all his companions kissed him at once; they welcomed the lad well and honorably. Desiré told the king where the boy had been conceived. They took him with

them and treated him most affectionately. Desiré loved him and held him so dear that he was couldn't leave him night or day.

(479) When the lad had been with him for two months and had learned his lineage, he rose early one day and got dressed and equipped. He mounted his horse, and then he went to meet his father, who had come out of church and was about to mount his horse. "My lord," he said, "listen to me. I have come to take my leave of you; I must go to my mother, for I can no longer stay here."

(491) "No!" said his father. "By God's saints, dear son, do not kill me: truly, I would rather die than see you leave me!"

(495) "My lord," he said, "I must do it." He spurred his horse and set out at a gallop, leaving him behind. Desiré mounted his horse, for he had only just found his son and he feared he had lost him. He called him repeatedly by name, spurred his horse after him, and begged him to stop and talk with him a little. But his son paid no heed and continued straight ahead until he entered the forest.

(508) Desiré pursued him all day long, and when night began to fall, the boy was still going at a gallop, and Desiré rode after him in haste, until his horse crashed into a large tree and fell down. Desiré got to his feet and led his horse along—he had had much trouble and distress that day! Desiré had lost his son and did not know in which direction he had gone. He hadn't gone very far in the forest when he looked to his right and saw a great fire, under a broad, leafy oak. Do you know what Desiré thought when he found the fire? That some powerful man was resting there, who was planning to go hunting in the morning and had been hunting that day but had been overtaken by night. Guided by the light of the fire that he saw, he hurried along in that direction. There he found only a dwarf, tightly clad in silk: he was grinding pepper in a mortar, and was roasting steaks from a large, fat wild boar on the fire.

(536) Desiré came forward and greeted the dwarf pleasantly, but he did not answer. He left the pepper and the mortar, and ran to take the horse. He led it off to one side, then removed the reins and unfastened its saddle, and gave fresh grass to it. Then he went back to the knight and prepared a bed of grass, leaves and ferns and spread an embroidered covering over the bed: he had the knight sit down on it. But he still was not willing to speak to him, and went back to preparing his pepper sauce.

(553) When the pepper was well ground and the meal was ready, he took two golden basins in his hands and hung a towel on his neck. As soon as Desiré saw the basins, he recognized them: the maiden he first

met in the forest was carrying them! He didn't want to give any sign of it to the dwarf. The dwarf laid a cloth in front of him, then a salt cellar and knives and then two loaves of bread. In a large cup of pure gold the dwarf brought him wine, and served him the steaks on a silver platter. Then the knight took a knife and cut a large piece of meat: he dipped it in the pepper sauce and offered it to the dwarf, who ate it. Then he uncovered the cup and gave it to the dwarf to drink first. He never took a mouthful without giving one just as good to the dwarf. When the dwarf saw that he was so agreeable, noble and well-bred, he could no longer conceal himself, but wanted to speak.

(581) "Sir Knight," said the dwarf, "truly you are not a fool or uncourtly. You are welcome here. Even if I should be beaten for it, if you please, I will no longer be guarded, but will speak to you. You should be happy, for I was sent to meet you today and to give you lodgings and serve you, because we knew that you would come."

(591) Then the knight answered him: "Friend, great thanks, and may all go well for the one who sent you here and gave me cause to rejoice."

(595) "Sir," said the dwarf, "it was your sweetheart, who loves you more than her life."

(597) Then Desiré spoke: "My sweetheart, by God!" he said. "Then I am truly fortunate."

(599) "By my faith, sir, you are telling the truth, for I will do everything in my power so that you may speak with her. If you are willing to go with me, I will bring you to her chamber, and I will show you her bed."

(605) "Friend," said the knight, "I will go with you gladly."

(607) When they rose from their meal, the dwarf led Desiré to the castle where his lady was. They went as far as the bedchamber and found no doors or windows there except one, at the top on the right. Inside they saw candles burning, whose light was very great. In the room were two beds, well and grandly made up; two damsels were lying in them, and I think they were asleep. The dwarf called to Desiré and showed him the whole room. "Sir," he said, "look here. That is your sweetheart who is sleeping there, and her sister is on the other side. Go inside, don't be afraid. Over there you will find a serving maid—I think that you are acquainted with her. This girl is sewing a robe for my lady by candle light."

(629) Desiré got ready, and jumped through the window with both feet together, but he couldn't keep his balance and fell down in front of the bed. He hurt his side badly, and all the room echoed with the clatter.

His sweetheart's sister awoke; she was very frightened, and cried out. She made all the knights rise quickly and arm themselves. The maid who was awake—the one who was sewing—took the knight by the hand and led him out, and then spoke: “My lord,” she said, “now I am repaying you the debt I owe, just as I promised. If you had been caught in this chamber, I assure you that you would have been killed! Please be so kind as to take care that my service isn’t wasted, and if you ever again see me in a situation where you can repay it to me, my lord, don’t forget me.”

(652) “My dear friend,” he said, “I will not.”

(653) She accompanied him until they found the dwarf. She struck him in the chest with her hand: “You malicious, deceitful wretch! Why did you betray this noble man? Get away from here as fast as you can!” They went away in great haste and returned to their fire. Desiré was aware that he was hurt and lay down on the bed, feeling that he had been greatly mocked. As soon as light of day appeared, he saddled his horse and then mounted it. He headed back toward his own region: he was severely wounded in his side, and he remained so for a long time until the king was to hold court at a castle in Calatir. At Pentecost the king invited to the feast all his neighbors and his barons, and most of them came there, since they loved their lord. Desiré, who was loved by the king, was also at this feast.

(677) They all heard mass and left the church; as the king was about to eat, sitting at the dais, an extraordinary lady came riding into the hall on a gentle white mule, and with her there was a maiden. They were splendidly dressed; their clothes were worth a hundred marks of silver. They were riding two white mules and carrying two sparrowhawks. The king and the men with him looked at them with wonder: they were so extraordinarily beautiful in body, face and figure. With these maidens there was a young man: in all the world there was none so handsome.

(695) They stopped in front of the king, and the older woman greeted the king: “My lord,” she said, “listen to me. I have come here to you, and I have brought you these two children. Give arms to the boy make such arrangements for the girl that honor may come to you. The truth is that I am their mother and Desiré is their father. You should be pleased to take care of the children of such a good knight and such a lady as I am. I have done you great honor today by coming here to your court from my country.”

(711) The king answered: “Beautiful lady, I grant this to you. Whatever you ask of me I will do, with all my power. Dismount, and come and sit down, ask for water, eat and enjoy yourself with us.”

(717) "I will certainly not do that," she said. "First, fulfil my request. Marry my lover to me right away, for I wish to take him with me. Let us be joined lawfully, and he will live with me all his life. He will never seek confession or penance or pardon."

(725) Then the king had arms brought forth; he wanted to dub the lad a knight. He himself fastened the sword on him and gave him the accolade. Two kings, from Moreis and Leoneis, were at the feast. The king knelt and fastened on his spurs, with great honor. When he was splendidly equipped and knighted, the king, in the presence of all his people, said that he would take the girl and make her his queen; he would keep the maiden for his own, for he had never seen anyone so beautiful.

(739) Desiré was sitting on the other side; he was very eager that he should marry his sweetheart and that she should be given at once. Desiré and the king led them both to a church and married them together.

(745) When they returned, the lady took her leave. She wanted to go back to her native country; she had no desire to stay there. "Mount up, Desiré," she said. "You will go with me. Your son has now been knighted; you will leave him here in this land. Your daughter is married; you have had a successful day! You can be certain that they will come to visit when they can." Desiré got on his horse and set out with his sweetheart, who was his guide. He stayed with her from then on, and never came back; he had never had any desire to return.

To commemorate this adventure, they composed a *lai*, and called it "Desiré".