

Graelent

translated by

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Now will I tell you the adventure of Graelent, even as it was told to me, for the lay is sweet to hear, and the tune thereof lovely to bear in mind.

Graelent was born in Brittany of a gentle and noble house, very comely of person and very frank of heart.

The King who held Brittany in that day made mortal war upon his neighbours, and commanded his vassals to take arms in his quarrel. Amongst these came Graelent, whom the King welcomed gladly, and since he was a wise and hardy knight, greatly was he honoured and cherished by the Court. So Graelent strove valiantly at tourney and at joust, and pained himself mightily to do the enemy all the mischief that he was able. The Queen heard tell the prowess of her knight, and loved him in her heart for reason of his feats of arms and of the good men spake of him. So she called her chamberlain apart, and said—

“Tell me truly, hast thou not often heard speak of that fair knight, Sir Graelent, whose praise is in all men’s mouths?”

“Lady,” answered the chamberlain, “I know him for a courteous gentleman, well spoken of by all.”

“I would he were my friend,” replied the lady, “for I am in much unrest because of him. Go thou and bid him come to me, so he would be worthy of my love.”

“Passing gracious and rich is your gift, lady, and doubtless he will receive it with marvellous joy. Why, from here to Troy there is no priest even, however holy, who in looking on your face would not lose Heaven in your eyes.”

Thereupon the chamberlain took leave of the Queen, and seeking Graelent within his lodging, saluted him courteously, and gave him the message, praying him to come without delay to the palace.

“Go before, fair friend,” answered the knight, “for I will follow you at once.”

So when the chamberlain was gone, Graelent caused his grey horse to be saddled, and mounting thereon, rode to the castle, attended by his squire. He descended without the hall, and passing before the King, entered within the Queen’s chamber. When the lady saw him she embraced him closely, and cherished and honoured him sweetly. Then she made the knight to be seated on a fair carpet, and to his face praised him for his exceeding comeliness. But he answered her very simply and courteously, saying nothing but what was seemly to be said. Then the Queen kept silence for a great while, considering whether she should require him to love her for the love of love; but at the last, made bold by passion, she asked if his heart was set on any maid or dame.

“Lady,” said he, “I love no woman, for love is a serious business, not a jest. Out of five hundred who speak glibly of love, not one can spell the first letter of his name. With such it is idleness, or fulness of bread, or fancy, masking in the guise of love. Love requires of his servants chastity in thought, in word and in deed. If one of two lovers is loyal, and the other jealous and false, how may their friendship last, for love is slain! But sweetly and discreetly love passes from person to person, from heart to heart, or it is nothing worth. For what the lover would, that would the beloved; what she would ask of him, that should he go before to grant. Without accord such as this, love is but a bond and a constraint. For above all things love means sweetness, and truth, and measure; yea, loyalty to the loved one and to your word. And because of this I dare not meddle with so high a matter.”

The Queen heard Graelent gladly, finding him so tripping of tongue, and since his words were wise and courteous, at the end she discovered to him her heart.

“Friend, Sir Graelent, though I am a wife, yet have I never loved my lord. But I love you very dearly, and what I have asked of you, will you not go before to grant?”

“Lady,” said he, “give me pity and forgiveness, but this may not be. I am the vassal of the King, and on my knees have pledged him loyalty and faith, and sworn to defend his life and honour. Never shall he have shame because of me.”

With these words Sir Graeent took his leave of the Queen, and went his way.

Seeing him go in this fashion, the Queen commenced to sigh. She was grieved in her very heart, and knew not what to do. But whatever chanced she would not renounce her passion, so often she required his love by means of soft messages and costly gifts, but he refused them all. Then the Queen turned from love to hate, and the greatness of her passion became the measure of her wrath, for very evilly she spoke of Graeent to the King. So long as the war endured, Graeent remained in that realm. He spent all that he had upon his company, for the King grudged wages to his men. The Queen persuaded the King to this, counselling him that by withholding the pay of the sergeants, Graeent might in no wise flee the country, nor take service with another lord. So at the end Graeent was wonderfully downcast, nor was it strange that he was sad, for there remained nothing which he might pledge, but one poor steed, and when this was gone, no horse had he to carry him from the realm.

It was now the month of May, when the hours are long and warm. The burgess with whom Graeent lodged had risen early in the morning, and with his wife had gone to eat with neighbours in the town. No one was in the house except Graeent, no squire, nor archer, nor servant, save only the daughter of his host, a very courteous maid. When the hour for dinner was come she prayed the knight that they might sit at board together. But he had no heart for mirth, and seeking out his squire, bade him bridle and saddle his horse, for he had no care to eat.

"I have no saddle," replied the squire.

"Friend," said the demoiselle, "I will lend you bridle and saddle as well."

So when the harness was done upon him, Graeent mounted his horse, and went his way through the town, clad in a cloak of sorry fur, which he had worn overlong already. The townsfolk in the street turned and stared upon him, making a jest of his poverty, but of their jibes he took no heed, for such act but after their kind, and seldom show kindness or courtesy.

Now without the town there spread a great forest, thick with trees, and through the forest ran a river. Towards this forest Graeent rode,

deep in heavy thought, and very dolent. Having ridden for a little space beneath the trees, he spied within a leafy thicket a fair white hart, whiter even than snow on winter branches. The hart fled before him, and Graeent followed so closely in her track that man and deer presently came together to a grassy lawn, in the midst of which sprang a fountain of clear, sweet water. Now in this fountain a demoiselle disported herself for her delight. Her raiment was set on a bush near by, and her two maidens stood on the bank, busied in their lady's service. Graeent forgot the chase at so sweet a sight, since never in his life had he seen so lovely a dame. For the lady was slender in shape and white, very gracious and dainty of colour, with laughing eyes and an open brow—certainly the most beautiful thing in all the world. Graeent dared not draw nigh the fountain for fear of troubling the dame, so he came softly to the bush to set hands upon her raiment. The two maidens marked his approach, and at their fright the lady turned, and calling him by name, cried with great anger—

“Graeent, put my raiment down, for it will profit you little even if you carry it away, and leave me naked in this wood. But if you are indeed too greedy of gain to remember your knighthood, at least return me my shift, and content yourself with my mantle, since it will bring you money, as it is very good.”

“I am not a merchant's son,” answered Graeent merrily, “nor am I a huckster to sell mantles in a booth. If your cloak were worth the spoil of three castles I would not now carry it from the bush. Come forth from your bathing, fair friend, and clothe yourself in your vesture, for you have to say a certain word to me.”

“I will not trust myself to your hand, for you might seize upon me,” answered the lady; “and I tell you frankly that I put no faith in your word, nor have had any dealings with your school.”

Then Graeent answered still more merrily—

“Lady, needs must I suffer your wrath. But at least I will guard your raiment till you come forth from the fountain; and, fairest, very dainty is your body in my eyes.”

When the lady knew that Graeent would not depart, nor render again her raiment, then she demanded surety that he would do her no hurt. This thing was accorded between them, so she came forth from the

fountain, and did her vesture upon her. Then Graelent took her gently by the left hand, and prayed and required of her that she would grant him love for love. But the lady answered –

“I marvel greatly that you should dare to speak to me in this fashion, for I have little reason to think you discreet. You are bold, sir knight, and overbold, to seek to ally yourself with a woman of my lineage.”

Sir Graelent was not abashed by the dame’s proud spirit, but wooed and prayed her gently and sweetly, promising that if she granted him her love he would serve her in all loyalty, and never depart therefrom all the days of his life. The demoiselle hearkened to the words of Graelent, and saw plainly that he was a valiant knight, courteous and wise. She thought within herself that should she send him from her, never might she find again so sure a friend. Since then she knew him worthy of her love, she kissed him softly, and spoke to him in this manner –

“Graelent, I will love you none the less truly, though we have not met until this day. But one thing is needful that our love may endure. Never must you speak a word by which this hidden thing may become known. I will furnish you with deniers in your purse, with cloth of silk, with silver and with gold. Night and day will I stay with you, and great shall be the love between us twain. You shall see me riding at your side, you may talk and laugh with me at your pleasure, but I must never be seen of your comrades, nor must they know aught concerning your bride. Graelent, you are loyal, brave and courteous, and comely enough to the view. For you I spread my snare at the fountain; for you shall I suffer heavy pains, as well I knew before I set forth on this adventure. Now must I trust to your discretion, for if you speak vainly and boastfully of this thing, then am I undone. Remain now for a year in this country, which shall be for you a home that your lady loves well. But noon is past, and it is time for you to go. Farewell, and a messenger shortly shall tell you that which I would have you do.”

Graelent took leave of the lady, and she sweetly clasped and kissed him farewell. He returned to his lodging, dismounted from his steed, and entering within a chamber, leaned from the casement, considering this strange adventure. Looking towards the forest, he saw a varlet issue therefrom riding upon a palfrey. He drew rein before Graelent’s door,

and taking his feet from the stirrup, saluted the knight. So Graelent inquired from whence he rode, and of his name and business.

“Sir,” answered he, “I am the messenger of your lady. She sends you this destrier by my hand, and would have me enter your service, to pay your servitors their wages and to take charge of your lodging.”

When Graelent heard this message he thought it both good and fair. He kissed the varlet upon the cheek, and accepting his gift, caused the destrier—which was the noblest, the swiftest and the most speedy under the sun—to be led to the stable. Then the varlet carried his baggage to his master’s chamber, and took therefrom a large cushion and a rich coverlet which he spread upon the couch. After this he drew thereout a purse containing much gold and silver, and stout cloth fitting for the knight’s apparel. Then he sent for the host, and paying him what was owing, called upon him to witness that he was recompensed most largely for the lodging. He bade him also to seek out such knights as should pass through the town to refresh and solace themselves in the company of his lord. The host was a worthy man. He made ready a plenteous dinner, and inquired through the town for such poor knights as were in misease by reason of prison or of war. These he brought to the hostelry of Sir Graelent, and comforted them with instruments of music, and with all manner of mirth. Amongst them sat Graelent at meat, gay and debonair, and richly apparelled. Moreover, to these poor knights and the harpers Graelent gave goodly gifts, so that there was not a citizen in all the town who did not hold him in great worship, and regard him as his lord.

From this moment Graelent lived greatly at his ease, for not a cloud was in his sky. His lady came at will and pleasure; all day long they laughed and played together, and at night she lay softly at his side. What truer happiness might he know than this? Often, besides, he rode to such tournaments of the land as he was able, and all men esteemed him for a stout and worthy knight. Very pleasant were his days and his love, and if such things might last for ever he had nothing else to ask of life.

When a full year had passed by, the season drew to the feast of Pentecost. Now it was the custom of the King to summon at that tide his barons and all who held their fiefs of him to his Court for a rich banquet. Amongst these lords was bidden Sir Graelent. After men had eaten and drunk the whole day, and all were merry, the King commanded the

Queen to put off her royal robes, and to stand forth upon the dais. Then he boasted before the company –

“Lord barons, how seems it to you? Beneath the sky is there a lovelier queen than mine, be she maid, dame or demoiselle?”

So all the lords made haste to praise the Queen, and to cry and affirm that in all the world was neither maid nor wife so dainty, fresh and fair. Not a single voice but bragged of her beauty, save only that of Graelent. He smiled at their folly, for his heart remembered his friend, and he held in pity all those who so greatly rejoiced in the Queen. So he sat with covered head, and with face bent smiling to the board. The Queen marked his discourtesy, and drew thereto the notice of the King.

“Sire, do you observe this dishonour? Not one of these mighty lords but has praised the beauty of your wife, save Graelent only, who makes a mock of her. Always has he held me in envy and despite.”

The King commanded Graelent to his throne, and in the hearing of all bade the knight to tell, on his faith as vassal to his liege, for what reason he had hid his face and laughed.

“Sire,” answered Graelent to the King, “sire, hearken to my words. In all the world no man of your lineage does so shameful a deed as this. You make your wife a show upon a stage. You force your lords to praise her just with lies, saying that the sun does not shine upon her peer. One man will tell the truth to your face, and say that very easily can be found a fairer dame than she.”

Right heavy was the King when he heard these words. He conjured Graelent to tell him straightly if he knew a daintier dame.

“Yes, sire, and thirty times more gracious than the Queen.”

The Queen was marvellously wrathful to hear this thing, and prayed her husband of his grace to compel the knight to bring that woman to the Court of whose beauty he made so proud a boast.

“Set us side by side, and let the choice be made between us. Should she prove the fairer, let him go in peace; but if not, let justice be done on him for his calumny and malice.”

So the King bade his guards to lay hands on Graelent, swearing that between them never should be love nor peace, nor should the knight issue forth from prison, until he had brought before him her whose beauty he had praised so much.

Graelent was held a captive. He repented him of his hasty words, and begged the King to grant him respite. He feared to have lost his friend, and sweated grievously with rage and mortification. But though many of the King's house pitied him in his evil case, the long days brought him no relief, until a full year went by, and once again the King made a great banquet to his barons and his lieges. Then was Graelent brought to hall, and put to liberty, on such terms that he would return bringing with him her whose loveliness he had praised before the King. Should she prove so desirable and dear as his boast, then all would be well, for he had nought to fear. But if he returned without his lady, then he must go to judgment, and his only hope would be in the mercy of the King.

Graelent mounted his good horse and parted from the Court, sad and wrathful. He sought his lodging, and inquired for his servant, but might not find him. He called upon his friend, but the lady did not heed his voice. Then Graelent gave way to despair, and preferred death to life. He shut himself within his chamber, crying upon his dear one for grace and mercy, but from her he got neither speech nor comfort. So, seeing that his love had withdrawn herself from him by reason of his grievous fault, he took no rest by night or day, and held his life in utter despite. For a full year he lived in this piteous case, so that it was marvellous to those about him that he might endure his life.

On the day appointed, the sureties brought Graelent where the King was set in hall with his lords. Then the King inquired of Graelent where was now his friend.

"Sire," answered the knight, "she is not here, for in no wise might I find her. Now do with me according to your will."

"Sir Graelent," said the King, "very foully have you spoken. You have slandered the Queen, and given all my lords the lie. When you go from my hands never will you do more mischief with your tongue."

Then the King spoke with a high voice to his barons.

"Lords, I pray and command you to give judgment in this matter. You heard the blame that Graelent set upon me before all my Court. You know the deep dishonour that he fastened on the Queen. How may such a disloyal vassal deal honestly with his lord, for as the proverb tells, 'Hope not for friendship from the man who beats your dog!'"

The lords of the King's household went out from before him, and gathered themselves together to consider their judgment. They kept silence for a great space, for it was grievous to them to deal harshly with so valiant a knight. Whilst they thus refrained from words a certain page hastened unto them, and prayed them not to press the matter, for (said he) "even now two young maidens, the freshest maids in all the realm, seek the Court. Perchance they bring succour to the good knight, and, so it be the will of God, may deliver him from peril." So the lords waited right gladly, and presently they saw two damsels come riding to the palace. Very young were these maidens, very slender and gracious, and daintily cloaked in two fair mantles. So when the pages had hastened to hold their stirrup and bridle, the maidens dismounted from their palfreys, and entering within the hall came straight before the King.

"Sire," said one of the two damsels, "hearken now to me. My lady commands us to pray you to put back this cause for a while, nor to deliver judgment therein, since she comes to plead with you for the deliverance of this knight."

When the Queen heard this message she was filled with shame, and made speed to get her from the hall. Hardly had she gone than there entered two other damsels, whiter and more sweetly flushed even than their fellows. These bade the King to wait for a little since their mistress was now at hand. So all men stared upon them, and praised their great beauty, saying that if the maids were so fair, what then must be the loveliness of the dame. When, therefore, the demoiselle came in her turn, the King's household stood upon their feet to give her greeting. Never did woman show so queenly to men's sight as did this lady riding to the hall. Passing sweet she was to see, passing simple and gracious of manner, with softer eyes and a daintier face than girl of mother born. The whole Court marvelled at her beauty, for no spot or blemish might be found in her body. She was richly dressed in a kirtle of vermeil silk, brodered with gold, and her mantle was worth the spoil of a king's castle. Her palfrey was of good race, and speedy; the harness and trappings upon him were worth a thousand livres in minted coin. All men pressed about her, praising her face and person, her simplicity and queenlihead. She came at a slow pace before the King, and dismounting from the palfrey, spoke very courteously in this fashion—

“Sire,” said she, “hearken to me, and you, lord barons, give heed to my pleading. You know the words Graelent spake to the King, in the ears of men, when the Queen made herself a show before the lords, saying that often had he seen a fairer lady. Very hasty and foolish was his tongue, since he provoked the King to anger. But at least he told the truth when he said that there is no dame so comely but that very easily may be found one more sweet than she. Look now boldly upon my face, and judge you rightly in this quarrel between the Queen and me. So shall Sir Graelent be acquitted of this blame.”

Then gazing upon her, all the King’s household, lord and lackey, prince and page, cried with one voice that her favour was greater than that of the Queen. The King himself gave judgment with his barons that this thing was so; therefore was Sir Graelent acquitted of his blame, and declared a free man.

When judgment was given the lady took her leave of the King, and attended by her four damsels departed straightway from the hall upon her palfrey. Sir Graelent caused his white horse to be saddled, and mounting, followed hotly after her through the town. Day after day he rode in her track, pleading for pity and pardon, but she gave him neither good words nor bad in answer. So far they fared that at last they came to the forest, and taking their way through a deep wood rode to the bank of a fair, clear stream. The lady set her palfrey to the river, but when she saw that Graelent also would enter therein she cried to him—

“Stay, Graelent, the stream is deep, and it is death for you to follow.”

Graelent took no heed to her words, but forced his horse to enter the river, so that speedily the waters closed above his head. Then the lady seized his bridle, and with extreme toil brought horse and rider back again to land.

“Graelent,” said she, “you may not pass this river, however mightily you pain yourself, therefore must you remain alone on this shore.”

Again the lady set her palfrey to the river, but Graelent could not suffer to see her go upon her way without him. Again he forced his horse to enter the water; but the current was very swift and the stream was very deep, so that presently Graelent was torn from his saddle, and being borne away by the stream came very nigh to drown. When the

four maidens saw his piteous plight they cried aloud to their lady, and said—

“Lady, for the love of God, take pity on your poor friend. See how he drowns in this evil case. Alas, cursed be the day you spake soft words in his ear, and gave him the grace of your love. Lady, look how the current hurries him to his death. How may your heart suffer him to drown whom you have held so close! Aid him, nor have the sin on your soul that you endured to let the man who loved you die without your help.”

When the lady heard the complaint of her maidens, no longer could she hide the pity she felt in her heart. In all haste she turned her palfrey to the river, and entering the stream clutched her lover by the belt. Thus they won together to the bank. There she stripped the drowned man of his raiment, and wrapping him fast in her own dry mantle cherished him so meetly that presently he came again to life. So she brought him safely into her own land, and none has met Sir Graelent since that day.

But the Breton folk still hold firmly that Graelent yet liveth with his friend. His destrier, when he escaped him from the perilous river, grieved greatly for his master’s loss. He sought again the mighty forest, yet never was at rest by night or day. No peace might he find, but ever pawed he with his hoofs upon the ground, and neighed so loudly that the noise went through all the country round about. Many a man coveted so noble a steed, and sought to put bit and bridle in his mouth, yet never might one set hands upon him, for he would not suffer another master. So each year in its season, the forest was filled with the cry and the trouble of this noble horse which might not find its lord.

This adventure of the good steed and of the stout knight, who went to the land of Faery with his love, was noised abroad throughout all Brittany, and the Bretons made a lay thereof which was sung in the ears of many people, and was called a Lay of the Death of Sir Graelent.