

Renaut

Ignaurés

translated by

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One who loves should never conceal it, but rather should utter some fine words from which others may learn and receive a good example. I may benefit and have honor from it, but I won't get rich from it! Sense and wisdom, gold and silver—people no longer understand such things. Gifts are now taken and put away, and no one will get any recompense any more. Wisdom which is covered up is lost: but that which is shown and revealed can take root and grow everywhere.

And so I would like to begin a romance and tell of a very strange adventure which happened long ago in Brittany, to a knight of great power who surely ought to be remembered. This knight's name was Ignaurés, and he was very illustrious. He was born in the land of Hoel at the noble castle of Riol. His rank was not very high, but he achieved so much by his prowess that no knight in all the land was as worthy. There never will be a more joyful man. At the very beginning of May, he would rise at dawn, taking along five jongleurs, flute players, and pipers. Out to the woods this young man would go, welcoming May with great clamor! He was very fond of such enjoyment, and took part in it every day. True love had possessed and inflamed him: the ladies called him "Charming Lousignol."

Twelve peers assigned to the court dwelt in the castle at Riol. They were bold and prudent knights, well-provided with lands and income, and each one had a lovely, noble wife of high lineage and from a great family. Ignaurés, who had a noble heart, came to know all twelve; each one promised him all her love, just as he pleased, saying that if he wished anything of her, he would be treated like a count. Each one thought he was hers, and so they were all happy and amiable. Ignaurés acquitted himself very well: when he visited one of them, he forgot all the others and gave no sign that he desired anyone else. He led a very courtly life. When tournaments were held, he went to seek fame, along with twenty

or even thirty knights. Yet he had very little income: everyone was astonished, but the ladies gave so much to him, for they were filled with delight. Ignaurés was quite a young man!

He loved them all for more than a year, until one Saint John's Day—a feast which delights all living creatures—it happened that all twelve of the noble ladies went out to relax in a orchard. No one was there except those twelve. One of them was very eager to say what she was thinking (and damn whoever tried to restrain her from what she wanted to say!).

“You know, there is something that I could say, and I'm sure you will grant it when you hear the reason.”

“Say whatever you want, for we will all permit you.”

“We ladies are happy, lovely, noble, and worthy, the wives of the peers of this castle: and we are very happy. All of us are in love, and this is an especially joyful day. Let us make one of us our priest. Let her go and sit here in the middle by this flowering tree. Then each of us must go and tell her whom she loves, as if in confession, and to whom she has given the gift. In this way, we will know surely which of us loves most nobly.”

All of them replied, “That's well said. We agree without contradiction. You yourself will be the priest and hear the confessions. Go sit down beside that tree.”

“I agree,” the gentle lady said.

One of them, clothed in a rich tunic and a gray mantle, rose, came to the priest, and laughed.

“What do you seek?” the master said.

“I come to confess, Sir Priest.”

“Then sit down and tell me—and be careful that you don't lie—what is the name of your lover?”

“He is the most illustrious knight in this whole empire. Do you know who I mean? The most handsome man that you know, Ignaurés, the bold, the wise—he's the one to whom I've given myself.”

The priest blushed when she heard the woman name her lover (she herself was the one who loved him best). She could barely control herself: “Lady, now let the others come. I have heard your affirmation.”

Another then came up, beating her breast with her right hand.

“Go easy on your spine, sweet sister! Who made you commit the sins with which your body is stained?”

“Sir, I have come for correction.”

“I order you in penitence to tell me your lover’s name, dear friend.”

“Certainly, I will not lie. I can name to you the most courtly man from here to Vermandois, the prettiest and the most well bred.”

“You value him very highly! I do not know if you have the evidence.”

“By my faith! You are mistaken! His name is Ignaurés, the noble.”

The priest’s blood was stirred when she heard her mentioned the man she thought she held in pledge. “Lady, go and sit down over there.”

A beautiful, worthy and joyful lady came forward. “Sit down, wise lady.” When she had made her sit, she ordered her to reveal the name of her lover, insisting that she tell the truth.

“He is the noblest of men, the most courtly, the most dutiful, without any trace of dishonor. You will know the name of the one to whom I have completely given myself. He really ought to be a king or a count. I can name him, for he is the best of men: Ignaurés, the flower of nobility.”

When the priest heard her, she crossed herself, and her face grew pale. “Lady, now go back and sit down. You have a handsome and noble lover.”

Another lady stepped forth courteously, dressed regally in silk from Constantinople. She had a ring on her finger. When she heard a bird warbling in the tree, she kissed and fondled the ring. “Lady,” said the priest, “sit down. I believe you don’t hate the one whose ring that was!”

She replied, “He should be a count!”

“Then name him, since he is so noble.”

“It is Ignaurés, the flower of nobility.”

When she heard this, she almost went out of her mind: her face turned fiery red. “Now lady, go back and sit down.”

Then another pretty lady came forward; she was polished and beautiful. “Tell me, lady, what is the name of the one who has the gift of your heart?”

“The land resounds with his name. People ought to call it out when it thunders, so lightning will not strike them.”

“You’re wrong,” said the priest. “You’ve said his name often enough, but that didn’t prevent a certain bolt from striking you! His name will never save you or deflect such lightning bolts.”

“May God bring blows like that back to me! I won’t complain of their great number.”

“Lady, let’s drop this matter; tell me his name, sweet sister.”

“Ignaurés, the man with the noble heart, before whom all Brittany trembles.”

The priest smiled in spite of herself, marveling at this man that each of the ladies named. None of them mentioned anyone else!

When they had all confessed, they gathered before the priest: “Lady, tell us now, who do you think has the most valiant lover?”

“To tell the truth, each of you has told me the name the same knight! He has dishonored us all! For I love him also, just as all of you do! By God! This is an evil deed! Ignaurés has taken on a case that will cost him dearly, without delay!”

“How can we take vengeance for it?”

“We will all agree that the first woman he visits will grant him a meeting with her—and with all of us!—in the orchard, without delay. We will make the day known, and we will all be there, without fail. Everyone should bring a sharp knife! Cruel vengeance will be taken for his mad and wicked audacity against us.”

They all agreed to this plan, and then they left the garden and went their ways. Every one of them felt pain in her heart.

Ignaurés, who knew nothing of this plot, went to visit one of them. He kissed and embraced her, but he couldn’t go all the way. “Lady, why are you so cold toward me?”

“Sir, I am not cold at all. Right now you are pressuring me, but I want you to promise that you will come and speak with me on Sunday, in my lady Climenche’s garden; there you can do what you desire.”

“Lady,” he said, “at your pleasure. I will follow your commands.” He quickly took his leave. The noble knight was doomed to die, unless he caught on, or good fortune prevented him from returning!

This lady had the others warned, and on the next Sunday they all hid in the orchard, with good knives concealed under their mantles. The one who had arranged the treachery came into the orchard. Ignaurés saw his

mistress. He had come by another path, accompanied by a servant, who carried all the messages for him and looked after his finances. The lady had left the gate open, and the brave man went straight in. Before he left again, he would suffer!

The lady came to meet him, and he sent his messenger back to his lodgings: he didn't care to have him watch! She closed and locked the gate; softly and quietly, they went and sat down under a tree. The lady embraced the young man and he gently kissed her. She didn't want to allow him any other pleasure, for her desire was rather weak.

The ladies who had loved the handsome, happy knight rushed out from all sides, inflamed with anger and rage.

"My lady," he said, "is this a trap? You've caught me in your ambush!"

They went to where he was sitting and surrounded him. Igaurés spoke to them and said, "Welcome!"

"But you," they said, "are ill come. It is only right for you to pay for your outrages! Before you leave this place you will get the reward of a false and disloyal traitor!"

The priestess spoke first: "Please, I beg you, allow me to speak my mind; then each of you can say what she wants. Igaurés, do not lie to me. For many a day I have been your love. I gave my heart to you."

"Lady, I am your lover, your man, and your knight, with all my heart and soul."

One of them rose disdainfully and spoke to him proudly: "Igaurés, you are a faithless lover! What? Aren't you my lover?"

"Yes lady, so help me God! My heart and my love have never failed you, and I will never fail you, as long as I live."

Another one was envious and looked at him cruelly: "Ah! Evil traitor! You don't say this to me! So, do you love someone other than me? You were supposed to be all mine, on your oath!"

"Lady, I love you, truly, and will always love you: it can't be denied!"

"What?" said another. "What are you saying? Didn't you promise to love me?"

"Yes, with all my strength, you and all the others. I love you all, have no doubt. I love their solace and their delight."

Then you could have heard a great clamor, women fighting and quarrelling, menacing the good vassal. They drew the knives which they had hidden. "Ignaurés, you have sinned so much that you are surely dead, and no one but God can save you!"

"Ladies, don't be so cruel as to commit such a great sin! Even if I had my helmet laced on and I were riding an Arabian steed, with a shield at my neck and a lance in my hand, I would dismount here and throw myself on your mercy. If I die at such lovely hands, I will be a martyr, with the saints! Now I know I was blessed at my birth."

When they heard him, each one wept. The knight's fine speech had softened them completely. The lady had heard the confessions said, "Ladies, if you please, let us agree that you will do my bidding."

"We grant you this, since it pleases you."

"Ignaurés, you deceived us well until we discovered it. We will not love you like this any more; it is our considered decision that the lady who pleases you most should be yours and remain so. Every woman wants to have her own lover."

"I wouldn't do that, not for anything! I will still love you all, just as I have done up to now."

"Obey my command," said the priest, "or, by my head, you will die now! Choose the one of us you want."

"Lady," he said, "it is you. I am saddened by my loss, for they are all very worthy; but your love is dear to me."

"Thank you very much," the gentle lady said. The others were very unhappy, but nevertheless they swore that they would not love him any more and would leave him in peace. When they had settled their affairs, each one went to her lodgings again, and Ignaurés returned to the town.

Now you must know that Ignaurés had to visit his mistress often: if he had still had all of them, he wouldn't have done so, but now he had only one path. He visited her often, no matter who saw him, and by going too often he was discovered and destroyed: the mouse that has only one hole doesn't last very long! I don't know how it happened, but what the foolish women had confessed to each other when they were sitting in the orchard became known. There was a cruel and talkative slanderer in the castle. This woman, who was foolishly trying to cover

her tracks often went there, and this slanderer eventually discovered what she was doing. Once he knew, it wasn't kept hidden.

One day the twelve peers all came to eat together. It seems this wretch went there, and before he leaves the house, he will tell a story to anger even the noblest among them! The traitor began to speak, laughed, and made the sign of the cross on his forehead.

"What are you laughing at, knave? This is a poor beginning! I know what you're up to. You're preparing some slander!"

"By my faith," he said, "I see something so marvelous that I can hardly tell you. I can't keep from laughing."

"May God help you! Is it something about us?"

"Yes, by God. It's about all of you."

"Tell the truth. We're ready."

"I will, if I get something worthwhile from it!"

"You'll get something, don't be afraid."

"If I could have some formal assurance, I would tell you, by Saint Germain!"

One of them said, "I will undertake it, and see that you get what you want."

"Lords, if I tell you the truth about an affair—and I am absolutely certain about it—will you do me no harm or injury?"

"Not at all. We won't say a word against you."

"You have all been cuckolded, by a single man! I swear to it, as surely as I see you here. But one of you is the greatest cuckold of all."

When they heard this, they shook with rage at this vile reproach. "Is he a townsman or a knight? Tell us his name!"

"It's been well hidden. The name of the vassal who has been acting so improperly is Ignaurés." He told them the whole adventure of the orchard and the confessions and how the infuriated women wanted to carve him up with their knives. "Then the young man was terrified, because he was very close to death. They asked him to choose the one who pleased him best, and she remained alone with him while the others went away. They would never love him again. Whether he wanted to or not, that's what happened. He chose one of your wives, the most beautiful and the wisest; and I know which one of you is her master."

"Whose wife is it? Do you know?"

He said to one of them, "It's yours!"

The man replied, infuriated, "By God! Since I am her lord, I must be much more worthy than the rest of you!"

When the meal was over he swore to them that he wouldn't tell anyone else about this affair. They gave him his reward at once and he took his leave. The others remained, and lamented over their shame to each other. "There will be trouble in this castle if we can't avenge ourselves: we're sorry wretches indeed."

"I agree," said one. If you will follow my scheme we will have full vengeance for it. There will be no point in setting spies, since he has abandoned them all except the one he visits often. If her husband will agree with us to watch where he goes, he could easily catch him."

"That's well said," they all agreed. The husband, trembling with rage, said he certainly would watch for him. "And then, sir, let us know when you have captured him. We will all come and avenge ourselves of our shame." They all agreed to this plot.

They returned to their lodgings, anxious to punish Ignaurés, who had no idea he would have to answer a charge. Full of happiness, he was enjoying himself in the castle, right in front of his mortal enemies. The man whose wife he loved spied on him day and night, to trap him. If he could surprise him with his wife, he would keep his pledge to all the others!

Ignaurés went too often to enjoy himself with his mistress: but the mouse that has only one hole is soon trapped and caught. He was surprised one morning lying with the lady. The lord who was master of them all discovered it through his spy. He knew all the layout of his house, and entered the stone-walled chamber through an underground vault, with his helmet laced on and his sword drawn. He found Ignaurés, who was not on guard, making love. "Aha!" he said. "You should not be here!"

"My lord," answered Ignaurés, "for God's sake, mercy! You see how things are. I have sinned grievously against you. There's no point in denying or hiding it."

The lord had two young gentlemen with him, who were his nephews. They wanted to cut Ignaurés up, but the lord told them not to, but said they would have a better revenge. "You will not kill him, by my soul!"

Then the lord called to his wife: "Lady, you must bathe our lover here, and then you will have him bled. Be sure your lord has white sheets!" The lady tore her hair, filled with great sorrow.

Then the lord led Ignaurés away and had him secretly guarded in a stone-floored chamber by people in whom he felt most confidence. He promised to bring him pain and shame: his dinner will be poor indeed! Then he had the other peers informed of what he had accomplished.

The lady was in great torment; and she had the other ladies informed of all that had befallen her and how she had been surprised with Ignaurés: "I don't even know if he is dead or alive! Each one of you had what she wanted from him: now help me to make my lament. Just as we all had joy together, let our grief be shared as well." They all promised the messenger that they would never eat again until they could find out for sure if he were alive or dead. Then they began to fast.

Meanwhile the lord gathered all of his companions secretly. They took counsel to decide what sentence they could impose on the man who had caused them such shame and dishonor. One said, "Those filthy sluts have all agreed to fast until such time as they know whether he will die or escape. In four days, let us remove from the vassal that vile member whose delights used to please them: let it be made into a meal, and we'll put his heart in too! We'll prepare twelve bowls and trick them into eating it. There is no better way to avenge ourselves."

They all agreed to this plan, and dismembered the good knight. As they had agreed, they prepared the food and divided it among the twelve fasting ladies. Each of them was eased in her heart when she had swallowed that fine sweet food! Their lords had wheedled and pleaded with them enough to make them eat and drink, and they did not disdain it. When their spirits had revived, each one begged her husband to tell her truly, for the love of God, if he was free from prison.

The one who had caught him in his house replied, "Lady priestess, you were his mistress. You have eaten your great desire, that which gave you such pleasure; for you wanted nothing else. Finally you have been well served! I killed, I destroyed your lover, and you have all shared in the delight of that thing for which a woman hungers most. Are you satisfied now, the twelve of you? Now we're well avenged for our shame!"

The lady immediately fainted, and on reviving, sighed and wept. She hated death, because it did not come; she cared for nothing that she saw. She sent word to her companions, informing them about the meal: she told them all about the food which they had boldly eaten. They all made a vow to God that they would never eat again, no matter what fine dishes they were offered. So they spoke, and they fulfilled it well.

As long as they lived, they all lamented. One lamented his beauty, his handsome, well-formed members, and how they were destroyed, even that loveliest one! Thus they spoke of the young man. Another lamented his great courage, his noble body, and his generosity. The fourth lamented his flanks and his gray-green, laughing eyes. Another lamented his sweet heart. There would never be another one of such worth. "Alas! How we have changed you! The jealous men took vengeance too cruelly! But we will not eat; in this way we will avenge ourselves." Another lamented his fine feet which sat so nicely in his stirrups. He was more skilled at hunting with hounds and hawks than anyone—and so full of delight. Each one lamented the loss of her pleasure: who was as gratifying as he? Everyone who heard their laments wept for them. These gentle ladies would not eat, neither for the sake of their friends or their kinsfolk. They could not forget their lover. They grew weak, they wrung their hands, they sighed, they cried and they lamented.

The twelve of them mourned together; and twelve verses has this lay, which should be remembered, for the story is completely true. Renaut is a witness that Iгнаурés, the good vassal, died. Those who were his mistresses died for love of him. May God have mercy on their souls, both on the ladies and the knights.

And blessed be the lady who caused it to be composed, this lay which should please lovers. She has bound me so tightly that I can never be released. She has a long, full white neck with no bone or wrinkle to be seen. She is simple and polished and whiter than new-fallen snow. You will not have any more explicit words about her; the rest of her body is covered up, and love's chain is all the better for that! But I don't think I am one who can say the truth about it, although from the outside I do see her little breasts raise up her tunic from underneath, making it jut out ever so slightly, for they seem to be quite firm. She has lovely shoulders, long hands and slender fingers, lovely arms in her sleeves. She is a little

wider in the hips and slim of waist. She carries herself well, and is neither too small nor too large. Her appearance suits her marvelously well. She is love's chain itself! You should know that by this chain the lady can lead me wherever she wants. I am in a sweet prison and have no desire to escape through ransom.

That is the story of the lay, and now I will bring it to a close for you here. Frenchmen, Poitevins, and Bretons call it "The Lay of the Prisoner." It was composed for Ighaurés, who was dismembered for love.

Source: Renaut [de Beaujeu], *Le lai d'Ighaure ou Lai du Prisonnier*, ed. Rita Lejeune (Brussels, Palais des Académies, 1938).