

Thomas Chestre

# Sir Launfal

translated by  
James Weldon

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In the days of mighty Arthur, who held England in good laws, there befell a marvellous adventure, about which a lay was composed that was called *Launfal*—and is still so called. Now listen to how it went!

Mighty Arthur sojourned for some time at Cardiff<sup>1</sup> with joy and great disport, and with him were his worthy knights of the Round Table—there were never any better knights! Sir Perceval and Sir Gawain, Sir Gaheris and Sir Agravain—and Lancelot du Lake; Sir Kay and Sir Yvain, who could well fight and participate in battles, King Banbooght<sup>2</sup>, and King Bos of wide fame, Sir Galafre and Sir Launfal, about whom this tale is told.

With Arthur, then, there was this young knight, Launfal, who had stayed with him for many years. He gave gifts generously—gold, silver, and rich garments—to squires and knights, and because of his largesse and generosity, he was made the king's steward, holding that post for ten years. Of all the knights of the Round Table, none was so generous as Sir Launfal.

It befell that in the tenth year Merlin, the king's counselor, advised Arthur to go to King Ryon of Ireland and fetch from him his beautiful and noble daughter Guenevere; Arthur did as Merlin counselled and brought Guenevere home. Launfal and other noble knights, however, did not like her, for the lady had a reputation for having lovers besides her lord too numerous to count. Nevertheless, Arthur and Guenevere were married on Whitsunday before all the noble company of the realm and beyond; truly, no one could calculate the numerous countries and principalities represented. Nobody was seated in the hall unless he were a prelate or baronet, and even if they were not all equals, their array was always good and rich. When the lords had finished their meal and the table linen taken up, you might well imagine that the butlers served wine to all those present with happy cheer! The Queen distributed gifts for the

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occasion—gold, silver and precious stones—in order to display her courtesy. To each knight she gave either a brooch or ring, but to Sir Launfal she gave nothing, and that grieved him deeply. When the wedding feast had ended, Launfal went to Arthur, saying that he had received a letter announcing the death of his father and that he must depart for the funeral. Arthur, who was most noble, said: “Launfal, if you must depart from me, take many costly gifts with you. My two nephews, my sister’s sons, will accompany you there and back again.”

So Launfal took leave, truly, of the knights of the Round Table and went forth on his journey until he came to Caerleon<sup>3</sup>, where he proceeded to the house of the mayor, who had once been his servant. The mayor saw him approach with his two knights and his retinue and strode forward to meet him: “Sir, you are welcome. How fares it with our King, tell me?” Launfal answered: “He fares as well as any man; otherwise, it would be lamentable. But, Sir Mayor, in truth I have left the service of the King, and that grieves me very much. Certainly no man, noble or otherwise, will esteem me again for the love of King Arthur. Sir Mayor, I pray you as a true friend, may I lodge with you? We have known each other for a long time.” The mayor stood still for a moment in order to consider what answer he might give. Then he said, “Sir, seven knights from Brittany have lodged here, and I constantly wait upon their return.” Launfal turned to his knights and laughed, scornfully, “Now can you see what service is due to a lord of little worth and what gratitude he may expect!” With that Launfal began to ride away, but the mayor asked him to wait, and said, “Sir, you may lodge comfortably in a chamber beside my orchard, if it suits you.” Thus Launfal and his two knights dwelled there together for some time, but Launfal savagely<sup>4</sup> spent what wealth he had in first year to the point that he fell into great debt.

It happened that at Pentecost, the time when the Holy Ghost descends upon humanity, Sir Hugh and Sir John, his two knights, took leave of Launfal, saying, “Sir, our robes are all ragged, your wealth has been spent, and we are ill-clothed.” Sir Launfal responded, “Tell no one about my poverty, for the love of Almighty God!” The knights answered

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that for all the world they would never betray him, and so they departed and went to Glastonbury, where King Arthur was at that time. Upon seeing the noble knights, Arthur came forth to meet them, for they were his kinsmen. He saw that they were in the same robes, now worn and ragged, in which they had gone away. Then said the cruel Queen Guenevere: "How fares the proud knight Launfal? Can he still wield his weapons?" "Yes, madam," said the knights. "He fares as well as any man—and may God prevent any change to the contrary!" And then they told to King Arthur and Queen Guenevere much that was worthy and honourable of Launfal, and said: "He loved us so much that he would have kept us with him forever, but it happened that he went hunting in the grey woods on a rainy day; and so we wore our old clothes and came away just as we were." King Arthur rejoiced that Launfal prospered, but the Queen was sorely vexed, for with all her heart she wished him, day and night, that he were in ever-increasing torment.

Upon the feast of Trinity, a stately banquet was held in Caerleon. Earls, barons, ladies and burgesses of the city, both young and old, came to that assembly from all throughout the land; but Launfal was not invited, because of his poverty and because men spoke poorly of him. When the mayor had set off to the feast, his daughter came to Launfal, and asked if he would dine with her that day in her father's hall. "No, damsel," he said. "I have no heart to dine. I have neither eaten nor drunk for these past three days because of my poverty. I wanted to go to church today, but I lacked shoes, stockings, a clean shirt and trousers, and so for default of clothing, I could not mingle in public. Can you wonder if I am sad? But one thing, damsel, I pray; lend me saddle and bridle that I may ride awhile this morning in a meadow outside the city, and so comfort myself somewhat." He saddled his horse, without the assistance of knave or squire, and he rode dejected out of town. His horse slipped and fell in the mud, and many men mocked him. He remounted quickly and spurred away in order to escape their gawking. He rode towards the west. The weather was hot that morning, so he dismounted in the shade of a fair forest, and, folding his mantle, sat down to rest under a tree where it seemed most pleasant.

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As he sat there depressed and sorrowful, he saw two gentle maidens emerge from the grey woods. Their gowns were of silk from India, laced narrowly, prettily, and neatly. No women were more beautiful or fashionably dressed. Their mantles were of green velvet, embroidered in gold in wonderful patterns, and trimmed with grey fur. Their heads were richly adorned, each with a gay coronal of sixty gems or more. Their faces were as white as snow on the downs, their complexions red, and they had brown eyes. I never saw their like! One carried a gold basin; the other, a fine milk-white towel of good, rich silk. Their bright kerchiefs were arrayed with splendid gold thread. Launfal began to sigh as they approached him over the heath, but as he was ever courteous, he went towards them in order to greet them properly. "Maidens," he said, "May God watch over you!" "Sir knight, they answered, "Well may you be! Our Lady, Dame Tryamour, requests you to come and speak with her, if that is acceptable to you, and not tarry here any longer." Launfal quickly granted the request courteously and went with the flower-white maidens until they came to a pavilion in the forest. Launfal saw that it was splendid. It was truly the work of Saracens; the pommels were all of crystal and upon the top stood an eagle of fine burnished gold decorated with rich enamel. Its eyes were bright carbuncles which shone by night as brightly as the moon that sheds her rays over all. Neither Alexander the conqueror, nor King Arthur at the height of his glory, had ever such a jewels!

In the pavilion he found Dame Tryamour, daughter of the King of Olyroun<sup>5</sup>, king of all the fairies of the Occident, and a man of great power. Launfal discovered there a magnificent bed covered with purple linen, splendid to behold; and therein lay that that gentle and lovely lady who had sent for him. Because of the heat, she had put down her clothes almost to her girdle; and as she lay uncovered, Launfal perceived that she was as white as a lily in May, or snow that falls in the winter. Never had he seen so charming and attractive a woman. The red rose, new-blossomed, could not compare with her rosy complexion, I swear! Her hair shone like threads of gold. No human being could possibly do justice to her attire or even perceive it clearly in his mind!

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“Launfal,” she said, “my sweet darling. All my joy I willingly abandon for you, my precious dear. There is no man in all Christendom, neither king nor emperor, that I love so well as you!” Launfal looked at that sweet creature and kissed her, and all his love went out to her. Sitting down by her side, he said: “Sweetheart, whatsoever befall, I am at your service!” “Gentle and gracious Knight,” she said, “I know all about your condition, from first to last, so do not be not ashamed before me! If you will love me truly, and forsake all other women for me, I will make you rich. I will give you a purse of silk and clear gold, with three fair images upon it; as often as you put your hand into it, wherever you are, you will find therein a gold coin. Also, I give you my loyal steed, Blaunchard, and Gyfre, my personal servant; and you shall have a small banner bearing my arms of three emblazoned ermines. Further you shall suffer no wound in war or in tournament, for no knight’s blow shall hurt you, so well shall I protect you.” “Thank you, my sweet creature,” answered the gentle knight. “I have never received anything better than this!”

The damsel then arose and commanded her maidens to bring clear water for her hands, and it was done at once. The cloth was laid, the table set, and they went to dine. They had the best meat and drink, spiced wines such as Piment and Claret, as well as Rhenish—how could it be otherwise! When they had supped, and the day was gone, they soon went to bed. They slept little that night, such was their amorous joy!

When it was dawn, Tryamour told him to rise. “Forgive me, gentle Sir Knight,” she said. “If you will ever speak with me—at any time—go to some secret place, and I will come to you in private, as silent as a stone, so that no man alive shall see me.” Then Launfal was so happy that he could not have expressed his joy; he kissed her many times. She said to him: “But of one thing, Sir Knight, I warn you; you must never boast of me for any reason whatever, for if you do, I warn you clearly, you have lost all my love.”

Launfal took his leave to depart. Gyfre brought him his steed, and so he sprang into the saddle and rode home to Caerleon, still in his poor garments. In his heart he was happy, and all the morning he remained

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quiet in his chamber. Then ten well-dressed men on ten pack horses came riding through the city, some with silver, some with gold, some with splendid garments and bright armour, which they brought as gifts to Sir Launfal. They asked where the knight Launfal dwelled. The young men were clad in Indian silk, and Gyfre rode behind them on Blaunchar, the flower-white horse. Then a boy in the market-place said: "How far are all these things going? Tell us, please." And Gyfre answered: "They are sent as a present to Sir Launfal, who has been living in great poverty." Then said the boy: "Why, he is nothing but a wretch! Who cares anything about him? He dwells at the mayor's house."

At the mayor's house, they dismounted, and presented the noble knight the things sent to him. When the mayor saw all that richness and Sir Launfal's great estate, he considered himself slighted, and said: "Sir, for charity, dine with me in my hall today. Yesterday I had intended that we should be at the feast together and have joy and mirth, but before I could invite you, you were gone!" "May God reward you, Sir Mayor," answered Launfal. "When I was poor, you never invited me once to dinner, and now my friends have sent me more gold and wealth than belongs to you and your entire social circle!" And the mayor went away for very shame.

Launfal now dressed himself in purple furred with white ermine; and Gyfre calculated the sum of his former debts and paid them in full. Launfal held great feasts, fed fifty poor guests who were in misfortune, bought fifty strong steeds, gave fifty rich garments to knights and squires, rewarded fifty men of religion, liberated fifty poor prisoners and made them free of legal claims, clothed fifty minstrels, and did honour to many men, in countries far and near.

The lords of Caerleon organized a tournament in the town for love of Sir Launfal, and for Blaunchar his good steed; they wanted to know how so fair and well-equipped a knight should do in the games. And when the day of the tournament arrived, the lords of the castle rode out in full procession to the sound of trumpets. The jousting began, and every knight laid good blows on every other, with both maces and swords. Men might there see horses won and lost, and knights enraged

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in battle. Never was held a better tournament since the Round Table first was ordained, I dare well say.

Many a lord of Caerleon that day was overcome. The mighty Constable himself could no longer hold back, truly, but rode up to Launfal and smote at him, and so Launfal returned the blow. Each gave the other stern, grim strokes. Launfal had him in his sights and bore him to the ground; and when he was down, Gyfre leaped into his saddle and rode away. When the Earl of Chester saw that, he was near berserk for wrath, and riding up to Sir Launfal, smote him on his helmet so that his crest flew away—so says the French tale. But Launfal was so strong that he unhorsed the earl and bore him down into the dust. Then a great number of Welsh knights surrounded Launfal (I can't say exactly how many). There men might see shields riven, spears split and splintered, behind and before, but Launfal and his steed cast many a knight to the ground. So the prize of the tournament went to Launfal that day, without oath-taking.<sup>6</sup> Afterwards he and many a lord rode to the mayor's house in Caerleon, and there he held a rich and splendid feast that lasted a fortnight. Multitudes of earls and barons were set seemly in the hall and served royally. And every day Dame Tryamour came to Launfal's chamber at night, and no one saw her, except Gyfre and his lord.

Now there was a knight in Lombardy, called Sir Valentine, who was exceedingly envious of Sir Launfal. He had heard of Launfal's fame, that he could joust well and was a man of might. Sir Valentine himself was a powerful knight; he was fifteen feet tall, and he ardently desired to joust or fight with Launfal in the field—just the two of them. So, sitting in his hall, he called a messenger, and bade him go to Britain to this knight who bore such a reputation for prowess: "Say to him that for love of his lady, if she be gentle, courteous, free and kind, that he come to me in order to joust and keep his armour from rusting—otherwise, his very masculinity becomes forfeit."

The messenger went forth at his lord's bidding. He had the wind at his will, and when he came over the water, he took his way to Launfal, and greeted him with courteous words, and said: "Sir! my lord, Sir

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Valentine, a noble warrior and cunning of strategy, has sent me to you, and prays, for your lady's sake, that you joust with him." Now Launfal laughed quietly. He answered that in the name of chivalry he would joust with Sir Valentine in a fortnight's time, and he gave the messenger for his tidings a noble courser, a ring, and a robe of striped cloth.

He took leave of Tryamour, for that bright lady was even then in his chamber, and when he kissed her, she said: "Fear nothing, gentle sir knight! for you will slay him when you together meet." Launfal took nothing with him except Blaunchard, his steed, and no retinue but Gyfre, his servant. Then he went on board ship with a fair wind, and crossed the sea to Lombardy. He proceeded directly to the city of Atalye, where the jousts were to be held.

There Valentine awaited him with a great host, but Launfal, with his little company, soon stopped his boasting. When he was geared with helm and spear and shield, and mounted on Blaunchard, his light-footed steed, the folk that beheld him in his shining armour said they had never seen such a knight. Then the two then rode together, and their spears splintered and scattered in the field. They rode together a second time, and Sir Launfal's helmet slipped off, as the tale goes. Thereupon Sir Valentine laughed and made good sport. Launfal had never before been put to such shame in any fight, but Gyfre showed that he was good at need, for unseen by any man, he leaped on his master's horse, and before the two knights met again, he had set his lord's helmet on, fair and well-fitted. At this Launfal was glad and blithe, and thanked Gyfre heartily for his brave deed. Then Sir Valentine smote Launfal so that his shield fell from him, but before it touched the ground, Gyfre caught it up again and returned it to his lord. Then Launfal, rode again for the third time, and as a knight of great strength, he smote Sir Valentine so that both horse and man fell dead, groaning with a grisly wound.

All the lords of Atalye then were hostile towards Launfal for the death of Valentine, and swore that he should die before he should depart from Lombardy, and be hanged and drawn. Sir Launfal, however, unsheathed his sword, and in a little while laid them down as lightly as

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falls the dew. And when they were all slain, he returned to Britain with great mirth and rejoicing.

The tidings of Launfal's fame reached King Arthur, who immediately sent him a letter, truly, that he should come to court at St. John's Mass. For the king wished to hold a feast for all his nobles, great and small, and Launfal, known for his generosity, should be steward in the hall once more, and manage the great festivities. So he took leave of Tryamour, to go and superintend the king's feast. There he found much mirth and honour, ladies bright in bower, and a great company of knights. Forty days lasted the feast—rich, royal, and noble. At the end of that time, the lords took their leave to depart, each going his own way.

After the dinner, Sir Gawayn, Sir Gaheris and Agravain went with Sir Launfal to dance on the green beneath the tower where the Queen lay, with her sixty maidens and more. Launfal, who was loved the best of all for his ample generosity, was set to lead the dance. The Queen leaned forth and watched them. "I see," she said, "the generous Launfal dancing! I will go to him. Of all the knights that I see there, he is the fairest bachelor. He has never married. Whether for good or ill, I will go and know how he feels; I love him as my own life!" She took with her a company of the fairest ladies (sixty-five in all) and went down immediately to disport with the knights below—all this was done gracefully and quietly. The Queen herself went to the first of the line between Launfal and the noble Gawain, and after her came all the ladies to join in the dancing. It was pure joy to see lady and knight so amusing themselves! There were renowned minstrels, fiddlers, citole players and trumpeters (otherwise the party would have lacked something), and they danced, truly, after dinner for the rest of the day until it was almost night.

When the dancing subsided somewhat, the Queen whispered to Launfal and said, "Truly, Sir Knight, I have loved you passionately this seven-year period, and unless you love me, too, I shall surely die, Launfal, my sweetheart!" The gentle knight answered, "I shall never be a traitor, I swear by God who rules the stars!" Whereupon, Guenevere replied, "Fie on you, you coward! May you be hanged from the highest

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tree! It is a shame that you live, that you were ever born! You love no woman, nor does any woman love you. You deserve to die!" Launfal was bitterly ashamed at this, and could not forbear to speak, saying to the Queen: "For these last seven years I have loved a woman more beautiful than any you have ever beheld. Her least attractive servant, doubtless, might better be a queen than you, even in your youth!" The Queen was furious. She called her company of ladies, and in they went to the tower as quickly as they could. So enraged was Guenevere that she took to her bed; her wrath was so intense that she became ill, and she swore that as she lived she would be so revenged upon Launfal within five days that the whole country would speak of it.

King Arthur returned from hunting, blithe and glad, and went to his chamber. At once the Queen cried out to him: "Unless I am avenged, I shall die! My heart will break in three! I spoke to Launfal in jest and he shamefully desired me to be his lover! And he boasted that another woman's least attractive servant might deserve to be a queen more than me!" King Arthur was exceedingly angry and swore an oath that Launfal should be put to death. He commanded some of his strongest knights to fetch Launfal, so that he might be hanged and quartered. The knights searched for him, but Launfal had gone to his chamber for solace and company. He sought his beloved Tryamour, but she was not there, just as she had warned him previously. Then was Launfal miserable! He checked his purse that had always supplied money for spending whenever he had need—but it was empty. And Gyfre had ridden away upon his steed, Blauncharde. Everything that he had gained before had melted as snow before the sun, as the book says. His armour, once white as flour, now was black. Launfal cried, "Alas, my darling! How can I live apart from you, dearest Tryamour? All my joy I have lost and—worst of all—you, my beloved lady!" He struck his body and his head, too, and cursed the very mouth with which he spoke—so wrought with sorrow was he. In this distressed state he fainted and fell to the floor, just as four knights entered the chamber. They bound him and brought him before the King, doubling his agony.

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King Arthur said to him, "Vile, guilty traitor! Why did you boast so? You claimed that your beloved's most loathsome servant was more beautiful than my wife! What a foul lie! Further, you tried to force yourself upon her as a lover—what arrogant desire!" Launfal responded angrily, before the King where he stood, that the Queen had lied: "Ever since I was born I never before enticed her to folly. But she said that I was not a man, that I did not love women nor their company. I answered her and said that my beloved's most loathsome servant was worthier to be a queen more than she. Lords, I swear it is so. I am ready to do whatever the court wishes."

Twelve knights were appointed to study the case, truthfully, exactly as it happened. They consulted together and confessed among themselves that they knew the manners of the Queen. They accepted the premise that the Queen bore a reputation of having many lovers in addition to her lord and husband. None denied it. Thus they all said that the Queen and not Launfal was at fault, and they began to acquit him upon the condition that he produce the beloved of whom he had boasted or produce the servants whom he had claimed were more beautiful than the Queen. If he could not produce beloved or servants, however, he should be hanged as a thief. They were unanimous in their decision and they were unanimous in making the offer to Launfal that he should bring his lady before them. Launfal offered his head as assurance that he would obey, but the Queen, truly, said at this time: "If he can show us a more beautiful woman than me, then put out my grey eyes!"

With those conditions set, Launfal found two guarantors of his bail, the two noble knights Sir Perceval and Sir Gawain. They stood as assurance that Launfal would bring his fair beloved before the court within the span of a year and a fortnight. Sir Launfal, that noble knight, experienced both sorrow and care; he began to wring his hands, so great was the sorrow upon him. Such was his melancholy that he would gladly have given his life; he would have willingly have lost his head, and everyone who received the news shared in his grief.

As the appointed day drew near, his guarantors brought him before the King, who repeated the terms of the court and commanded him to

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bring his lady before them. Sir Launfal, deeply in sorrow, admitted that he could not; thereupon the King commanded the baronial court to sentence Launfal to death. One of the barons there, the Earl of Cornwall, objected, saying, "We do not wish to condemn Launfal thus. It would a reproach to us all to sentence such a noble and gracious gentleman. My lords, accept my advice and let us beseech our lord the King to seek another solution. Let Launfal be exiled instead!"

As the barons debated the case, ten beautiful maidens approached the castle on horseback. Everyone agreed that the least attractive among them might, without doubt, compete with their Queen. Then that courteous knight, Sir Gawain, said: "Launfal, dear brother, here comes your gracious lady," but Launfal answered, "My dear friend, Gawain, my sweet lady is not among them." To the castle the maidens rode. They dismounted at the castle gate, and proceeded to stand before King Arthur. They requested him to make ready a fair chamber for their Lady, who was of royal blood. "Who is your Lady," demanded Arthur. "You shall know soon enough," replied the maidens, "for she now comes!" King Arthur commanded that the fairest chamber in his castle be prepared, and then he turned to his barons, and resumed the trial, asking them to sentence that proud traitor, Launfal.

The barons, however, replied that until they would delay no longer after they had seen the beautiful maidens. A new debate rose then among them, and some argued for and others against Launfal. There were those who wanted to condemn him outright, while others pleaded for absolute acquittal. The debate was fierce. Suddenly they saw ten more maidens, each fairer than any of the maidens of the earlier group. They rode upon Spanish mules with bridles and saddles from Champagne, which glistened brightly. They were attired in samite, and all who watched them revelled in their sumptuous clothing. Gawain, that courteous knight, said to Launfal, "Here comes your sweet lady who can ease your pain!" but Launfal replied, "Alas, I know them not nor from whence they come." The maidens proceeded forth to the palace and dismounted before the high daïs where King Arthur sat. They greeted the King and Queen, and one of them said, "Prepare your hall, and cover

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the walls with rich cloths and drapes for the arrival of my Lady Tryamour!" The King answered at once, "Welcome, fair maidens, by our Lord the Saviour!" He commanded then Lancelot du Lake to bring them to the chamber with their companions with all mirth and ceremony. The Queen, however, suspected guile and worried lest Launfal's lady appear shortly and he acquitted and released. Thus, she said to Arthur quickly, "Sir, if you are a courteous lord and love your honour, I should be avenged of that traitor who cause me such grief. You should not spare Launfal—your barons love and favour him and therefore bring upon you humiliation with their delays." As she addressed the King, the barons saw approaching a lone damsel upon a beautiful white palfrey. Never had they seen a more attractive sight. The lady was as pretty as a bird upon the bough—in all senses lovely and fit to adorn any court or castle. With her gray eyes and fair complexion, she was as beautiful as a blossom on the briar and her entire countenance radiated light. Her cheeks were as red as the rose and the hair upon her head seemed as gold wire that shone brilliantly in the light. She wore a jewelled crown with rich gems that gleamed and she was dressed in a purple cloth that covered slender and small waist. A fashionable mantle trimmed with ermine and richly lined adorned her—none more chic or expensive might be found. Her saddle was tastefully decorated; her saddlecloth was made of green velvet, embellished with imagery, and the border adorned simply with bells, nothing else. In the saddlebows were two stones of India—exceedingly fine. The breast-trappings of her palfrey were alone worth the richest earldom in Lombardy. On her hand she had a falcon, and her palfrey paced slowly, so that all should have a chance to behold her. Through Caerleon rode that lady and two greyhounds with gold collars ran beside her.

When Launfal saw her, he cried loudly before all the people, "Here comes my sweet lady! She has the power to remedy my misfortune, if she so wills!" The lady went forth into the hall where the Queen with her ladies and the King awaited—Tryamour's maidens came to greet her and held her stirrup as she dismounted. She removed her cloak so that all might see her. King Arthur welcomed her courteously, and she

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addressed him with sweet and courteous words. Immediately, the Queen and her ladies got up and stood around the lady in order to examine her as she stood there straight and unmoved. They paled to her as the moon against the sun in the daylight. Then the Lady addressed King Arthur: "Sir, I have come to clear Sir Launfal. Neither by day nor by night did he shamefully offer any illegitimate love to the Queen in any manner. Therefore, Sir King, heed my words well. He did not compromise her; rather, she solicited him to be her lover. And he replied to her that his beloved's least attractive servant was more beautiful than she." King Arthur said (it is no lie): "Each man may see that the claim is true: you and your maidens are more beautiful by far!" With that, Lady Tryamour went to the Queen and blew upon her such a breath that she could never see from that time forward.

The lady then leapt to her palfrey and bid them all good day—she would no longer tarry there. Gylfre then appeared from out of the forest and stood beside Launfal with his steed. Without further delay, Launfal sprang into the saddle and rode after his beloved. Tryamour and her maidens then departed in a ceremonious and stately fashion. The Lady rode through Cardiff far into a fabulous isle called Olyroun<sup>7</sup>.

Every year upon a certain day people can hear Launfal's steed neigh and see him. Whosoever desires to joust and keep their armour trim in tournament or fight can find his match with Sir Launfal, the knight. Thus Launfal, truly, that noble knight of the Round Table, was taken into the land of the fairies. No one has seen him since, and I, Thomas Chestre, who made this tale, can relate no more about this Launfal, famous for chivalry—truly, I cannot. May Jesus, who is Heaven's King, and His mother, Mary, bless all of us. Amen

## Notes

Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* survives in a single manuscript copy, British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii. The Latin title given in the manuscript is *Launfal Miles*. Chestre based his romance on Marie de France's lay, *Lanval*, and an anonymous fourteenth-century translation and adaptation, *Sir Landevale*; he also seems to have used another anonymous lay, *Graelent*. Recent editions of *Sir Launfal* include Stephen H.A. Shepherd's text in *Middle English Romances* (Norton Critical Edition; New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1995; this edition also presents a version of *Sir Landevale*), Jennifer Fellows' text in *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance* (Everyman's Library; London: J.M. Dent, 1993) and Donald B. Sands edition in *Middle English Verse Romances* (Exeter Middle English Texts and Studies; 1956; Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1986). According to Sands, the manuscript copy is early fifteenth century, while the language is that of the late fourteenth century. Chaucer is thought to have borrowed from *Sir Launfal* in his parody, *Sir Thopas*.

1 The MS reading "Kardevyle" was glossed by Sands as "the town of Carlisle in Cumberland" (n. 8, p. 203), but Fellows (n. 8, p. 309) and most recently Shepherd (n. 2, p. 190) cite Cardiff as the site most likely intended by Chestre's spelling.

2 Shepherd notes that this word possibly scrambles the names of two kings, Kings Ban and Bors (n. 5, p. 191).

3 Caerleon-upon-Usk in Wales.

4 The manuscript reads "savargelych", which Fellows emends to "largelych" or "generously" (n. 130, p. 311). As Fellows notes, however, the anonymous *Sir Landevale* has "wildely," which confirms the

*Sir Launfal*

manuscript sense here that Launfal spent his wealth “savagely,” that is, recklessly or desperately – and not merely generously.

5 “Olyroun” seems to refer to the island of Oléron, which is off the coast of Brittany. Possibly Oléron is confused with Avalon.

6 It is not clear here whether Launfal exacted no oaths from the vanquished or whether the narrator insists upon the truth of his story even without his swearing an oath to its veracity

7 See note 5 above.

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