

Huon de Cambrai
The Palfrey

translated by

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That men may bear in mind the fair deeds that woman has done, and to tell of her sweetness and frankness, this tale is here written. For very right it is that men should hold in remembrance the excellent virtues that can so easily be perceived in her. But grievous is it, and very heavy to me, that all the world does not laud and praise women to the height which is their due. Ah, God, if but they kept their hearts whole and unspotted, true and strong, the world would not contain so rich a treasure. The greater pity and sorrow, then, that they take not more heed to their ways, and that so little stay and stability are to be found in them. Too often the heart of a woman seems but a weathercock upon a steeple, whirled about in every wind that blows; so variable is woman's heart, and more changeable than any wind. But the story that I have taken upon me to narrate shall not remain untold because of the fickle-hearted, nor for reason of those who grudge praise to the frank and pure; therefore, give ear to this Lay of the Marvellous Palfrey.

Once upon a time a certain knight, courteous and chivalrous, rich of heart, but poor in substance, had his dwelling in the county of Champagne. So stout of heart was this lord, so wise in counsel, and so compact of honour and all high qualities, that had his fortune been equal to his deserts he would have had no peer amongst his fellows. He was the very pattern of the fair and perfect knight, and his praise was ever in the mouth of men. In whatever land he came he was valued at his proper worth, since strangers esteemed him for the good that was told of him, and rumour but increased his renown. When he had laced the helmet on his head, and ridden within the lists, he did not court the glances of the dames, nor seek to joust with those who were of less fame than he, but there where the press was thickest he strove mightily in the heart of the stour. In the very depths of winter he rode upon his horse, attired in seemly fashion (since in dress may be perceived the inclinations of the

heart) and this although his substance was but small. For the lands of this knight brought him of wealth but two hundred pounds of rent, and for this reason he rode to tourneys in hope of gain as well as in quest of honour.

This knight had set all his earthly hope and thoughts on gaining the love of a certain noble lady. The father of the damsel was a puissant Prince, lacking nought in the matter of wealth, and lord of a great house furnished richly as his coffers. His fief and domain were fully worth one thousand pounds a year, and many an one asked of him his fair daughter in marriage, because her exceeding beauty was parcel of the loveliness of the world. The Prince was old and frail; he had no other child than the maiden, and his wife had long been dead. His castle was builded in a deep wood, and all about it stretched the great forest, for in the days of my tale Champagne was a wilder country then than now.

The gentle knight who had set his heart on the love of the fair lady was named Messire William, and he lived within the forest in an ancient manor some two miles from the palace of the Prince. In their love they were as one, and ever they fondly dreamed one upon the other; but the Prince liked the matter but little, and had no mind that they should meet. So when the knight would gaze upon the face of his mistress, he went secretly by a path that he had worn through the profound forest, and which was known of none save him. By this path he rode privily on his palfrey, without gossip or noise, to visit the maiden, many a time. Yet never might these lovers see each other close, however great was their desire, for the wall of the courtyard was very high, and the damsel was not so hardy as to issue forth by the postern. So for their solace they spoke together through a little gap in the wall, but ever between them was the deep and perilous fosse, set thickly about with hedges of thorn and spine, so that never closer might they meet. The castle of the Prince was builded upon a high place, and was strongly held with battlement and tower; moreover, bridge and portcullis kept his door. The ancient knight, worn by years and warfare, seldom left his lodging, for he might no longer get him to horse. He lived within his own house, and ever would have his daughter seated at his side, to cheer his lonely age with youth. Often this thing was grievous to her, for she failed to come to that fair spot where her heart had taken root. But the brave knight in nowise

forgot the road that he had worn, and asked for nothing more than to see her somewhat closer with his eyes. Now the tale tells that in spite of his poverty the knight owned one thing that was marvellously rich. The palfrey on which he rode had not his like in all the world. It was grey and of a wonderful fair colour, so that no flower was so bright in semblance, nor did any man know of so beautiful a steed. Be assured that not in any kingdom could be discovered so speedy a horse, nor one that carried his rider so softly and so surely. The knight loved his palfrey very dearly, and I tell you truly that in nowise would he part with him for any manner of wealth, though the rich folk of that country, and even from afar, had coveted him for long. Upon this fair palfrey Messire William went often to his lady, along the beaten path through the solitary forest, known but to these two alone. Right careful was he to keep this matter from the father of the demoiselle; and thus, though these two lovers had such desire one of the other, they might not clasp their arms about the neck, nor kiss, nor embrace, nor for their solace, even, hold each other by the hand. Nought could they do but speak, and hearken softly to such sweet words, for well they knew that should the old Prince know thereof, very swiftly would he marry his daughter to some rich lord.

Now the knight considered these things within himself, and day by day called to remembrance the wretched life that was his, for he might not put the matter from his mind. So at the end he summoned all his courage, and for weal or woe resolved that he would go to the aged Prince and require of him his daughter for his wife, let that betide what may. For very clear it was to him that such a life he could not lead for every day of the week. On a certain day he made himself ready, and repaired to the castle where the demoiselle dwelt with her father. He was welcomed very gladly by the Prince and his company, for he was esteemed a courteous and gentle knight, and bragged of by all men as a valiant gentleman, who was lacking in no good qualities.

“Sire,” said the knight, “I ask you of your grace to listen to my words. I enter in your house to crave of you such a gift as may God put it in your heart to bestow.”

The old man looked upon him fixedly, and afterwards inquired—

“What is it you would have? Tell me now, for by my faith I will aid you if I may, yet in all things saving my honour.”

“Yea, sire, very easily you may do this thing, if so you please. May God but grant that such is your pleasure.”

“I will grant you the gift if it seems to me well, and I will refuse you the boon if it seems to me ill. Nothing will you get from me, neither gift, nor promise, nor blame, that it is not fitting for me to bestow.”

“Sire,” answered he, “I will tell you the gift I crave at your hand. You know who I am, and right well you knew my father. Well, too, you know my manor and my household, and all those things wherein I take my pleasure and delight. In guerdon of my love, I pray—so it may please you, sire—your daughter as my wife. God grant that my prayer may not disturb your heart, and that my petition may not be refused to my shame. For I will not hide from you that although I am not of her fellowship, yet have I spoken from afar with my demoiselle, and perceived those fair virtues which all men praise. Greatly is my lady loved and esteemed in these parts, for truly there is not her like in all the world. I have been too rash, since I have dared to require so gracious a gift, but so you deign to give to my asking, joyous and merry shall I go for all my days. Now have I told you my petition; so answer me according to my hope and your good pleasure.”

The old man had no need for counsel in this matter, so without delay he made answer to the knight—

“I have heard with patience what you had to tell. Certes, and without doubt, my daughter is fair, and fresh, and pure, and a maiden of high descent. For myself, I am a rich vavasour, and come of noble ancestry, having fief and land worth fully one thousand pounds each year in rent. Think you I am so besotted as to give my daughter to a knight who lives by play! I have no child but one, who is close and dear to my heart, and after I am gone all my wealth will be hers. She shall wed no naked man, but in her own degree; for I know not any prince of this realm, from here even to Lorraine, however wise and brave, of whom she would not be more than worthy. It is not yet a month ago since such a lord as this prayed her at my hand. His lands were worth five hundred pounds in rent, and right willingly would he have yielded them to me, had I but hearkened to his suit. But my daughter can well afford to wait, for I am

so rich that she may not easily lose her price, nor miss the sacrament of marriage. Too high is this fruit for your seeking, for there is none in this realm, nor from here to Allemaigne, however high his race, who shall have her, save he be count or king."

The knight was all abashed at these proud words. He did not wait for further shame, but took his leave, and went as speedily as he might. But he knew not what to do, for Love, his guide, afflicted him very grievously, and bitterly he complained him thereof. When the maiden heard of this refusal, and was told the despiteful words her father had spoken, she was grieved in her very heart, for her love was no girl's light fancy, but was wholly given to the knight, far more than any one can tell. So when the knight—yet heavy and wrathful—came to the accustomed trysting place to speak a little to the maiden, each said to the other what was in the mind. There he opened out to her the news of his access to her father, and of the disaccord between the twain.

"Sweet my demoiselle," said the knight, "what is there to do? It seems better to me to quit my home, and to dwell henceforth amongst strangers in a far land, for my last hope is gone. I may never be yours, neither know I how these things will end. Cursed be the great wealth with which your father is so puffed up. Better had it been that you were not so rich a dame, for he would have looked upon my poverty with kinder eyes if his substance were not so great."

"Certes," answered she, "very gladly would I be no heiress, but only simple maid, if all things were according to my will. Sire, if my father took heed only to your good qualities, by my faith he would not pain himself to prevent your coming to me. If he but weighed your little riches in the balance against your great prowess, right soon would he conclude the bargain. But his heart cannot be moved: he does not wish what I would have, nor lament because I may wring my hands. If he accorded with my desire, right speedily would this matter be ended. But age and youth walk not easily together, for in the heart is the difference between the old and young. Yet so you do according to my device, you shall not fail to gain what you would have."

"Yea, demoiselle, by my faith, I will not fail herein; so tell me now your will."

“I have determined on a thing to which I have given thought many a time and oft. Very surely you remember that you have an uncle who is right rich in houses and in goods. He is not less rich than my father; he has neither child, wife nor brother, nor any kindred of his blood nearer than you. Well is it known that all his wealth is yours when he is dead, and this in treasure and in rent is worth sixty marks of virgin gold. Now go to him without delay, for he is old and frail; tell him that between my father and yourself is such a business that it may not come to a good end unless he help therein. But that if he would promise you three hundred pounds of his land, and come to require grace of my father, very soon can the affair be ended. For my father loves him dearly, and each counts the other an honourable man. Your uncle holds my father as prudent and wise: they are two ancient gentlemen, of ripe years, and have faith and affiance the one in the other. Now if for love of you your uncle would fairly seek my father and speak him thus, ‘I will deliver to my nephew three hundred pounds of my lands, so that you give him your child,’ why, the marriage will be made. I verily believe that my father would grant your uncle his request, if only he would ask me of him. And when we are wedded together, then you can render again to your uncle all the land that he has granted you. And so sweetly do I desire your love, that right pleasing I shall find the bargain.”

“Fairest,” cried the knight, “verily and truly there is nothing I crave in comparison with your love; so forthwith I will find my uncle, and tell him this thing.”

The knight bade farewell, and went his way, yet thoughtful and bewildered and sad, by reason of the shame which had been put upon him. He rode at adventure through the thick forest upon his grey palfrey. But as he rode fear left him, and peace entered in his heart, because of the honest and wise counsel given him by the fair maiden. He came without hindrance to Medet, where his uncle had his dwelling, but when he was entered into the house he bewailed his lot, and showed himself all discomfited. So his uncle took him apart into a privy chamber, and there he opened out his heart, and made plain to him all this business. “Uncle,” said he, “if you will do so much as to speak to her sire, and tell him that you have granted me three hundred pounds of your land, I will make this covenant with you, and plight you my faith,

my hand in yours, that when I have wedded her who is now denied me, that I will render again and give you quittance for your land. Now I pray that you will do what is required of you."

"Nephew," answered the uncle, "this I will do willingly, since it pleases me right well. By my head, married you shall be, and to the pearl of all the country, for good hope have I to bring this matter to an end."

"Uncle," said the knight, "put your hand to my task, and so press on with the business that time may go swiftly to the wedding. For my part I will arm me richly, and ride to the tournament at Galardon, where, by the aid of God, I trust to gain such ransom as will be helpful to me. And I pray you to use such diligence that I may be married on my return."

"Fair nephew, right gladly," answered he, "for greatly it delights me that so gracious and tender a lady shall be your bride."

So without further tarrying Messire William went his way, merry of heart because of his uncle's promise that without let he should have as wife that maid whom so dearly he desired. For of other happiness he took no heed. Thus blithe and gay of visage he rendered him to the tournament, as one who had no care in all the world.

On the morrow, very early in the morning, the uncle got to horse, and before the hour of prime came to the rich mansion of that old Prince, and of her whose beauty had no peer. He was welcomed with high observance, for the ancient lord loved him very dearly, seeing that they were both of the same years, and were rich and puissant princes, near neighbours in that land. Therefore he rejoiced greatly that one so high in station did honour to his house, and spread before him a fair banquet, with many sweet words, for the old Prince was frank and courteous of heart, and knew to praise meetly where honour was due. When the tables were cleared, the two spake together of old faces and old stories, shields, and swords and spears, and of many a doughty deed, in the most loving fashion. But the uncle of the good knight would not forget his secret thought, and presently discovered it to the Prince in saying—

"What go I now to tell you? I love you very truly, as you may easily perceive. I am come to require a favour at your hand. May God put it into your heart to lend your ear to my prayer in such a fashion that the matter may be brought to a right fair end."

“By my head,” answered the old Prince, “you are so near to my heart that you are not likely to be refused aught that you may ask of me. Tell me, that I may grace you with the gift.”

“Sire, thanks and thanks again, for I would do the same by you,” returned the uncle of the knight, who no longer cared to hide his privy mind. “I am come to pray of you, fair sire, the hand of your virtuous maid in marriage. When we once were wed I would endow her with my wealth to the utmost of my power. You know well that I have no heir of my body, which troubles me sorely; and I will keep good faith with you herein, for I am he who loves you dearly. When your daughter is bestowed upon me, it would not be my care to separate father and child, nor to withdraw my wealth from yours, but all our substance should be as one, and we would enjoy together in common that which God has given us.”

When he whose heart was crafty heard these words, he rejoiced greatly, and made reply –

“Sire, I will give her to you right gladly, for you are a loyal and an honourable man. I am more content that you have required her of me than if the strongest castle of these parts had been rendered to my hand. To none other in the world would I grant my maid so willingly as to you, for you are prudent and hardy, and many a time have I proved ere now that I may have confidence in your faith.”

Then was promised and betrothed the damsel to a husband of whom she had little envy, for she was persuaded that another had asked her as his wife. When the maiden knew the truth thereof she was altogether amazed and sorrowful, and often she swore by St. Mary that never should she be wedded of him. Right heavy was she, and full of tears, and grievously she lamented her fate.

“Alas, unhappy wretch, for now I am dead. What foul treason has this old traitor done, for which he justly should be slain! How shamefully he has deceived that brave and courteous knight, whose honour is untouched by spot. By his wealth this aged, ancient man has bought me at a price. May God requite it to his bosom, for he purposes to commit a great folly, since the day we are wed he takes his mortal foe to wife. How may I endure that day! Alas, may God grant that I shall never see that hour, for too great is the anguish, that I suffer because of this

treason. If I were not fast in prison, right swiftly would I get quit of this trouble, but nought is there for me to do, since in no wise can I flee from this manor. So stay I must, and suffer as my father wills, but truly my pain is more than I can bear. Ah, God, what will become of me, and when shall he return who so foully is betrayed. If he but knew the trick his uncle has set on him, and how, too, I am taken in the snare, well I know that he would die of grief. Ah, if he but knew! Sure I am that he would ride with speed, and that soon these great woes would be as they had never been. Too sorely is my heart charged with sorrow, and better I love to die than to live. Alas, that this old man ever should cast his thought upon me, but none may deliver me now, for my father loves him because of his wealth. Fie on age! Fie upon riches! Never may bachelor wed with loving maid save he have money in his pouch. Cursed be the wealth which keeps me from him wherein I have my part, for truly my feet are caught in a golden net."

In this wise the maiden bewailed her lot, by reason of her great misease. For so sweetly was her heart knit in the love of her fair bachelor, that in nowise might she withdraw her thoughts from him. Therefore she held in the more despite him to whom her father had given her. Old he was, very aged, with a wrinkled face, and red and peering eyes. From Chalons to Beauvais there was no more ancient knight than he, nor from there to Sens a lord more rich, for that matter. But all the world held him as pitiless and felon; whilst so beautiful and brave was the lady, that men knew no fairer heiress, nor so courteous and simple a maiden, no, not within the Crown of France. How diverse were these twain. On one side was light, and on the other darkness; but there was no spot in the brightness, and no ray within the dark. But the less grief had been hers had she not set her love on so perilous a choice.

Now he to whom the damsel was betrothed, because of his exceeding content, made haste to appoint some near day for the wedding. For he knew little that she was as one distraught by reason of the great love she bore his nephew, as you have heard tell. So her father made all things ready, very richly, and when the third day was come he sent letters to the greybeards, and to those he deemed the wisest of that land, bidding them to the marriage of his daughter, who had bestowed her heart elsewhere. Since he was well known to all the country round, a great

company of his friends came together to the number of thirty, to do honour to his house, since not one of them but owed him service for his lands. Then it was accorded between them that the demoiselle should be wedded early on the morrow, and her maidens were bidden to prepare their lady for the wedding on the appointed day and hour. But very wrathful and troubled in heart were the maidens by reason of this thing.

The Prince inquired of the damsels if his daughter was fitly arrayed against her marriage, and had content therein, or was in need of aught that it became her state to have.

“Nothing she needs, fair sire,” made answer one of her maidens, “so far as we can see; at least so that we have palfreys and saddles enow to carry us to the church, for of kinsfolk and of cousins are a many near this house.”

“Do not concern yourself with the palfreys,” replied the Prince, “for I trow we shall have to spare. There is not a lord bidden to the wedding whom I have not asked to lend us from his stables.”

Then, making no further tarrying, he returned to his own lodging, with peace and confidence in his heart.

Messire William, that brave and prudent knight, had little thought that his marriage was drawing so near its term. But Love held him so fast that he made haste to return, for ever the remembrance of her face was before his eyes. Since love flowered so sweetly within his heart, he parted from the tournament in much content, for he deemed that he rode to receive the gift he desired beyond all the world. Such he hoped was the will of God, and such the end of the adventure. Therefore he awaited in his manor, with what patience he might, the fair and pleasant tidings his uncle must presently send him, to hasten to the spousal of his bride. Since he had borne off all the prizes of the tourney, he bade a minstrel to his hall, and sang joyously to the playing of the viol. Yet, though all was revelry and merriment, often he looked towards the door to see one enter therein with news. Much he marvelled when the hour would bring these welcome words, and often he forgot to mark the newest refrains of the minstrel, because his thoughts were elsewhere. At the time hope was growing sick a varlet came into the courtyard. When Messire William saw him the heart in his breast leaped and fluttered for joy.

“Sire,” said the varlet, “God save you. My lord, your friend, whom well you know, has sent me to you in his need. You have a fair palfrey, than which none goes more softly in the world. My lord prays and requires of you that for love of him you will lend him this palfrey, and send it by my hand forthwith.”

“Friend,” answered the knight, “for what business?”

“Sire, to carry his lady daughter to the church, who is so dainty sweet and fair.”

“For what purpose rides she to church?”

“Fair sire, there to marry your uncle to whom she is betrothed. Early to-morrow morn my lady will be brought to the ancient chapel deep within the forest. Hasten, sire, for already I tarry too long. Lend your palfrey to your uncle and my lord. Well we know that it is the noblest horse within the realm, as many a time has been proved.”

When Messire William heard these words—

“God,” said he, “then I am betrayed by him in whom I put my trust; to whom I prayed so much to help me to my hope. May the Lord God assoil him never for his treasonable deed. Yet scarcely can I believe that he has done this wrong. It is easier to hold that you are telling me lies.”

“Well, you will find it truth to-morrow at the ringing of prime; for already is gathered together a company of the ancient lords of these parts.”

“Alas,” said he, “how, then, am I betrayed and tricked and deceived.”

For a very little Messire William would have fallen swooning to the earth, had he not feared the blame of his household. But he was so filled with rage and grief that he knew not what to do, nor what to say. He did not cease lamenting his evil case till the varlet prayed him to control his wrath.

“Sire, cause the saddle to be set forthwith on your good palfrey, so that my lady may be carried softly to the church.”

Then Messire William considered within himself to know whether he should send his grey palfrey to him whom he had cause to hate more than any man.

“Yea, without delay,” said he, “since she who is the soul of honour has nothing to do with my trouble. My palfrey shall bear her gladly, in

recompense of the favours she has granted me, for naught but kindness have I received of her. Never shall I have of her courtesies again, and all my joy and happiness are past. Now must I lend my palfrey to the man who has betrayed me to my death, since he has robbed me of that which I desired more than all the world. No man is bound to return love for treason. Very rash is he to require my palfrey of me, when he scrupled not to take the sweetness, the beauty and the courtesy with which my demoiselle is endowed. Alas, now have I served her in vain, and my long hope is altogether gone. No joy in my life is left, save to send her that thing which it breaks my heart to give. Nevertheless, come what may, my palfrey shall go to the most tender of maidens. Well I know that when she sets her eyes upon him she will bethink her of me; of me and of my love, for I love and must love her all the days of my life, yea, though she has given her heart to those who have wounded mine. But sure am I that this thing is not seemly to her, for Cain, who was brother to Abel, wrought no fouler treason."

In this manner the knight bewailed his heavy sorrow. Then he caused a saddle to be set upon the palfrey, and calling the servitor delivered the horse to his keeping. So the varlet forthwith went upon his way.

Messire William, yet heavy and wrathful, shut himself fast within his chamber to brood upon his grief. He charged his household that if there was a man so bold as to seek to hearten him in his sorrow he would cause him to be hanged. For his part he had no care for mirth, and would live withdrawn from men, since he might never lose the pain and sorrow that weighed upon his heart.

But whilst the knight was in this case, the servant in custody of the palfrey returned with all the speed he might to the castle of the old Prince, where all was merriment and noise.

The night was still and serene, and the house was filled with a great company of ancient lords. When they had eaten their full, the Prince commanded the watch that, without fail, all men should be roused and apparelled before the breaking of the day. He bade, too, that the palfrey and the horses should be saddled and made ready at the same hour, without confusion or disarray. Then they went to repose themselves and sleep. But one amongst them had no hope to sleep, because of the great unrest she suffered by reason of her love. All the night she could not

close her eyes. Others might rest: she alone remained awake, for her heart knew no repose.

Now shortly after midnight the moon rose very bright, and shone clearly in the heavens. When the warder saw this thing, being yet giddy with the wine that he had drunken, he deemed that the dawn had broken.

“Pest take it,” said he, “the lords should be about already.”

He sounded his horn and summoned and cried—

“Arouse you, lords, for day is here.”

Then those, yet drowsy with sleep, and heavy with last night’s wine, got them from their beds all bewildered. The squires, too, made haste to set saddles upon the horses, believing that daybreak had come, though before the dawn would rise very easily might the horses go five miles, ambling right pleasantly. So when the company which should bring this demoiselle to the chapel deep within the forest were got to horse, her father commended his maid to the most trusty of his friends. Then the saddle was put upon the grey palfrey; but when it was brought before the damsel her tears ran faster than they had fallen before. Her guardian recked nothing of her weeping, for he knew little of maidens, and considered that she wept because of leaving her father and her father’s house. So her tears and sadness were accounted as nought, and she mounted upon her steed, making great sorrow. They took their way through the forest, but the road was so narrow that two could not ride together side by side. Therefore the guardian put the maiden before, and he followed after, because of the straitness of the path. The road was long, and the company were tired and weary for want of sleep. They rode the more heavily, because they were no longer young, and had the greater need for rest. They nodded above the necks of their chargers, and up hill and down dale for the most part went sleeping. The surest of this company was in charge of the maiden, but this night he had taken so little sleep in his bed that he proved an untrusty warder, for he forgot everything, save his desire to sleep. The maiden rode, bridle in hand, thinking of nought except her love and her sorrow. Whilst she followed the narrow path the barons who went before had already come forth upon the high road. They dozed in their saddles, and the thoughts of those few who were awake were elsewhere, and gave no heed to the

demoiselle. The maiden was as much alone as though she fared to London. The grey palfrey knew well this ancient narrow way, for many a time he had trodden it before. The palfrey and the maiden drew near a hillock within the forest, where the trees stood so close and thick that no moonlight fell within the shadow of the branches. The valley lay deeply below, and from the high road came the noise of the horses' iron shoes. Of all that company many slept, and those who were awake talked together, but none gave a thought to the maiden. The grey palfrey knew nothing of the high road, so turning to the right he entered within a little path, which led directly to the house of Messire William. But the knight, in whose charge the damsel was placed had fallen into so heavy a slumber that his horse stood at his pleasure on the way. Therefore she was guarded of none—save of God—and dropping the rein upon the palfrey's neck, she let him have his will. The knights who preceded her rode a great while before they found that she was not behind them, and he who came after kept but a poor watch and ward. Nevertheless she had not escaped by her choice, for she recked nought of the path that she followed, nor of the home to which she would come. The palfrey followed the track without hesitation, for many a time he had journeyed therein, both winter and summer. The weeping maiden looked this way and that, but could see neither knight nor baron, and the forest was very perilous, and all was dark and obscure. Much she marvelled what had become of all her company, and it was no wonder that she felt great fear. None regarded her safety, save God and the grey palfrey, so she commended herself to her Maker, whilst the horse ambled along the road. Nevertheless she had dropped the rein from her fingers, and kept her lips from uttering one single cry, lest she should be heard of her companions. For she chose rather to die in the woodlands than to endure such a marriage as this. The maiden was hid in thought, and the palfrey, in haste to reach his journey's end, and knowing well the path, ambled so swiftly, that soon he came to the borders of the forest. A river ran there both dark and deep, but the horse went directly to the ford, and passed through as quickly as he was able. He had won but little beyond when the maiden heard the sound of a horn, blown from that place where she was carried by the grey palfrey. The warder on his tower blew shrilly on his horn, and the demoiselle felt herself utterly undone, since she knew

not where she had come, nor how to ask her way. But the palfrey stayed his steps on a bridge which led over the moat running round the manor. When the watch heard the noise of the palfrey thereon, he ceased his winding, and coming from the tower demanded who it was who rode so hardily on the bridge at such an hour. Then the demoiselle made reply –

“Certes, it is the most unlucky maid of mother born. For the love of God give me leave to enter in your house to await the day, for I know not where to go.”

“Demoiselle,” answered he, “I dare not let you or any other in this place, save at the bidding of my lord, and he is the most dolorous knight in all the world, for very foully has he been betrayed.”

Whilst the watch spoke of the matter he set his eye to a chink in the postern. He had neither torch nor lantern, but the moon shone very clear, and he spied the grey palfrey, which he knew right well. Much he marvelled whence he came, and long he gazed upon the fair lady who held the rein, and was so sweetly clad in her rich new garnishing. Forthwith he sought his lord, who tossed upon his bed with little delight.

“Sire,” said he, “be not wrath with me. A piteous woman, tender of years and semblance, has come forth from the woodland, attired right richly. It seems to me that she is cloaked in a scarlet mantle, edged with costly fur. This sad and outworn lady is mounted on your own grey palfrey. Very enticing is her speech; very slim and gracious is her person. I know not, sire, if I am deceived, but I believe there is no maiden in all the country who is so dainty, sweet and fair. Well I deem that it is some fay whom God sends you, to bear away the trouble which is spoiling your life. Take now the gold in place of the silver you have lost.”

Messire William hearkened to these words. He sprang forth from his bed without further speech, and with nothing but a surcoat on his back hastened to the door. He caused it to be opened forthwith, and the demoiselle cried to him pitifully in a loud voice –

“Woe is me, gentle lord, because of the sorrow I have endured this night. Sire, for the love of God turn me not away, but suffer me to enter in your house. I beg for shelter but a little while. But much I fear by reason of a company of knights who are pained greatly, since they have let me from their hands. Sir Knight, be surety for the maid whom

Fortune has guided to your door, for much am I sorrowful and perplexed."

When Messire William heard her voice he was like to swoon with joy. He knew again the palfrey which was so long his own. He gazed upon the lady, and knew her in his heart. I tell you truly that never could man be more happy than was he. He lifted her from the palfrey and brought her within his home. There he took her by the right hand, kissing her more than twenty times; and for her part the lady let him have his way, because she had looked upon his face. When the two sought each other's eyes, very great was the joy that fell between the twain and all their sorrow was as if it had never been. So when the damsel had put aside her mantle, they seated themselves merrily on silken cushions, fringed with gold. They crossed their brows again and yet again, lest they should wake and find this thing a dream. Then the maiden told her bachelor this strange adventure, and said—

"Blessed be the hour in which God brought me to this place, and delivered me from him who sought to add my marriage chest to his own coffers."

When morning was come Messire William arrayed himself richly, and led the demoiselle within the chapel of his own house. Then, without delay, he called his chaplain to him, and was forthwith wedded to the fair lady by a rite that it was not lawful to call in question. So when the Mass was sung, blithe was the mirth of that household, squire and maiden and man-at-arms.

Now when that company which so lightly had lost the maiden came together at the ancient chapel, they were very weary by having ridden all the night, and were sore vexed and utterly cast down. The old Prince demanded his daughter of him who had proved so untrusty a guardian. Knowing not what to say, he made answer straightly—

"Sire, because of the strictness of the way I put the maid before, and I followed after. The forest was deep and dark, and I know not where she turned from the path. Moreover, I nodded in my saddle till I was waked by my companions, for I deemed that she was yet in my company, but she was altogether gone. I cannot tell what has become of the damsel, for very basely have we kept our trust."

The old Prince sought his daughter in every place, and inquired of her from every person, but he might not find her whereabouts, nor hear of any who had seen the maid. Yet all men marvelled at her loss, for none was able to bring him any news. The ancient bridegroom, that the demoiselle should have wed, grieved yet more at the loss of his bride, but to no purpose did he seek her, for the hind had left no slot. Now as the two lords were riding with their company in such fear as this, they saw upon the road a certain squire making towards them in all haste. When he was come to them he said –

“Sire, Messire William sends by me assurance of the great friendship he bears you. He bids me say that early this morning, at the dawn of day, he married your daughter, to his great happiness and content. Sire, he bids you welcome to his house. He also charged me to say to his uncle, who betrayed him so shamefully, that he pardons him the more easily for his treason, since your daughter has given him herself as a gift.”

The old Prince hearkened to this wonder, but said no word in reply. He called together all his barons, and when they were assembled in hall, he took counsel as to whether he should go to the house of Sir William, and bring with him the lord to whom his daughter was betrothed. Yet since the marriage was done, nothing could make the bride again a maid. So, making the best of a bad bargain, he got to horse forthwith, and, all his barons with him. When the company came to the manor they were welcomed with all fair observance, for right pleasing was this to Messire William, since he had all things to his own desire. Whether he would, or whether he would not, nought remained to the old Prince but to embrace his son-in-law; whilst as to that greybeard of a bridegroom, he consoled himself with what crumbs of comfort he could discover. Thus, since it was the will of God that these lovers should be wed, it pleased the Lord God also that the marriage should prove lasting.

Messire William, that courteous and chivalrous knight, lost not his hardihood in marriage, but ever sought advancement, so that he was esteemed of the counts and princes of his land. In the third year of his marriage the old Prince (as the tale tells us) died, because his time was come. So all that he died possessed of in wealth and lands and manors, together with the rich garnishing thereof, became the heritage of the

knight. After this, Death laid hands upon his uncle, who, too, was very rich. And Sir William, who was not simple, nor grudging of heart, nor little of soul, nor blustering with his neighbours, inherited all the goods that were his.

So the story which I have told you endeth in this fashion, in accordance with the truth, and to your pleasure.