

LANVAL

From the Lays of Marie de France

I will tell you the story of another lay, just as it happened. It is about a very worthy young man whose name, in Breton, is Lanval. King Arthur, who was valiant and courtly, was at Carlisle because the Scots and Picts were laying waste the country. They had invaded the land of Logres and were frequently pillaging it. The king was there in summer, at Pentecost.

He distributed rich gifts to his courts and barons and to the Knights of the Round Table, whose equal did not exist in all the world. He gave wives and land to all, except to one who had served him. That was Lanval, whom he forgot about. No one called the king's attention to him, for many were jealous of Lanval, because he was worthy, generous, handsome, and valiant. Some feigned affection for him, but they would not have been saddened if some misfortune had befallen him. He was the son of a king and thus of noble lineage, but he was far from his land. He belonged to King Arthur's household, but he had spent all his wealth, for the king gave him nothing, and Lanval asked him for nothing. Now Lanval was downcast and overcome with sadness. That, my lords, is hardly surprising. A disconsolate man in a strange land can be very forlorn when he had nowhere to turn for help.

This knight who I am telling you about had long served the king. One day he mounted his horse and went away to amuse himself. He left the city and, all alone, came to a meadow. He dismounted beside a flowing stream, but his horse was trembling violently. He loosened the saddle girth, and the horse went away from him to roll around on the meadow. Lanval lay down with his cloak folded beneath his head. He was distraught because of his misfortune, and nothing around him pleased him.

As he was lying there, he looked downstream and saw two young women coming toward him. Never had he seen more lovely women. They were richly dressed in fitted tunics of dark silk, and their faces were very beautiful. The older of them—I am telling you the truth about this—carried a pair of basins made of finely crafted gold, and the other carried a towel. They came straight to the place where the knight lay. Lanval, who was well-mannered, stood up as they approached. They greeted him first and gave him their message, "Sir Lanval, my lady, who is noble and wise and fair, sends us to you; now come with us. We will take you safely to her. See, her pavilion is nearby."

The knight went with them, paying no attention to his horse, which was grazing on the meadow. They led him to the tent, which was beautiful and luxurious. Neither Queen Semiramis, however much wealth, power, and knowledge she had, nor Emperor Octavian could have afforded even the flap of the tent. On top of it was a golden eagle; I



cannot even guess the value of it, or of the ropes and poles that supported the walls. No king on earth, no matter how extravagant he might be, could have afforded it.

In the tent was the maiden. Neither the lily nor the rosebud, when it first appears in summer, could match her beauty. She lay on a fine bed, the coverings of which were worth a castle, and she wore only a shift. Her body was shapely and beautiful. To protect herself from the sun, she had covered herself with an expensive mantle of white ermine trimmed with Alexandrian silk, but her face, neck, breast, and side were uncovered. Her skin was whiter than the hawthorn blossom.

The knight approached, and the maiden called to him; he sat down beside the bed. "Lanval," she said, "fair friend, for your sake I left my land; I have come for to seek you. If you are worthy and noble, no emperor or count or king had ever had such joy or profit as you will, for I love you more than anything."

He looked at her and saw that she was beautiful, and love's flame was kindled in his heart. He answered her in seemly fashion, "Fair lady," he said, "if it pleased you to love me – if I were so fortunate – I would obey your every command, whether it be foolish or wise. I will do your will, and for you I will abandon the company of others. I never want to leave you; this is what I most desire."

When the maiden heard the words of the man who loved her so much, she granted him her love and her body. Now Lanval's fortunes have changed!

Afterwards she gave him a boon. He would have in abundance whatever he most wanted. He could give gifts and spend liberally, and she would provide whatever he needed. Lanval was well provided for; however generously he spent, he would always have more gold and silver.

"My love," she said, "now I warn you and command and entreat you never to reveal this to anyone. And I will tell you the truth. If our love were ever revealed, you would lose me forever. Never again could you see me or possess me."

He answered that he would do as she commanded. He lay down beside her. Now he was well provided for indeed! He stayed with her all afternoon and until evening fell, and he would have stayed longer if he had been able and if his lady had permitted it.

"My love," she said, "get up. You can remain no longer. Go now, and I will stay here. But I tell you this: When you wish to speak with me, you have only to think of a place where one could be alone with his lady without reproach or shame, and I will be there to do your bidding. No one except you will see me or hear my voice."

Hearing this, he was overjoyed. He kissed her and then stood up. Those who had led him to the tent dressed him in rich garments. Thus dressed, he was the most handsome of young men, and he was by no means foolish or ill-mannered. They gave him water to wash his hands and a cloth to dry them; then they brought him food. He supped, as was proper, with his lady. It was brought to him. Lanval had been well served there. He took his leave, mounted, and set out for the city. He often looked back, very uneasy. He was pensive and fearful because of his adventure; he was astonished and confused, and he could hardly believe that it had happened.

He returned to his lodging, where he found his men finely dressed. That evening he was a generous host, but no one knew how he had the means to afford it. In the city, there was no knight in need of lodging whom he did not summon and serve generously and well. Lanval gave rich gifts; Lanval pardoned prisoners; Lanval outfitted jongleurs; Lanval performed noble acts. There was neither stranger nor friend to whom Lanval

would not give money. Lanval had great joy and pleasure, for by day or by night he could see his lady frequently, and she was completely at his command.

I believe it was that same year, after the feast of Saint John, when some thirty knights sought amusement in a grove beneath the tower in which the queen was staying. Gawain was with them, as was his cousin, the handsome Yvain. The noble and valiant Gawain, who was loved by all, said, "By God, my lord, we are treating our friend Lanval badly by not bringing him along, for he is generous and courtly and his father is a powerful king." Then they turned back, went to his lodging, and invited Lanval to accompany them.

The queen, who had three ladies with her, was at a window carved from the stone. Seeing the king's retinue approach, she recognized Lanval and looked at him. She called one of her ladies and had her summon her most attractive and beautiful maidens, who were to go with her to enjoy themselves in the garden where the others were. She took thirty or more with her. They descended the stairs, and the knights, delighted to see them, came forward to meet them. They took the women by the hand and engaged them in courtly conversations.

Lanval went aside, well away from the others; he was impatient to hold his lady and to kiss, embrace, and touch her. The joy of others meant little to him if he could not take his own pleasure. When the queen saw him alone, she went straight to him. She sat down beside him and spoke to him about what was on her mind, "Lanval, I have greatly honored and cherished and loved you. You can have all my love. Now tell me what you desire. I grant you my love, and you should be very happy to have me."

"Lady," he said, "leave me alone! I have no desire to love you. I have long served the king, and I do not wish to betray my faith. Never will I wrong my lord for you or your love."

The queen became angry and spoke outrageously. "Lanval," she said, "I do not think you have a taste for that kind of pleasure. I've often been told that you are not interested in women. While training young men, you have taken your pleasure with them. Lowborn, evil coward! It is tragic that my husband has tolerated you near him. I fear that he is damned for doing so."

When he heard that, he was pained, and he was not slow to reply. In his anger he spoke words that he would often regret. "Lady," he said, "I lack skill in the kind of work you mention; rather, I love and am loved by a lady who deserves to be prized over all others. And I will tell you something, and you can be certain of this. Even her poorest servant girl is more worthy than you, my dear queen—in body, face, wisdom, and goodness!"

Then the queen left, returning to her room in tears. She was distraught and outraged at his insult. She took to her bed, ill, saying that she would never get up if the king did not see that justice was done in regard to her complaint.

The king returned from the forest, where he had spent a joyful day. He entered the queen's chambers. When she saw him, she complained aloud, fell at his feet, implored his mercy, and said that Lanval had shamed her by asking for her love; when she refused, he insulted and vilified her. He boasted that he had a lady who was so refined and noble and proud that even her poorest chambermaid was more worthy than the queen.

The king was extremely angry and swore that he would have Lanval burned or hanged if the knight could not defend himself in court. The king left the room and

summoned three of his barons. He sent them for Lanval, who was very pained and distraught. He had returned to his lodging, and he understood that he had lost his lady by revealing their relationship. He was all alone in a room, downcast and tormented. He frequently called to his lady, but to no avail. He lamented and sighed and often fainted, and he asked a hundred times that she have mercy on him and speak to him. He cursed his heart and his mouth; it is a wonder that he did not kill himself! No matter how much he wept and wailed, struggled and strained, she would not take pity on him, not even so far as to let him see her. Alas, what could he do?

The men sent by the king arrived and ordered him to come to court immediately. The king had sent them to summon him, for the queen had made an accusation against him. Lanval, distraught, went to court; he would have been happy to have them kill him. Sad and without speaking, he came before the king; his great sorrow was evident.

The king said to him angrily, "Vassal, you have greatly wronged me. You acted unworthily in shaming and insulting me and in vilifying the queen. You made a foolish boast. Your lady is very noble indeed if her serving girl is more worthy than the queen."

Lanval categorically denied that he had dishonored or shamed his lord and insisted that he had not sought the queen's love, but he acknowledged that truth of what the king had said otherwise, about the love of which he had boasted. Now he was in despair because he had lost her, and he said that he would accept whatever the court decreed in this matter.

The king, who was very angry but did not want his actions to be considered improper, asked his advisors to tell him what he should do. They had no choice but to do as he had ordered. They gathered and decided that Lanval should be tried. But he should provide his lord with pledges to ensure that he would await his trial and return at the proper time. (That way the court could be enlarged, for only the king's household was there at this time.) The barons returned to the king and presented their conclusions to him.

The king demanded pledges, but Lanval was alone and had neither relatives nor friends there. Gawain came forward and presented himself as a pledge, and all his companions did so as well. The king told them, "I entrust him to you, and his presence at trial will be guaranteed by everything—lands and fiefs—that each of you holds from me."

When the pledges were made, nothing remained to be done. Lanval returned to his lodging, accompanied by the knights. They repeatedly criticized and chastised him, urging him not to be downcast, and they cursed such a foolish love. They went to see him daily, for they wished to be sure that he was taking proper nourishment; and they feared that he would harm himself.

On the designated day, the barons assembled. The king and queen were there, and those who had pledged themselves brought Lanval to court. Everyone felt great sorrow on his account. I believe that there were at least a hundred who would have done anything to see him freed without a trial, for he had been wrongly accused. The king asked for a verdict based on the charge and denial; now it was up to the barons to make their decision. Undertaking their deliberations, they were very concerned and troubled on account of this man from another land, who was now in such dire straits. Some wanted to punish him according to their lord's desire.

The Count of Cornwall said, "We will not fail in our duty. Right must prevail, like it or not. The king lodged a complaint against his vassal whose name, I understand, is

Lanval. He accused him of a crime and a misdeed concerning a love of which he boasted, angering the queen. Only the king is making that accusation. Upon my faith, there truthfully should be no need for a rebuttal, were it not that one should honor his lord in all things. An oath will bind Lanval, and the king will then release us. And if Lanval can prove his claim—if his lady presents herself and if what he said that angered the queen is true—then he will be acquitted, since he did not say it out of spite. And if he cannot prove his claim, we should inform him that he must leave the king's service and be banished."

They sent word to Lanval that he was to have his lady come there to defend and protect him. He told them that that was impossible, that he would have no help from her. The messengers returned to the judges, who were not expecting help to come for Lanval. The king pressed them because the queen was waiting for them.

As they were about to render their verdict, they saw two maidens approaching on fine ambling horses. The maidens were very attractive; they were dressed in purple taffeta, worn next to their bare skin. The judges watched them with interest. Gawain, along with three knights, went to Lanval and recounted this to him and pointed out the two women. Gawain was happy about this and asked if one of them was Lanval's ladylove. Lanval replied that he did not know who they were or where they had come from or where they were going.

The women rode on. They dismounted before the dais where King Arthur was sitting. They were very beautiful, and they spoke in a most refined manner, "King, make your chambers available, and have them hung with silk in preparation for my lady, for she wishes to take lodging with you." He granted this willingly; he summoned two knights to accompany them up to the chambers. For the moment they said nothing more.

The king asked his barons for their verdict and said that they had greatly angered him by delaying for so long. "Sir," they said, "we were deliberating, but we did not reach a verdict because of the maidens we saw. Now we will resume our deliberations." They reconvened, very troubled, and there was a good deal of contentious debate.

As they were arguing, they saw two other maidens, who were beautifully dressed in Phrygian silk, riding down the street on Spanish mules. The vassals were delighted and said to one another that the worthy and courageous Lanval was now saved. Yvain and his companions went to Lanval. "Sir," he said, "rejoice! In God's name, speak with us. Two attractive and beautiful damsels are coming. One must certainly be your lady." Lanval immediately responded that he did not recognize, know, or love them.

Then the women arrived and dismounted before the king. Many who were there praised their figures, their faces, their complexions. Each of them was more worthy than the queen had ever been. The older one was refined and wise, and she delivered her message in courtly fashion, "King, now make chambers available to lodge my lady; she is coming here to speak with you." He ordered that these women be taken to the others who had arrived earlier. No attention was paid to the mules. When the women had gone, the king sent word to his barons that they were to render a verdict. There had been too much delay, and the queen, who had been kept waiting too long, was angry.

As they were about to deliver their verdict, a maiden came riding through the city. In all the world there was not a more beautiful woman. She rode a white palfrey, which carried her properly and elegantly. Its neck and head were finely formed; there was no

more beautiful animal in the world. This palfrey was richly equipped, and no count or king under heaven could have afforded it without selling or pledging his land.

The woman was dressed in a white linen shift and robe, and at the sides her body was visible through the laces. Her body was beautiful, her hips low, her neck whiter than snow on a brand; she had bright eyes, a white face, a beautiful mouth and a well-formed nose, brown eyebrows and an attractive forehead, and curled blond hair. A gold thread does not shine as brightly as her hair did in the sun. Her cloak was of dark silk, and she had wrapped its hem around her. She held a sparrow-hawk on her hand, and a greyhound followed her. No one in the town, rich or poor, young or old, could take his eyes off her, nor did anyone jest about her beauty. She approached slowly. The judges, seeing her, thought it was a marvel, and every one of them felt true joy.

Those who loved Lanval came to him and told him that the maiden who was arriving would save him, God willing. "My lord, a lady is coming here. Her hair is neither red nor dark, and she is the most beautiful lady in the world."

Lanval heard this and raised his head; he knew who she was, and he sighed and blushed. He spoke without hesitation, "By my faith," he said, "this is my ladylove! Now I am healed by the very sight of her, and if she has no mercy on me, I hardly care if I am killed."

The lady entered the palace; never had such a beautiful woman been there. She dismounted before the king, where everyone could see her clearly, and she removed her cloak, the better to display her beauty. The king, who was well mannered, rose to meet her; and all the others honored her and offered her their service.

When they had looked at her intently and had praised her beauty at length, the lady, having no desire to linger, said, "King, I have loved one of your vassals. Here he is. It is Lanval. Because of what he said, he was accused in your court, and I do not want any harm to come to him. Know that the queen was wrong. He never asked for her love. If I can prove that the boast he made was true, he should be freed by your barons."

The king agreed to abide by what the judges legally decided. There was not one among them who did not consider Lanval to have been properly defended. He was freed by their decision, and the maiden, with her many servants, left. The king could not keep her there.

Outside the room there was a large stone of dark marble, where the heavily armed men mounted their horses when they left the king's court. Lanval stood on it, and when the maiden came riding through the door, Lanval leapt on the palfrey behind her. The Bretons tell us that he went with her to Avalon, to a beautiful isle. The young man was taken there, and no one ever heard of him again. Nor is there anything more to tell.

1. Who is the author of this story?
2. Where does Lanval find his ladylove?
3. What must Lanval never do?
4. Who makes a pass at Lanval?
5. What rumor does she relate concerning Lanval?
6. Why is Lanval put on trial?
7. What is the only thing that can save Lanval?
8. Who saves Lanval?
9. Where does this person take him?
10. Why is this story a reversal of typical medieval roles?