

# Lancelot, The Knight of the Cart

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us fight." Then the king says: "So help me God, all that thou sayest is of no avail." "Why is that?" he asks. "Because I will not consent. I will not so trust in thy folly and pride as to allow thee to be killed. A man is a fool to court death, as thou dost in thy ignorance. I know well that thou hatest me because I wish to save thy life. God will not let me see and witness thy death, if I can help it, for it would cause me too much grief." He talks to him and reproves him until finally peace and good-will are restored. The terms of the peace are these: he will surrender the Queen to Lancelot, provided that the latter without reluctance will fight them again within a year of such time as he shall choose to summon him: this is no trial to Lancelot. When peace is made, all the people press about, and it is decided that the battle shall be fought at the court of King Arthur, who holds Britain and Cornwall in his sway: there they decide that it shall be. And the Queen has to consent, and Lancelot has to promise, that if Meleagant can prove him recreant, she shall come back with him again without the interference of any one. When the Queen and Lancelot had both agreed to this, the arrangement was concluded, and they both retired and removed their arms. Now the custom in the country was that when one issued forth, all the others might do so too. All called down blessings upon Lancelot: and you may know that he must have felt great joy, as in truth he did. All the strangers assemble and rejoice over Lancelot, speaking so as to be heard by him: "Sire, in truth we were joyful as soon as we heard your name, for we felt sure at once that we should all be set free." There was a great crowd present at this glad scene, as each one strives and presses forward to touch him if possible. Any one who succeeded in touching him was more delighted than he could tell. There was plenty of joy, and of sorrow too; those who were now set free rejoiced unrestrainedly; but Meleagant and his followers have not anything they want, but are pensive, gloomy, and downcast. The king turns away from the list, taking with him Lancelot, who begs him to take him to the Queen. "I shall not fail to do so," the king replies; "for it seems to me the proper thing to do. And if you like, I will show you Kay the seneschal." At this Lancelot is so glad that he almost falls at his feet. Then the king took him at once into the hall, where the Queen had come to wait for him.

(Vv. 3955-4030.) When the Queen saw the king holding Lancelot by the hand, she rose before the king, but she looked displeased with clouded brow, and she spoke not a word. "Lady, here is Lancelot come to see you," says the king; "you ought to be pleased and satisfied." "I, sire? He cannot please me. I care nothing about seeing him." "Come now, lady," says the king who was very frank and courteous, "what induces you to act like this? You are too scornful toward a man who has served you so faithfully

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that he has repeatedly exposed his life to mortal danger on this journey for your sake, and who has defended and rescued you from my son Meleagant who had deeply wronged you." "Sire, truly he has made poor use of his time. I shall never deny that I feel no gratitude toward him." Now Lancelot is dumbfounded; but he replies very humbly like a polished lover: "Lady, certainly I am grieved at this, but I dare not ask your reason." The Queen listened as Lancelot voiced his disappointment, but in order to grieve and confound him, she would not answer a single word, but returned to her room. And Lancelot followed her with his eyes and heart until she reached the door; but she was not long in sight, for the room was close by. His eyes would gladly have followed her, had that been possible; but the heart, which is more lordly and masterful in its strength, went through the door after her, while the eyes remained behind weeping with the body. And the king said privily to him: "Lancelot, I am amazed at what this means: and how it comes about that the Queen cannot endure the sight of you, and that she is so unwilling to speak with you. If she is ever accustomed to speak with you, she ought not to be niggardly now or avoid conversation with you, after what you have done for her. Now tell me, if you know, why and for what misdeed she has shown you such a countenance." "Sire, I did not notice that just now; but she will not look at me or hear my words, and that distresses and grieves me much." "Surely," says the king, "she is in the wrong, for you have risked your life for her. Come away now, fair sweet friend, and we shall go to speak with the seneschal." "I shall be glad to do so," he replies. Then they both go to the seneschal. As soon as Lancelot came where he was, the seneschal's first exclamation was: "How thou hast shamed me!" "I? How so?" Lancelot inquires; "tell me what disgrace have I brought upon you?" "A very great disgrace, for thou hast carried out what I could not accomplish, and thou hast done what I could not do."

(Vv. 4031-4124.) Then the king left them together in the room, and went out alone. And Lancelot inquires of the seneschal if he has been badly off. "Yes," he answers, "and I still am so. I was never more wretched than I am now. And I should have died a long time ago, had it not been for the king, who in his compassion has shown me so much gentleness and kindness that he willingly let me lack nothing of which I stood in need; but I was furnished at once with ever)thing that I desired. But opposed to the kindness which he showed me, was Meleagant his son, who is full of wickedness, and who summoned the physicians to him and bade them apply such ointments as would kill me. Such a father and stepfather have I had! For when the king had a good plaster applied to my wounds in his desire that I should soon be cured, his treacherous son, wishing to put me to death, had it promptly

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taken off and some harmful salve applied. But I am very sure that the king was ignorant of this; he would not tolerate such base and murderous tricks. But you do not know how courteous he has been to my lady: no frontier tower since the time that Noah built the ark was ever so carefully guarded, for he has guarded her so vigilantly that, though his son chafed under the restraint, he would not let him see her except in the presence of the king himself. Up to the present time the king in his mercy has shown her all the marks of consideration which she herself proposed. She alone had the disposition of her affairs. And the king esteemed her all the more for the loyalty she showed. But is it true, as I am told, that she is so angry with you that she has publicly refused to speak with you?" "You have been told the exact truth," Lancelot replies, "but for God's sake, can you tell me why she is so displeased with me?" He replies that he does not know, and that he is greatly surprised at it. "Well, let it be as she pleases," says Lancelot, feeling his helplessness; "I must now take my leave, and I shall go to seek my lord Gawain who has entered this land, and who arranged with me that he would proceed directly to the waterbridge." Then, leaving the room, he appeared before the king and asked for leave to proceed in that direction. And the king willingly grants him leave to go. Then those whom Lancelot had set free and delivered from prison ask him what they are to do. And he replies: "All those who desire may come with me, and those who wish to stay with the Queen may do so: there is no reason why they should accompany me." Then all those, who so desire, accompany him, more glad and joyous than is their wont. With the Queen remain her damsels who are light of heart, and many knights and ladies too. But there is not one of those who stay behind, who would not have preferred to return to his own country to staying there. But on my lord Gawain's account, whose arrival is expected, the Queen keeps them, saying that she will never stir until she has news of him.

(Vv. 4125-4262.) The news spreads everywhere that the Queen is free to go, and that all the other prisoners have been set at liberty and are free to go whenever it suits and pleases them. Wherever the people of the land gather together, they ask each other about the truth of this report, and never talk of anything else. They are very much enraged that all the dangerous passes have been overcome, and that any one may come and go as he pleases. But when the natives of the country, who had not been present at the battle, learned how Lancelot had been the victor, they all betook themselves to the place where they knew he must pass by, thinking that the king would be well pleased if they should seize Lancelot and hale him back to him. All of his own men were without their arms, and therefore they were at a disadvantage when they saw the natives of the country coming under arms. It was not strange that they

seized Lancelot, who was without his arms. They lead him back prisoner, his feet lashed together beneath his horse. Then his own men say: "Gentlemen, this is an evil deed; for the king has given us his safe-conduct, and we are under his protection." But the others reply: "We do not know how that may be; but as we have taken you, you must return with us to court." The rumour, which swiftly flies and runs, reaches the king, that his men have seized Lancelot and put him to death. When the king hears it, he is sorely grieved and swears angrily by his head that they who have killed him shall surely die for the deed; and that, if he can seize or catch them, it shall be their fate to be hanged, burned, or drowned. And if they attempt to deny their deed, he will not believe what they say, for they have brought him such grief and shame that he would be disgraced were vengeance not to be exacted from them; but he will be avenged without a doubt. The news of this spread until it reached the Queen, who was sitting at meat. She almost killed herself on hearing the false report about Lancelot, but she supposes it to be true, and therefore she is in such dismay that she almost loses the power to speak; but, because of those present, she forces herself to say: "In truth, I am sorry for his death, and it is no wonder that I grieve, for he came into this country for my sake, and therefore I should mourn for him." Then she says to herself, so that the others should not hear, that no one need ask her to drink or eat, if it is true that he is dead, in whose life she found her own. Then grieving she rises from the table, and makes her lament, but so that no one hears or notices her. She is so beside herself that she repeatedly grasps her throat with the desire to kill herself; but first she confesses to herself, and repents with self-reproach, blaming and censuring herself for the wrong she had done him, who, as she knew, had always been hers, and would still be hers, if he were alive. She is so distressed at the thought of her cruelty, that her beauty is seriously impaired. Her cruelty and meanness affected her and marred her beauty more than all the vigils and fastings with which she afflicted herself. When all her sins rise up before her, she gathers them together, and as she reviews them, she repeatedly exclaims: "Alas! of what was I thinking when my lover stood before me and I should have welcomed him, that I would not listen to his words? Was I not a fool, when I refused to look at or speak to him? Foolish indeed? Rather was I base and cruel, so help me God. I intended it as a jest, but he did not take it so, and has not pardoned me. I am sure it was no one but me who gave him his death-blow. When he came before me smiling and expecting that I would be glad to see him and would welcome him, and when I would not look at him, was not that a mortal blow? When I refused to speak with him, then doubtless at one blow I deprived him of his heart and life. These two strokes have killed him, I am sure; no other bandits have caused his death. God! can

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I ever make amends for this murder and this crime? No, indeed; sooner will the rivers and the sea dry up. Alas! how much better I should feel, and how much comfort I should take, if only once before he died I had held him in my arms! What? Yes, certainly, quite unclad, in order the better to enjoy him. If he is dead, I am very wicked not to destroy myself. Why? Can it harm my lover for me to live on after he is dead, if I take no pleasure in anything but in the woe I bear for him? In giving myself up to grief after his death, the very woes I court would be sweet to me, if he were only still alive. It is wrong for a woman to wish to die rather than to suffer for her lover's sake. It is certainly sweet for me to mourn him long. I would rather be beaten alive than die and be at rest."

(Vv. 4263-4414.) For two days the Queen thus mourned for him without eating or drinking, until they thought she too would die. There are plenty of people ready to carry bad news rather than good. The news reaches Lancelot that his lady and sweetheart is dead. You need have no doubt of the grief he felt; every one may feel sure that he was afflicted and overcome with grief. Indeed, if you would know the truth, he was so downcast that he held his life in slight esteem. He wished to kill himself at once, but first he uttered a brief lament. He makes a running noose at one end of the belt he wore, and then tearfully communes thus with himself: "Ah, death, how hast thou spied me out and undone me, when in the bloom of health! I am undone, and yet I feel no pain except the grief within my heart. This is a terrible mortal grief. I am willing that it should be so, and if God will, I shall die of it. Then can I not die some other way, without God's consent? Yes, if he will let me tie this noose around my neck. I think I can compel death, even against her will, to take my life. Death, who covets only those who fear her, will not come to me; but my belt will bring her within my power, and as soon as she is mine, she will execute my desire. But, in truth, she will come too tardily for me, for I yearn to have her now!" Then he delays and hesitates no longer, but adjusts his head within the noose until it rests about his neck; and in order that he may not fail to harm himself, he fastens the end of the belt tightly about the saddle-bow, without attracting the attention of any one. Then he let himself slide to earth, intending his horse to drag him until he was lifeless, for he disdains to live another hour. When those who ride with him see him fallen to earth, they suppose him to be in a faint, for no one sees the noose which he had attached about his neck. At once they caught him in their arms and, on raising him, they found the noose which he had put around his neck and with which he sought to kill himself. They quickly cut the noose; but the noose had so hurt his throat that for some time he could not speak; the veins of his neck and throat are almost broken. Now he could not harm himself, even had he wished to do so; however, he is

grieved that they have laid hands on him, and he almost burns up with rage, for willingly would he have killed himself had no one chanced to notice him. And now when he cannot harm himself, he cries: "Ah, vile and shameless death! For God's sake, why hadst thou not the power and might to kill me before my lady died? I suppose it was because thou wouldst not deign to do what might be a kindly deed. If thou didst spare me, it must be attributed to thy wickedness. Ah, what kind of service and kindness is that! How well hast thou employed them here! A curse upon him who thanks thee or feels gratitude for such a service! I know not which is more my enemy: life, which detains me, or death, which will not slay me. Each one torments me mortally; and it serves me right, so help me God, that in spite of myself I should still live on. For I ought to have killed myself as soon as my lady the Queen showed her hate for me; she did not do it without cause, but she had some good reason, though I know not what it is. And if I had known what it was before her soul went to God, I should have made her such rich amends as would have pleased her and gained her mercy. God! what could my crime have been? I think she must have known that I mounted upon the cart. I do not know what other cause she can have to blame me. This has been my undoing. If this is the reason of her hate, God! what harm could this crime do? Any one who would reproach me for such an act never knew what love is, for no one could mention anything which, if prompted by love, ought to be turned into a reproach. Rather, everything that one can do for his lady-love is to be regarded as a token of his love and courtesy. Yet, I did not do it for my 'lady-love'. I know not by what name to call her, whether 'lady-love', or not. I do not dare to call her by this name. But I think I know this much of love: that if she loved me, she ought not to esteem me less for this crime, but rather call me her true lover, inasmuch as I regarded it as an honour to do all love bade me do, even to mount upon a cart. She ought to ascribe this to love; and this is a certain proof that love thus tries his devotees and thus learns who is really his. But this service did not please my lady, as I discovered by her countenance. And yet her lover did for her that for which many have shamefully reproached and blamed him, though she was the cause of it; and many blame me for the part I have played, and have turned my sweetness into bitterness. In truth, such is the custom of those who know so little of love, that even honour they wash in shame. But whoever dips honour into shame, does not wash it, but rather sullies it. But they, who maltreat him so, are quite ignorant of love; and he, who fears not his commands, boasts himself very superior to him. For unquestionably he fares well who obeys the commands of love, and whatever he does is pardonable, but he is the coward who does not dare."

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(Vv. 4415-4440.) Thus Lancelot makes his lament, and his men stand grieving by his side, keeping hold of him and guarding him. Then the news comes that the Queen is not dead. Thereupon Lancelot at once takes comfort, and if his grief for her death had before been intense and deep, now his joy for her life was a hundred thousand times as great. And when they arrived within six or seven leagues of the castle where King Bademagu was, grateful news of Lancelot was told him, how he was alive and was coming hale and hearty, and this news the king was glad to hear. He did a very courteous thing in going at once to appraise the Queen. And she replies: "Fair sire, since you say so, I believe it is true, but I assure you that, if he were dead, I should never be happy again. All my joy would be cut off, if a knight had been killed in my service."

(Vv. 4441-4530.) Then the king leaves her, and the Queen yearns ardently for the arrival of her lover and her joy. She has no desire this time to bear him any grudge. But rumour, which never rests but runs always unceasingly, again reaches the Queen to the effect that Lancelot would have killed himself for her sake, if he had had the chance. She is happy at the thought that this is true, but she would not have had it happen so for anything, for her sorrow would have been too great. Thereupon Lancelot arrived in haste.<sup>xxiii</sup> As soon as the king sees him, he runs to kiss and embrace him. He feels as if he ought to fly, borne along by the buoyancy of his joy. But his satisfaction is cut short by those who had taken and bound his guest, and the king tells them they have come in an evil hour, for they shall all be killed and confounded. Then they made answer that they thought he would have it so. "It is I whom you have insulted in doing your pleasure. He has no reason to complain," the king replies; "you have not shamed him at all, but only me who was protecting him. However you look at it, the shame is mine. But if you escape me now, you will see no joke in this." When Lancelot hears his wrath, he puts forth every effort to make peace and adjust matters; when his efforts have met with success, the king takes him away to see the Queen. This time the Queen did not lower her eyes to the ground, but she went to meet him cheerfully, honouring him all she could, and making him sit down by her side. Then they talked together at length of all that was upon their hearts, and love furnished them with so much to say that topics did not lack. And when Lancelot sees how well he stands, and that all he says finds favour with the Queen, he says to her in confidence: "Lady, I marvel greatly why you received me with such a countenance when you saw me the day before yesterday, and why you would not speak a word to me: I almost died of the blow you gave me, and I had not the courage to dare to question you about it, as I now venture to do. I am ready now, lady, to make amends, when you have told me what has been the



crime which has caused me such distress." Then the Queen replies: "What? Did you not hesitate for shame to mount the cart? You showed you were loath to get in, when you hesitated for two whole steps. That is the reason why I would neither address nor look at you." "May God save me from such a crime again," Lancelot replies, "and may God show me no mercy, if you were not quite right! For God's sake, lady, receive my amends at once, and tell me, for God's sake, if you can ever pardon me." "Friend, you are quite forgiven," the Queen replies; "I pardon you willingly." "Thank you for that, lady," he then says; "but I cannot tell you here all that I should like to say; I should like to talk with you more at leisure, if possible." Then the Queen indicates a window by her glance rather than with her finger, and says: "Come through the garden to-night and speak with me at yonder window, when every one inside has gone to sleep. You will not be able to get in: I shall be inside and you outside: to gain entrance will be impossible. I shall be able to touch you only with my lips or hand, but, if you please, I will stay there until morning for love of you. Our bodies cannot be joined, for close beside me in my room lies Kay the seneschal, who is still suffering from his wounds. And the door is not open, but is tightly closed and guarded well. When you come, take care to let no spy catch sight of you." "Lady," says he, "if I can help it, no spy shall see me who might think or speak evil of us." Then, having agreed upon this plan, they separate very joyfully.

(Vv. 4551-4650.) Lancelot leaves the room in such a happy frame that all his past troubles are forgotten. But he was so impatient for the night to come that his restlessness made the day seem longer than a hundred ordinary days or than an entire year. If night had only come, he would gladly have gone to the trysting place. Dark and sombre night at last won its struggle with the day, and wrapped it up in its covering, and laid it away beneath its cloak. When he saw the light of day obscured, he pretended to be tired and worn, and said that, in view of his protracted vigils, he needed rest. You, who have ever done the same, may well understand and guess that he pretends to be tired and goes to bed in order to deceive the people of the house; but he cared nothing about his bed, nor would he have sought rest there for anything, for he could not have done so and would not have dared, and furthermore he would not have cared to possess the courage or the power to do so. Soon he softly rose, and was pleased to find that no moon or star was shining, and that in the house there was no candle, lamp, or lantern burning. Thus he went out and looked about, but there was no one on the watch for him, for all thought that he would sleep in his bed all night. Without escort or company he quickly went out into the garden, meeting no one on the way, and he was so fortunate as to find that a part of the garden-wall had

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recently fallen down. Through this break he passes quickly and proceeds to the window, where he stands, taking good care not to cough or sneeze, until the Queen arrives clad in a very white chemise. She wore no cloak or coat, but had thrown over her a short cape of scarlet cloth and shrew-mouse fur. As soon as Lancelot saw the Queen leaning on the window-sill behind the great iron bars, he honoured her with a gentle salute. She promptly returned his greeting, for he was desirous of her, and she of him. Their talk and conversation are not of vulgar, tiresome affairs. They draw close to one another, until each holds the other's hand. But they are so distressed at not being able to come together more completely, that they curse the iron bars. Then Lancelot asserts that, with the Queen's consent, he will come inside to be with her, and that the bars cannot keep him out. And the Queen replies: "Do you not see how the bars are stiff to bend and hard to break? You could never so twist, pull or drag at them as to dislodge one of them." "Lady," says he, "have no fear of that. It would take more than these bars to keep me out. Nothing but your command could thwart my power to come to you. If you will but grant me your permission, the way will open before me. But if it is not your pleasure, then the way is so obstructed that I could not possibly pass through." "Certainly," she says, "I consent. My will need not stand in your way; but you must wait until I retire to my bed again, so that no harm may come to you, for it would be no joke or jest if the seneschal, who is sleeping here, should wake up on hearing you. So it is best for me to withdraw, for no good could come of it, if he should see me standing here." "Go then, lady," he replies; "but have no fear that I shall make any noise. I think I can draw out the bars so softly and with so little effort that no one shall be aroused."

(Vv. 4651-4754.) Then the Queen retires, and he prepares to loosen the window. Seizing the bars, he pulls and wrenches them until he makes them bend and drags them from their places. But the iron was so sharp that the end of his little finger was cut to the nerve, and the first joint of the next finger was torn; but he who is intent upon something else paid no heed to any of his wounds or to the blood which trickled down. Though the window is not low, Lancelot gets through it quickly and easily. First he finds Kay asleep in his bed, then he comes to the bed of the Queen, whom he adores and before whom he kneels, holding her more dear than the relic of any saint. And the Queen extends her arms to him and, embracing him, presses him tightly against her bosom, drawing him into the bed beside her and showing him every possible satisfaction; her love and her heart go out to him. It is love that prompts her to treat him so; and if she feels great love for him, he feels a hundred thousand times as much for her. For there is no love at all in other hearts compared with what there is in his; in his heart

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love was so completely embodied that it was niggardly toward all other hearts. Now Lancelot possesses all he wants, when the Queen voluntarily seeks his company and love, and when he holds her in his arms, and she holds him in hers. Their sport is so agreeable and sweet, as they kiss and fondle each other, that in truth such a marvellous joy comes over them as was never heard or known. But their joy will not be revealed by me, for in a story, it has no place. Yet, the most choice and delightful satisfaction was precisely that of which our story must not speak. That night Lancelot's joy and pleasure were very great. But, to his sorrow, day comes when he must leave his mistress' side. It cost him such pain to leave her that he suffered a real martyr's agony. His heart now stays where the Queen remains; he has not the power to lead it away, for it finds such pleasure in the Queen that it has no desire to leave her: so his body goes, and his heart remains. But enough of his body stays behind to spot and stain the sheets with the blood which has fallen from his fingers. Full of sighs and tears, Lancelot leaves in great distress. He grieves that no time is fixed for another meeting, but it cannot be. Regretfully he leaves by the window through which he had entered so happily. He was so badly wounded in the fingers that they were in sorry state; yet he straightened the bars and set them in their place again, so that from neither side, either before or behind, was it evident that any one had drawn out or bent any of the bars. When he leaves the room, he bows and acts precisely as if he were before a shrine; then he goes with a heavy heart, and reaches his lodgings without being recognised by any one. He throws himself naked upon his bed without awaking any one, and then for the first time he is surprised to notice the cuts in his fingers; but he is not at all concerned, for he is very sure that the wound was caused by dragging the window bars from the wall. Therefore he was not at all worried, for he would rather have had both arms dragged from his body than not enter through the window. But he would have been very angry and distressed, if he had thus injured and wounded himself under any other circumstances.

(Vv. 4755-5006.) In the morning, within her curtained room, the Queen had fallen into a gentle sleep; she had not noticed that her sheets were spotted with blood, but she supposed them to be perfectly white and clean and presentable. Now Meleagant, as soon as he was dressed and ready, went to the room where the Queen lay. He finds her awake, and he sees the sheets spotted with fresh drops of blood, whereupon he nudges his companions and, suspicious of some mischief, looks at the bed of Kay the seneschal, and sees that his sheets are blood-stained too, for you must know that in the night his wounds had begun to bleed afresh. Then he said: "Lady, now I have found the evidence that I desired. It