

The Gray Palfrey

translated by Isabel Butler

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The Gray Palfrey.

This tale is set in writing to portray and call to remembrance the worth, gentleness and honour that can be drawn from women; for well should we hold in mind the virtues that may be seen in them. Right sorry am I, and much it irketh me that they are not exalted and praised of all men to the height of their deserts. God! if but their hearts were sound and steadfast, strong and true, there were in all the world no treasure like unto them, It is great loss and great pity that they take not more heed to themselves; at the lightest breath a woman will change and shift and vary; her heart seemeth a very weather cock, for oft it chanches that in a little space her spirit changeth more quickly than the storm wind.

Now in that I have been commanded to that I have set my hand, I will not leave it for dread of faithless cowards who envy those whose hearts are brave and valiant, nor fail to run my race out, to make me known and win me fame. In the lay of the Gray Palfrey, hear now the wisdom of Huon Leroy wisely come down to you; and inasmuch as he knoweth how to listen to reason, he would fain display his sayings, right well he turns them, methinketh.

Now know ye that a valiant knight, courteous and right chivalrous, high of heart but poor in havings, dwelt in the land of Champagne. Full meet it is I portray his worth and the valour wherewith he was kindled; in many a place he proved his prowess, for he had wisdom and honour and a heart of great valiancy. Had he but been as rich in gear as he was in desire for good provided always he did not worsen by reason of his wealth he would have known no peer, equal or fellow. And now I make me ready for the story, for meet it is the deeds of a man of prowess be told from end to end, that we may take therefrom a fair and goodly example. Now this knight was praised of all folk.

Wheresoever he went his valour was confessed, for those who knew him not yet loved the fame of him by reason of the good that sprang from him. When he had helm on head and rode into the tourney, no thought had he for the wooing of ladies, nor did he linger on the outskirts. There where the press was greatest he smote right hardily.

Armed and ahorseback he was full fair to see; ever he went gaily clad, even in midwinter; and of some he was blamed for his gaiety of heart.

Little wealth of land he had; at the most it yielded him no more than two hundred pounds a year; but ever he rode far and wide in search of honour.

In those days in Champagne the woodland was wilder than it is today and likewise the open. Now it came to pass this knight fell to dreaming of a love fair and valiant, a damsel, to wit, daughter to one of the foremost men of that land, one no wise wanting in riches, rather was he well supplied with goods and gear, and dwelt within strong walls. A full thousand pounds each year his land brought him; and often men came to him to seek his daughter in marriage, in that all folk were won by her great beauty. No other children he had, nor any wife living, and his time was almost spent. His dwelling stood in a wood, and all round about it the forest was great and thick.

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Now the young knight of whom I told you made bold to seek the damsel, but her father gainsaid him, no desire had he that the youth should love her, or win him honor by means of her. The young knight's name was Messire Guillaume of a sooth, and he abode in that same forest wherein the old vavasour had his stronghold, with its riches and its wide lands. The one manor was two leagues distant from the other; but on both sides love could not fail to spring up, and on nought else was their thought set save its maintenance. And when the knight wished to go to her he loved, he made a path through the deep forest that was great and thick thereabouts, a way traversed by no living man save him only. By it he rode secretly to the damsel many a time, he and his palfrey, all still and quietly. Sore vexed was he that he could not speak to her face to face, but the court was right strongly enclosed, and high was the barrier; the damsel dared not issue out, but her comfort was that she spoke to him many a time through the timbers of the wall. Without, the fosse was wide, and the hedge thick and strong, so they could not come close to one another. The house stood upon a rock, and was full strongly enclosed. At the entrance was a drawbridge; moreover, the old knight who was in all ways crafty, and who had well nigh run out his time, seldom stirred out of the house, for he could no longer ride abroad, but sat at home in peace. He had his daughter well watched; and for his delight he made her sit with him, which oftentimes irked her in that thereby she lost that joy to which her heart was rooted. But the young knight who was wise and valiant did not forget the way to her; he asketh only to see her.

Inasmuch as he saw that matters could not be otherwise, oftentimes he returned to her dwelling, but never could he enter in, and never could he see her, who was so close a prisoner, as nigh at hand as his heart desired.

Oft he came to see her, yet never could he look upon her, for she could not so stand that he could see her face all clearly. And the heart of each was sore stricken.

The knight, whom it beseemed to love the maid who was of such marvellous worth her like was not known, had so the tale telleth us a palfrey of great price; a vair it was, of wondrous colour, that no man might conceive of any colour, or the semblance of any flower so perfect in its beauty; know ye that in no kingdom was there its like in those days for goodliness, and none that went so soft an amble. The knight loved it much, and certes, he would not part with it for any treasure; long had the folk of that land seen it in his possession. Now oftentimes on this palfrey he rode to seek the damsel through the fair and solitary forest where he had worn a path, known to none save to him and to the palfrey. Little noise he made as he rode to seek his love; right great care must he take that he be not seen of her father, for full bitter was her life to her.

Thus then they spent their days, each longing for the other, for they could never comfort themselves with kiss or embrace, and I tell you of a sooth that if ever the lips of the one might have touched those of the other, right sweet had it seemed to the fellowship of those twain. Full fierce was the fire they could in no wise quench, for if they might have drawn each other close, and kissed and embraced full sweetly as they had great will and desire to do, then could no man have wrought them annoy, but their joy had been perfect. Now right great was their pain in that they might in no wise touch or solace one another.

Little joy could they have in one another save that of speech and hearing, and rarely they saw one another, for too cruel was the interdict between these two lovers. She was in fear of her father, for were he to know of the intercourse between those twain, he would more quickly give her in marriage elsewhere; and the knight on his part desired to do nought that might undo the love that was between them, and would not risk a quarrel, for much he feared that old man who was rich out of all measure.

Now the knight bethought himself, and day after day pondered the life he led, for ever he held it in mind. And at length the thought came to his heart that let it be for good or for ill, he would go speak to the old vavasour, and ask him for his daughter to wife, let what so will come of it, for he knoweth not what his present life will bring to him. Every day of the week he is denied that which he coveteth, for over narrow is the path.

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So one day he made him ready and went to hold speech with the old man in his own house, there where his daughter was. Right well was he received, for full well was he known to the old man and to his household. And the knight who was brave and courteous, and ready of speech like a man of worth in whom naught lacketh, spoke, saying: "Sir, I am come hither, and of your grace I pray you hearken to my words. I have come into your house to ask a boon, may God let you grant it me."

The old man looked upon him, and thereafter asked: "What may it be?"

By my faith, I will help you herein, if I may, saving my honour." "Yea, sir, this much I know of your matters that right well ye may it; now may God grant you concede it." "I will if it liketh me, but if it liketh me not, right well shall I know how to give denial; and if it is not my will to vouchsafe it, I will not deceive you by either token or promise." "Sir," he saith, "I will tell you now the gift I would ask of you. You know somewhat of my estate; well knew ye my father, my house and dwelling, and right well know ye the time and manner wherein I take my delight; and now in guerdon of this, sir, I would ask of you your daughter, if it be your will. Now may God grant that no thought so trouble your heart that by reason of the presumption of my request ye refuse me this gift."

And I would that you know I was never of her acquaintance; right glad and joyous had I been if I might have spoken with her, and seen for myself the goodness for which she is famed. Greatly is she beloved in this land by reason of her virtues; meseemeth she hath not her like in all the world. So tell me all those who know her, though but to few is she known in that she lives imprisoned herewithin. An overbold thought was mine when I dared ask her of you, but if I have your consent, and ye deign to give me the gift of her by way of service and guerdon, right glad and joyful shall I be thereof. Now have I made my prayer and do you answer me at your pleasure."

Then forthright and without staying for any counsel the old man saith to him: "Right well do I understand all ye have said, for all is plain therein. My daughter is young and fair and wise and a damsel of high lineage; and I am a rich vasasour, sprung of a noble house, and my land yieldeth a good thousand pounds each year. Now I am not so out of my wit that I would give my daughter to a knight who lives by what he may chance to win; for I have no other children save her only, nor has she failed my love, and after my time all will be hers, wherefore I desire to marry her well. I know of no prince in this kingdom, nor from here even to Lorraine, who howsoever wise and valiant he may be would not do well in having her to wife. Awhile agone, scarce a month since, one asked her of me in marriage whose land yieldeth a good five hundred pounds a year, which would now be made over to me, if I would give assent to his offer. But my daughter can well wait a little, for I am so rich in goods and gear that she will not lose her price or her value in marriage. The man of highest lineage in all this land or from here to Alemaigne, save only king or count, may well be hers."

Now when the knight heard this he was sorely abashed, nor did he make any tarrying but took leave and went away. But he knew not what to do in that he was so swayed and constrained by love, wherefore he made bitter lament.

When the damsel knew of the dismissal, and what her father had said, she was full sorrowful, for she was not light of love but had given her heart wholly to the knight, more so than words can tell. Before he who was wrathful with grief returned home again, they held speech together without the wall, and both spoke their thought. The knight told her all he had said to her father and of their falling out. "O lady, frank and free," saith the knight, "now what shall I do? Meseemeth I must leave this land and ride at errantry, for all I desired is vanished. You I may not win, and I know not what will become of me. On an ill day I came to know the great riches whereon your father so prides himself; liefer would I have you poorer, for had your father not been so rich he would have looked with favour on what I may win." "Certes," saith she, "and I might have my way, gladly would I have less than I am to have."

Ah, Sir, if my father would but give thought to your valour and worth, by my faith, he would not gainsay your wooing me, and making a covenant with him; if he but weighed your riches over against your valiancy surely he

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would grant the compact. But his heart is overladen with prudence; he does not desire what I desire, nor sorrow at my sorrow. If he were at one with my thought, right soon were the thing granted. But the heart that beats in old age giveth no thought to youth nor to the desire of youth, for the heart of the old is not as that of the young, methinketh. Yet if you will do according to my counsel you cannot fail of winning me."

"Yes, by my faith, even so will I do, damsel; now without fail tell me your will." "I have bethought me," she saith, "of a thing on which my mind hath often dwelt. You know right well you have an uncle who is of great wealth, and a strong manor he hath within his defences. Even so rich as my father is he, and he hath neither wife nor child nor brother, nor any heir nearer than you yourself. 'T is well and fully known that after his death all will be yours, and his money and rents are well worth sixty marks of fine gold. Now go to him straightway, old he is and frail, as ye know right well; tell him that you have had such words with my father that never can you be of accord with him unless he aid you in the matter. Let him promise you as much land as will bring in three hundred pounds yearly, and let him come to ask this thing of my father, who greatly loves him. Your uncle looks on my father as a sage, and each deems the other a man of worth; both are old and full of years, each wholly trusts the other; and if your uncle will graciously do so much for your love that you can induce him to promise you so much of his havings that he can say to my father: 'My nephew shall have three hundred pounds of my land in return for your daughter whom he seeketh,' then the marriage will indeed come to pass, for I truly believe my father would yea-say it, if your uncle spoke in this wise. And when you shall have married me, you will return to him again all the land which he will have promised to you on these terms; and I have so given myself over to your love that I shall be well content of the bargain." "Fair one," he saith, "now know ye of a sooth that never did I desire anything so much, and straightway will I speak with my uncle."

So he took his leave and returned home again; but his thoughts were sad and sombrous because of the refusal he had met with. Thus he rideth through the forest upon his gray palfrey; in sore wrath is he, and yet right glad at heart by reason of the wise and good counsel the damsel had given him. So he rode without let or hindrance to Medet where his uncle dwelleth. Straightway he came before him and maketh to him sore complaint and lament. Thereafter they went into an upper chamber, and there he told his uncle plainly all his plight and his covenant. "Uncle, if you will do so much," saith he, "that you will speak to him of the matter, and tell him that you have given over to me three hundred pounds of your land, I will without condition pledge you, and my hand in your hand, herewith promise you, that when I shall have married the damsel who is now denied me you shall have your land again all quit, as guerdon and reward; now do as I beseech you." "Nephew," saith his uncle, "right willingly, for I am well pleased and content with the project.

By my head, you would marry the best in the land, and I think I can bring it to pass." "Uncle," saith he, "prithe hasten my suit, and so press it that he consent to the marriage, for I would fain no longer waste my time; and meantime, I will go to the tournament at Galardon; I shall be full richly accoutred, and may God grant me as guerdon that I do so well that my suit may thereby be bettered. And do you bethink you to so contrive that the wedding may be on my return." "Right willingly, fair nephew," saith he, "I am right glad of your tidings, in that the maid is frank and free." Then Messire Guillaume rode away forthwith; and he made great joy in that his uncle had said that he should of a sooth have to wife her whom he so desired, of no other joy is he fain. So all alight with happiness he rode to the tourney as one who is well wont thereto.

The next morning at dawn of day, his uncle got him to horseback, and six more with him, and before the hour of prime came to the spot where dwelt the old vavasour, who maintained a full rich household, and who was father to her whose beauty knew no fault. He was received with full great state, for he was much beloved of the old man whose fellow he was in years, in that he was his neighbour and mightily rich. So the old man made great cheer and joy, in that this other who was of high estate had come to see him, and forgot not to say: "Right welcome are you, fair sir." And a goodly feast was spread, for the old man was frank and free, and knew well how to honour him whom he would.

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When the tables were removed there were tales told, old meetings of lance and sword and shield; and of old deeds was many a fair word said. But the uncle of the good knight did not over long forget himself, but laid bare his thought, and all openly he saith to the old man: "Where am I wandering? As God may aid me, I love you right well, as you shall now hear. I am come to you to seek help in a matter; may God so incline your heart that my prayer be heard in such wise and manner that I may attain it." And the old vavasour maketh answer: "By my head, I have so taken you into my heart, that even though it be to my hurt, nothing sought by you shall be refused, but rather shall the boon be granted you." "Sir, thanks and guerdon will I gladly give you," saith the old man, who delayeth no longer to speak his thought: "Fair sir, I have come to ask for your daughter who is wise and discreet; fain would I take her to wife, and before I marry her, she shall receive a dower from my own store, for I am passing rich. Ye know I have no heir of my own flesh and blood, which sore grieveth me, and to her I will be of good faith inasmuch as you are right dear to me. When I shall have taken your daughter to wife, I shall not be fain to leave you, or to dispart my wealth from yours, rather all shall be one; and together we will hold in common that which God hath given us." Then he who was prudent and wise was right glad, and said: "Sir, without any naysaying I will give her to you, and right willingly, inasmuch as you are a man of worth and honesty.

Full glad am I that you have asked her of me; had I been given the best castle in all Friesland I would not have known such joy; to none would I give her in marriage so gladly as to you, for I have found you discreet and a man of wisdom in all points wherein I have known ought of your affairs."

Thereupon he promised and affianced to him the damsel who had no desire for him, but thought surely to have another. Now when the damsel knew the truth she was in sore grief and dismay. Ofttimes she maketh oath to Saint Mary that she would never be married to that old man; all woful she was, and weeping, ofttimes she made lament: "Alas, unhappy that I am, how am I undone. What treason hath this old man wrought! Surely he deserves death. How he hath deceived his nephew, that brave and gentle knight who is all compact of goodness. And now, lo you, I am given to this old man, all only because of his riches. May God give him his reward for it. Surely he hath wrought great folly; never will he know gladness, and on the day he weddeth me he will win a mortal enemy. Alas, that I should ever see the day. Nay, may God not grant me life so long that I do see it. Now hath my friend sorrow and great anguish; never have I heard of such treason. If I were not so imprisoned right soon would I end this matter; but I can do nought, nor even issue out of this house. I must needs abide here and endure my father's will; but the pain is over cruel. Ah, God, what can I do, and when will he who hath been so cruelly betrayed return again? If he knew how his uncle had dealt by him, and had sinned towards me, I know full well that all joyless I would die and cease to be; and if he knew this, by my head, I think he would come to his end; and my great woes would cease. God, how my heart is torn; better would I love death than life.

What envy and what treason! How did that old man dare think this thing? None can dispute with him for me, for my father loveth covetousness which doth overmuch tempt and allure him. Fie upon old age, fie upon wealth! Shall no man ever win a wife rich and of high lineage unless he have great possessions? Certes, I ought to hate him who separateth me from the one in whom I claim a part, and who thought of a surety to have me, but now meseemeth, I shall fail him."

Thus the damsel made lament in her sore distress, for her heart was so bound in love to the young knight that scarce can she conceal her thought from any; and contrarywise, she hateth him to whom her father hath given her. She thinketh herself evilly bestowed, for he is old and of great age, his face is all wrinkled and his eyes red and hateful. From Chalons even unto Beauvais was no knight older than he seemed in all points, nor even unto Sens any of greater riches, so men say. But the folk of that land held him for coward and felon, whereas she so shone with beauty and valiancy that in all the kingdom of France was no woman so fair, or so frank and courteous. Full diverse was the portioning, on one side bright, on the other dark; nor was there any shadow in the light, or any glimmer in the darkness. Fain would the damsel whom love so grieved and tormented have changed her plight. But he who had betrothed her and had great joy of her well devised his affair, and set term for the wedding, even as one who had no suspicions, and knew nought of the debate and grief in her whom love held captive, even as ye have heard me relate.

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Now I must not fail to tell you of the conclusion of the marriage. He who was wise and a man of worth made himself ready full richly. And before the third, day dawned the old vavasour had bidden all the hoary old heads sprung of that land and countryside, those he deemed men of most wisdom, to be present at the high marriage of his daughter, she who had set her heart elsewhere. She had given her love and desire to the brave and far-famed knight, but now 't is seen how without hope she is tricked and betrayed. The two old knights have assembled a goodly company, for they were well known to all the men of years and worth in that land, and the more part came thither, a good thirty in number; not one of them but had revenue and safeguard from the old vavasour, and now they are come together in his house.

So the word is gone forth that the damsel shall be married at dawn of day. And the maidens who attend her are bidden to make her ready; but they give thought to the day and the hour, which sorely displeases them, and assume looks of great dismay. The old knight asketh them on whom his command is laid if his daughter is fully prepared, and if she is in doubt about aught, and if anything lacketh whereof she hath need. "No, fair sir, nought that I can see," so made answer one of the damsels, "if but we had palfreys and saddles to carry us all to the minster; for there will be, methinketh, great company of ladies, cousins and kindred who dwell nigh at hand." "There need be no fear for palfreys," quoth he, "methinketh there will be enough and to spare." And there was not a baron in the land from whom he did not command one; and he to whom the message was given went straightway to the dwelling of him whose heart was all fulfilled with valour, he who shone with prowess.

Now Messire Guillaume, the brave and wise, knew not that the marriage had been plotted to this point, but love which goaded his heart had hastened his return. Of nought could he think save that which tormented him; and his love waxed and flourished. Yet he had come back from the tourney as one no wise unglad, for he still thought to have for his own her he has now lost, unless it please God and some adventure betide. Each day he expected fair and pleasant tidings, and that his uncle would send word to him that he might marry the damsel.

So he went singing through the house, and he made a minstrel play new songs upon the viol; full of joy and mirth he was, for furthermore, he had won every prize at the tourney. But ever he looks towards the door to see if anyone cometh with news.

Much he wonders when they will send to him, and at the last he stops his singing, for love forbids him to set his thought on aught beside. And now, lo you, without more tarrying, a varlet enters the court. When Messire Guillaume saw him his heart leaped and trembled with joy; and the varlet saith to him: "God save you, sir; the old vavasour who has long been your friend, as ye well know, hath in great need sent me to you. You have a palfrey of great price, no other in the world goeth so soft an amble; now my lord prayeth and commandeth that you loan it to him of your love, and send it to him this same night." "And wherefore, friend?" saith he. "Sir, to bear his daughter to the minster, our lady gracious and fair." "And to what end goeth she thither?" "Fair sir, there she is to marry your uncle to whom she is affianced; and tomorrow morning at dawn she is to be escorted to the waste chapel that lieth on the edge of the forest. But ye delay too long, sir, prithee haste; lend now to your uncle and my liege lord your palfrey, the best in the kingdom as I well know, for oft has it been so proven."

Messire Guillaume heareth him. "God," saith he, "hath my uncle whom I so trusted, and besought so fairly that he help me in my need, now betrayed me? May the Lord God never forgive him his misdeed and his treason! Scarce can I believe he has done this; methinketh you speak not truly." "You may know it of a truth tomorrow," saith he, "before the hour of prime; and already great is the assembly at his house of ancient knights of the land." "Alas," saith he, "how I have been tricked and deceived and betrayed." And for sorrow he well nigh fell to the ground in a swoon; in sooth, had he not feared blame from the folk of the household he would have done otherwise than he did. All hot he was with wrath and sorrow, and knew not what to do or say. Unceasingly he made lament; but despite his sore distress, the messenger urgeth him and changeth his thought: "Sir, let your good palfrey be saddled straightway, and my lady will ride upon him to the minster, for softly he goeth." And he who was easily moved still maketh sorrow, even while he masters his grief in bethinking what he will do, namely, to know of a truth if he will indeed send his gray palfrey to him he needs must hate above all others.

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"Yes," saith he straightway, "she who is of such high excellence, and whom I have now lost, hath no blame herein, much it irketh me. My palfrey will go to serve her, and requite the high honour I have always found in her, for I have proven her at all points; but nevermore will she be mine, this I may know of a truth.

"Now I have not spoken wisely, rather have I lost my wit and fallen short of the mark, when I thought to send my palfrey for the joy and delight of him who has betrayed me and brought me to nought. Hath he not forced me to turn away from her whom I thought to have for mine own? No man should love one who seeketh his betrayal. Over bold is he who asketh for my palfrey; nothing of mine will I send to him of whom I have nought. Hath he not disinherited me of the sweetness, beauty and great courtesy for which my lady is praised?

"Long time I served her in vain; well had I deserved the sovereign honour of her; but now no joy of her shall I have henceforth. How send him who maketh me so sorrowful anything whereof he will be glad? But none the less, though it cost me somewhat that she who is of such goodness should ride upon my palfrey, well I know that when she looks on him, he will recall me to her remembrance. I have loved her in good faith, I do love her and shall love her always, but her love costs me too dear. All solitary I will be her lover, yet I know not if she put her heart into the old intimacy that hath made my heart so heavy and sorrowful; methinketh it was not dear to her; Cain the brother of Abel did no greater treason. Now is my heart in sore torment by reason of her of whom I have no comfort." Thus he made lament unceasingly; but he let saddle the palfrey and called the squire; to his enemy he sent the gray palfrey, and the messenger set out straightway.

Messire Guillaume had no respite from his sorrow, he shut himself into his chamber all wrathful and sorrowful, and said to all his sergeants that were any so bold as to attempt to make merry, he would have him hung or put to the sword. No heart had he for joy, rather he was fain to lead a life without cheer, for he could no wise drive out the heaviness, the grief and the pain from his heart. Meantime, he to whom he had given the palfrey led it away, and returned forthwith to the house of his master, who made great joy.

The night was clear and still, and within the house was a great company of ancient knights. When they had eaten plenteously, the old man bade the watch, and said to all and commanded them, that an hour before daylight they be all awake and ready, and horses and palfreys be saddled and accoutred without noise or disorder; and thereafter they all went to rest and sleep. But she whom love caused to sigh and tremble with dread had no thought of sleep, not once that night did she slumber; all others slept, she watched. Nor was her heart asleep but all intent on making moan; and if it might have been, she would never have waited for the stirring of the men or the coming of the dawn, but would have fled away forthwith.

After midnight, the moon arose, and lighted all the heavens and the air; and when the watch, who had drunk deep, saw the great light round about him, he thought the dawn was breaking. "The high company of knights should have been astir before now," he thought; and he sounded the dawn, and called aloud and cried: "Up lordings, the day breaketh."

So cried he who was all bemuddled from the wine he had drunk over night. And they who had scarce rested or slept arose all bewildered, and hastily the squires saddled the horses, for they thought the day had come. But before ever the dawn shall break they may well ride and travel a good five leagues.

The palfreys were saddled, and all the old men who were to escort the damsel to the waste chapel on the edge of the forest had mounted, and the maiden was committed to the care of the most discreet. The gray palfrey had been saddled, and when it was led forth, she made greater sorrow than ever she had made before. But the wise old men guessed nothing, nor knew her thought, rather they deemed she wept because she was leaving her father's house; nought they understood of her tears or the sorrow that she made; all wofully she got her to horseback.

So they rode forth together, and turned straight towards the forest, methinketh. They found the path so narrow that no two could ride abreast; now they who accompanied the damsel were in the rear, and the others went on before;

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and he who was her escort, in that he saw the path was narrow, made her go before him, while he rode behind by reason of the straitness of the way.

Long was the cavalcade, but inasmuch as they had slept little they were wearied and worn, and somewhat dispirited; also they rode the more heavily in that they old were and ancient, and by reason it was long before day they were the more given over to slumber. So drowsing upon the necks of their horses they rode up hill and down dale; and he who had been chosen as the most discreet escorted the damsel; but passing little rest had he had in his bed that night, and sleep tricked him into forgetfulness, for great was his desire of slumber.

Now as for the damsel she was distressed by nought save her love and her grief. And while she was in this narrow path whereof I have spoken, the great company of knights and barons passed on; the more part were bent low over their saddles, some few watched, but their thoughts were on other matters than the escort of the damsel; and ever they rode on swiftly through the deep forest. The damsel was in deep distress, even as one who would fain be elsewhere, in London or Winchester.

The gray palfrey well knew this old and narrow way, for many a time had he traversed it. Anon they rode down a steep hillside where the forest grew so thick that the light of the moon was hidden; full dusky there was the wood, for right deep was the valley. Loud was the noise of the horses, and the more part of the barons rode before her. Some bent low in sleep over their comrades, some waked and talked; and so they all fared on together. Now the gray palfrey which the damsel rode, following in the rear of the company, did not know the way of the highroad that ran straight before them, but chose a by-path to the right which led directly to the house of Messire Guillaume. The palfrey seeth the path, full oft had he traversed it, and straightway left the road and the cavalcade of horses. As for the knight who accompanied the damsel, he was so overtaken with sleep that ever and again he let his palfrey stop short in the roadway. And now no one guides the damsel, save God only; she gives her palfrey the rein and he turns into the tangled by-way.

Not one of the knights discover that the damsel is no longer following them, more than a league they ride before they take note thereof; little care hath her guide and leader given her. And she did not wittingly take flight, but rather rode on as one who knoweth not the way nor to what land the road leadeth.

The palfrey follows the path nor goeth astray, for often, both summer and winter, had he been there before. The damsel all woful oftentimes looketh about her, but sees neither knight nor baron. Full perilous seemed the forest, sombre and darksome; and she was right fearful in that she was without companions. No great marvel is it that she was afraid, and much she wondered what had become of the knights who had borne her company. Full glad she was of the mischance, yet woful that she had no guide, save God alone, for herself and the palfrey who had often passed that way before. But she committed her to God, and the palfrey bore her away. She who was sore discomforted gave him the rein, nor did she utter a single cry, for she had no wish that those others should hear her, or return to her again. Rather would she die in the wild wood than make such a marriage.

Thus she rode deep in thought, and the palfrey, which knew the path well and was eager to get him home again, went at so swift a pace that he speedily traversed that great forest. On a hillside was a stream which ran swift and dark; the palfrey went straight thither, for he knew the ford, which was not very deep or wide, and he passed over it as fast as might be. Scarce had they left it behind when the damsel heard the sound of a horn from the side whither the gray palfrey was bearing her.

The watch was above the gate, and played upon his horn to herald the day, and thither rode the damsel. Straight to the house she came, all abashed and astray, even as one who knoweth neither the road nor the pass nor how to ask the way. Thus the palfrey left the path, and came out upon the bridge which led across a deep water that enclosed all the manor.

The Gray Palfrey

And the watch on guard sounding his horn heard the noise and clatter of the palfrey upon the bridge, which had crossed there many a time before. He stopped his horn blowing for a little and cometh down from his place, and as forthright: "Who is it rides so hard over the bridge at this hour?" And the damsel it maketh answer: "Surely the most unhappy lady ever born of woman. In God's name let me within until the day dawneth, for I know not whither I should go." "Certes, damsel," he maketh answer, "that I dare not do, nor to bring anyone into this house, save by the leave of my lord; and never hath any man been in greater grief than he now is; right sorrowful is he in that he hath been cruelly betrayed."

Now even as he spoke in this wise, he put his face and eyes to an opening in the postern; neither torch nor lantern had he, for the moon shone clear, and he seeth the gray palfrey; right well he knew it, often had he looked on it aforetime. Much he wondered whence it came; and long he looked upon the damsel who held it by the rein, and who was richly dight in new and goodly raiment. Speedily the watch goeth to his master, who lay upon his bed all joyless. "Sir," saith he, "a damsel is come hither out of the wood, all uncounselled is she, and young of look and seeming; rich is her array, full rich her garments; meseemeth, she is wrapped about in a mantle richly furred, and her gown, methinketh, is of fine scarlet. Sad and downcast she rideth upon your gray palfrey; no whit unpleasing is her speech, but fair and gracious: I would not willingly lie to you, sir, but I believe in all this land is no maid so fair and winsome. Methinketh she is a fay that God hath brought hither to you, to make good the loss that hath rendered you so heavy hearted; fair amends will she make you for her ye have lost."

Messire Guillaume heareth him, and forthwith springeth to his feet; with a surcoat upon his back and nought beside he cometh to the door, and bade it be speedily opened. The damsel crieth out to him, sighing:

"Ah, gentle sir, sore travail hath been mine this night. Sir, in God's name, be not angry, but let me enter now your house, I ask not to abide there.

I am in sore distress by reason of a company of knights who are now in great dismay inasmuch as they have lost me. For safeguard I have come to you, even as chance has led me; right sorrowful am I and all astray."

Messire Guillaume heard her and had to great joy thereof. He knew the palfrey that had long been his own, and he looketh hard upon the damsel, a more joyful man there might not be. So he leadeth her into his house; he hath set her down from her palfrey, and taking her by the hand hath kissed her more than twenty times. And she made no denial, for right well she knew him. One looked upon the other, and right great joy made they between them; and in one another they forgot all their griefs. He took from her her mantle, and joyfully they sat them down upon a cushion of rich silk bordered with gold. Each maketh the sign of the cross a good twenty times, for scarcely can they believe it is not a dream, they look upon. And when the serving-men were gone, much they solaced themselves with kisses, but no other misdoing was there between them.

Freely the damsel told him all her plight; now she saith blessed was the hour of her birth, in that God that led her thither, and hath, as fortune willed it, delivered her from that other who thought to make her his own in return for his chatels and gear. Now in the morning at dawn of day, Messire Guillaume arrays himself, and lets bring the damsel into his court and chapel, and without delay he lets summon his chaplain.

Speedily the knight had himself married and bound in holy wedlock; not lightly may the twain be parted. And when the mass was sung, maids and serving-men and squires made great joy within the house.

But great annoy was theirs who had heedlessly lost her. They were come together at the waste chapel, and right weary were they from riding the night long, not one of them but was the worse for it. Then the old man demanded his daughter of him who had guarded her so ill; he knew not what to say, but speedily he made answer; "Sir, she rode before me, I was behind, for right narrow was the path and the forest great and thick. I know not if she turned aside, for I drowsed in my saddle; now and again I awoke and ever I deemed her near me, but certes, she is not here now, and I know not what hath become of her; right ill have we guarded her, "

The Gray Palfrey

The old man looked for her up and down, and asked and inquired of all where she was, and if they had seen her; sorely were they all abashed thereat, and had no word to say. And he who was to wed the damsel was yet more woful. He was not slow to seek her, but nought avails him his search for the right scent was lost. Now even amid their dismay a squire rode spurring down the path, and anon he cometh before the old man. "Sir," saith he, "Messire Guillaume sendeth you his goodliest fellowship. Very early this morning in the first dawn, he married your daughter; wherefore right glad and joyful is he. Come ye to him, sir; and likewise he biddeth his uncle who did so falsely by him, but now he pardoneth him the offence, inasmuch as he hath the gift of your daughter."

The old man gave ear to the marvel, never had he heard its like. He calleth and assembleth all his barons, and when they were come together he taketh counsel that he will go, and take with him that other to whom he had pledged his daughter; the marriage he seeth to be a sooth, no undoing may there be of that. So he who was right wise rode thither quickly and all his barons with him. When they came to the house they were received full richly, and Messire Guillaume made great joy, even as one who is glad at heart by reason of his guerdon. The father must needs grant the marriage whether he would or no, and the old man of the twisted moustaches took what comfort he might therein. Even so, lordings, the Lord God willed that this marriage which seemed good to him be established.

Messire Guillaume was brave, courteous and right valourous, and no whit did his prowess abate, but rather he strove the more, and was well looked on by counts and princes. Now before the third year, as the tale telleth us, the old man died, this is sooth, and he gave and granted all his wealth to the knight, who thereafter held all his lands which were rich and plenteous. A good thousand pounds a year the land yielded him....

And he held it quit of all claim.

So the adventure I have related endeth in this wise, as truth telleth you.