

# Erle of Tolous

*anon*

*a fourteenth century Middle English Breton lai*

Translated and retold in Modern English prose  
by

**Richard Scott-Robinson**

This lai has been translated and retold from: Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Eds), 1995. *The Middle English Breton Lays*. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. From a copy found in Cambridge MS Ff.2.38.

Copyright © Richard Scott-Robinson, 2015, 2025

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. The download of a single copy for personal use, or for teaching purposes, does not require permission.  
richardsr@hotmail.co.uk



# Erle of Tolous

anon

late fourteenth century

**J**hesu Cryste in Trynyté oonly God and persons thre · graunt us wele to spede · and gyf us grace so to do · that we may come thy blys unto · on Rode as thou can blede – Jesus Christ in Trinity, three entities and only God, who bled on the cross for us – grant us success and give us the grace to live our lives so that we can come at last into your bliss.

My dear noblemen, I shall tell you a tale of something that happened in a far-away land a long time ago. It's about a lady who had great misfortune and how she then recovered from her grief. Please, listen!

**O**nce, there was in Germany a powerful emperor, whose name was Sir Diocletian. He was courageous and strong and all Christendom feared him. He had disinherited many men and seized their lands unjustly, by force of arms. One day, conflict arose between a knight and himself.

Sir Barnard was the Earl of Toulouse, and the emperor was not his friend. The emperor had stolen land from him worth three hundred pounds a year, which annoyed the earl greatly. The earl was a mighty lord himself and he and many others recognised the wrong that had been done to him. He gathered an army, entered the emperor's lands and began to burn and to kill.

The emperor had a wife, the most beautiful lady who has ever lived, with the exception of the Virgin Mary of course. She was gracious and charitable, and faithful to her husband as far as her body went, which augmented her virtue still further. She said to him: 'My dear lord, play fair with the earl and give him back his land.'

'Madam, I don't wish to hear any more about it,' he replied.

'That day will never come. As long as I can ride a horse, he shall never have his lands again. Upon my nobility, I would rather cut his brain into two pieces! He's making war upon me as we speak, but I'll be ready for him in fourteen days' time.'

The emperor sent word to all his able-bodied men that they should make themselves ready to fight against the earl. He had this command cried out in towns and villages

*There is much dispute over whether this Middle English Breton lai has its roots in history – events in ninth century France, perhaps – or whether it simply recasts a motif that was already common in folktale and legend, that of the calumniated queen. Both episodes of its diptych-like structure centre upon the motif of disguise: in the first part, the Earl of Toulouse glimpses the emperor's beautiful wife while disguised as a beggar; in the second part, he questions her while disguised as a monk, before defending her in a trial by combat.*

*There are four other Middle English manuscript copies of this story, dating to the fifteenth and sixteenth century: in Bodleian Library, Oxford, MSS Ashmole 45 and 61, Cambridge University Library MS Ff.2.38 and in Lincoln Cathedral Library MS 91, in which Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Isumbras and the Awntyrs of Arthur are also found. There are versions of this story in many other medieval European languages as well. This Middle English version was probably composed in the latter half of the fourteenth century.*

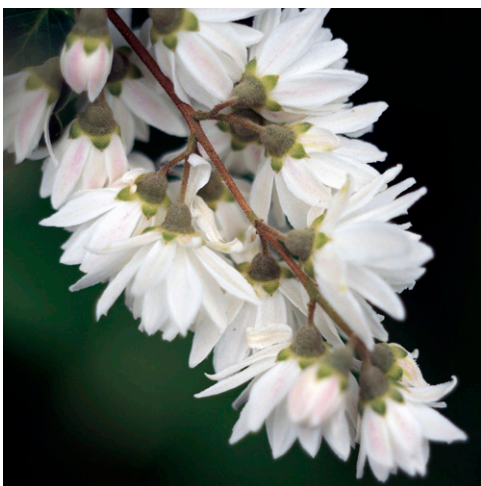
throughout the land. All those capable of wielding a weapon, be it a spear, a sword or a crossbow, were to make themselves ready to fight, he commanded. The earl, for his part, gathered forty thousand men. A day of battle was set, and when they came together, many a head was smashed!

The emperor had seven battalions, which he addressed sternly: 'Be ready to fight,' he commanded. 'Go and give them hell! Show them no mercy. Kill them all! Don't capture any of them for ransom – not for gold nor any income from land. Impale them all on your lances and then cut their throats!'

But for all the emperor's stern rhetoric, the earl's forces put up a good fight. Battle raged everywhere, knights galloped together with shields and lances, swords and axes thrust and hacked as though their wielders were mad. It made a terrible noise. Shields and lances were splintered, heads were sliced in half despite helmet and hood, chain mail was ripped to shreds. The earl himself drew an axe and killed a hundred men with it that day, he was so skilled and valiant in warfare.

Many a horse was impaled, many a bold nobleman lay wallowing in his own gore. So much blood was spilled that day that it was like wading through a lake of it! Bodies and heads were strewn across the battlefield, and many a fearless and valiant knight was left lying in the mud. Many wives would sit and weep, where they used to sleep peacefully at night.

The Earl of Toulouse won the day. The emperor gazed forlornly upon his defeat and fled to a nearby castle, intending to lie low. He had three earls with him, the only ones to have escaped the conflict without being killed or captured. The Earl of Toulouse chased down



the retreating forces until the light gave out, then he gave thanks to God for the victory. The emperor lost sixty thousand men in that battle, and three hundred and fifty high-ranking noblemen were captured for ransom, most of them wounded. The Earl of Toulouse had only twenty killed, his knights were so valiant and worthy. God, through his inestimable grace, was able to provide confirmation that an unjust quarrel will get its just deserts.

The emperor was not happy. He'd lost a lot of land and a great many men, and he let out some deep sighs. He swore by he who died on the cross that he would neither eat nor drink until he'd exacted revenge for this humiliation.

'My lord, you'd be better off reaching an amicable agreement with the earl, by all that I can see,' advised his wife. 'It's perilous to put yourself in the wrong, to my mind.'

'Madam, I've been dishonoured, which hurts me very greatly, and my noblemen are all captured or dead, so my mood is not one of joy. I feel weak with sorrow.'

‘Then Sir, by Saint John, why don’t you heal this rift? You’re in the wrong and he’s in the right. Everything that’s happened so far bears this out.

The emperor was not pleased to hear his wife saying this, particularly since she was speaking the truth, and he didn’t like it. He went away in a very serious frame of mind, didn’t speak a word to anybody and looked very angry and intense. But let us turn from the emperor for a moment and speak of the earl, who is thanking God as fervently as he can, for the grace that he’s received.

Earl Barnard of Toulouse held many captured knights in his prison and received so much wealth in ransom for them that I couldn’t begin to tot it all up for you. Amongst all his prisoners, the most high-ranking was a lord named Sir Trylabas of Turkey, a man of large estate and great renown, whom the emperor loved dearly. It happened one day that he and the earl were hawking beside a river, and the Earl of Toulouse said to Sir Trylabas: ‘Tell me, sir, for it’s widely reported, but is the emperor’s wife as beautiful as everybody says she is? If it’s true, then, I swear by book and by bell, the emperor must be a very proud man indeed!’



‘I shall tell you the truth, by my knighthood,’ replied Sir Trylabas. ‘There is no woman more beautiful in the whole world, neither in Christendom nor in the lands of the heathen. Her skin is as white as snow and her complexion is redder than the reddest rose. No man would harbour any doubt at all that she is the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen.’

‘Then this makes me long all the more to see her,’ said the earl. ‘I would waive your ransom and pledge you my support and my love, for as long as I live, if you would agree to arrange it so that, under guarantee of safety, I might be able to see this lady. I’ll give you a hundred pounds, as well as horses and armour. I give you my word on this, as a true knight.’

‘I agree to it,’ replied Sir Trylabas. ‘I shall hold you to your promise, and bring you to where you can have a good look at her. I shall arrange this in secrecy, and never more shall I take up arms against you. With God’s grace, I shall be loyal to you or else die, I promise.’

‘I trust you like the new friend that you are, without question’ replied the earl, courteously. ‘Let us travel immediately to see this delectable creature. I swear by God and Saint Andrew that if I find you to be as faithful as you say you’ll be, I’ll shower you with riches.’

They let neither storm nor rain delay them, but set off at once. They didn't rest until they came to the city where the empress was in residence. In order to disguise himself, the earl assumed the outfit of a poor hermit, although he was well able to afford some better clothes! He stayed there for three days, resting in his lodgings. Meanwhile, Sir Trylabas, who had planned all along to betray him, went to see the empress. He went down on one knee and said: 'May Jesus Christ protect you from all peril, madam. By Jesus! I have the Earl of Toulouse with me in this city. He is our greatest enemy!'

'How does he come to be here,' asked the empress.

'Madam, I was in his prison and he's waived my ransom, all for the love of you. The truth is that he longs to see you. He's given me a hundred pounds as payment for arranging this, and horse and armour as well. I've promised that he'll be able to satisfy his desire to see you – I've pledged this to him, lady. But he's our enemy and he's done us much harm. I suggest that we have him killed at once.'

'If you do that, your soul will be lost!' exclaimed the empress. 'You must do as you've promised, since he's waived your ransom and released you from his prison. Banish all these wicked thoughts entirely. Tomorrow, when the bell for Mass is rung, bring him to my chapel, and don't entertain any thought of harming him. There he can look at me for as long as he wants, in fulfilment of your agreement. And I advise you to keep your side of the bargain, for if you betray him, your soul will be in mortal danger, since you've made him an oath. It would be treasonable for you to attack him under these circumstances, and a great shame on you if you do.'

The knight went back to the earl, his pride wounded at having received such a telling off from the empress. 'Sir, so give me prosperity,' he told him, 'tomorrow you shall have your wish. So be of good cheer. When you hear the Mass bell ringing, it'll be the sign that I'm accompanying the empress to the chapel. That's where she'll be going. Stand in the church on the other side of the partition and you'll have a good view of this woman in all her beauty.'

'You will never live to regret this,' said the earl, happily. 'Fill the wine goblets,' he said. 'This is going well!'

He slept soundly and in the morning, got himself ready. He dressed himself in a hermit's rags and when the Mass bell rang, he and everybody else made their way to the church, to catch a glimpse of the empress. They had only been standing for a short while, about the time that it takes to ride half a mile, when the lady appeared, accompanied by two earls. She was wearing the most beautiful outfit imaginable, adorned with gold and glittering jewels. When the Earl of Toulouse caught sight of her, she looked as stunning to him as the blossom on a tree. Of all the things he had ever seen, he had never been so transfixed in all his life by anything so beautiful as the sight before him now.

The empress stood outside her chapel and kept her head uncovered for this knight. He stared at her face and swore to God that he had never seen such beauty. Her eyes were

as grey as glass, her nose and mouth were perfectly formed, in fact, from her forehead to her toes, she was perfect! No woman could possibly have seemed more attractive to him.

Twice, the empress turned from one side to another, as she stood between the two earls, so that the Earl of Toulouse could have a good look at her. When she spoke softly, it was like hearing the voice of an angel, and she had such poise and radiance. Her back was straight, she had a slim waist, shoulders and arms that were perfectly proportioned and hands as white as whalebone, with long fingers and beautiful fingernails. On her fingers were many lovely rings.

When the Earl of Toulouse had gazed at her for a long while, the lady went into her private chapel to hear Mass. The earl stood in the main church, unable to take his eyes off her. 'Good lord, through your great power,' he prayed, 'I would give anything that she had no husband and that I was so perfect a knight that she would accept me as her greatest friend. I would rather this than have all the gold in the world.'

When the Mass was over, the noble lady returned to her chamber. The earl sighed and was very glum, now that the encounter was at an end. 'God save me, but I'd gladly stand in line for her to give me alms, should she be kind enough to do so, so that I could see her every day,' he said. 'If I could receive anything at all from that generous lady, it

would make my heart sing.' Then the Earl of Toulouse knelt down and prayed as hard as he could for God to make this happen.



The empress called a knight to her. 'Bring me forty new florins,' she instructed. Then she went to give alms to the hermit whom she'd seen in the church, and she concealed a ring from one of her fingers under the gold before giving it to him. He thanked her profusely for the gold. Then the lady returned to her chamber, where she most liked to be.

The earl returned to his inn in high spirits, and when he discovered the ring under the gold, he was doubly overjoyed and kissed it many times. 'My darling!' he cried. 'This was on your finger! I have your grace and your ring! If ever we should have the good fortune that love may be allowed to grow between us, this will be our token.'

As soon as dawn broke the next morning, the earl took his leave and prepared to go home to his own country. He eagerly thanked Sir Trylabas for the fine work he'd done, and promised to reward him handsomely for it. They kissed one another as friends, and then Sir Trylabas went home. May every harm come to him, for he intends to do mischief if he can. He called two knights, both of them strong and hardy warriors who were related to him. 'Sirs, he said, 'without fail, if you do as I say, great rewards lie in store for you. Do you know the Earl of Toulouse? He's done us much harm, his pride is

overinflated and I suggest that we burst his little bubble. If you'll follow my instructions, he'll be dead before the day is out, may God save me from sin!

One of these knights was called Kaunters, the other Kayme, and they were two of the most faithless men to be found anywhere, with the exception of Sir Trylabas himself. It was easy to persuade them to follow him. They caught up with the Earl of Toulouse at a bridge and set upon him with some hard strokes of the sword, like the enemies that they were. The earl was a tough fighter, though, and it wasn't long before he had killed two of them. The third fled and was soon exhausted. The earl overtook him and split his head into three pieces. And so ended Sir Trylabas.

The district quickly rose up against the earl and gave chase. A hundred men gathered to pursue him. He fled for his life and was relieved to escape from them when he entered a wild forest, taking his chances there, in order to rest, for by now he was very weary. He rested all night in this forest, for he had nowhere else to stay. As soon as dawn broke, he arose and thanked God that his enemies were still nowhere in sight. He travelled all that day and was often in great danger because of the perilous path that he was taking, but at last he came to a stone castle that seemed pleasant and inviting. The men inside were pleased to see him. 'Be merry, my men,' cried the earl. 'I believe the emperor will leave us in peace from now on.'

The earl continued to live in that castle, enjoying sport, entertainment and great merriment. But let us leave him for a while and return to Dame Beaulyon, the empress, for she is dejected and downhearted. The emperor loved Dame Beaulyon as much as his own life, indeed more so, and had chosen two of his most valued knights to watch over her, wherever he was, day and night. One of them had developed amorous yearnings for her, and so had the other, to be honest, she was so attractive. Neither of them knew of the other's feelings, for they kept it to themselves, but this secrecy made it no less intense nor bearable for them.

One day, one of them said to the other: 'Sir, I hope you don't mind me saying so, but you're beginning to look as pale and thin as a corpse. Are you eating properly?'

'I don't know why it might be, but you're not looking too tip-top yourself,' replied the other. 'Why's this? Tell me what's wrong with you, and I'll tell you what's making me so ill.'

'Alright. But I'm telling you this in confidence. Understand?'

'Agreed.'



‘It’s my lady the empress. I love her. I’m in a great deal of pain because of it. It’s going to bring me to my death, I’m sure of it.’

‘It’s exactly the same with me!’ exclaimed the other. ‘But since we’re both in love with her, how can we best arrange it so that we can get some relief from our distress? Have you any ideas?’

‘By Saint John, I can think of one way,’ said the first. ‘I suggest that one of us goes to her room, tells her what the problem is and asks her openly to allow him to make love to her. I’ll go if you like, because – well, you never know – she might say yes! But you won’t miss out. You can intrude on us while we’re having sex, and she’ll be so scared you might go to tell her husband that she’ll be willing to grant the same to you.’

So they agreed to this, these despicable villains. The one went off to see how the lady might respond to being told about his amorous feelings, and found her in her chamber. He fell onto one knee and prepared to explain to her how he felt.

‘Sir, I can see just by looking at you that you’re lacking something,’ she interrupted. ‘Is there anything that you need which you’re not getting enough of? You don’t look well to me at all. Tell me what’s wrong. Why are you not eating properly or looking after yourself as you should be?’

‘Lady, I dare not tell you. Not for anything on God’s Earth. I’ll tell you only if you swear upon a book not to divulge what I say to anyone else. Then I’ll tell you.’

‘Why do you say this?’ she asked. ‘It’s very unpleasant for me to learn that there’s something you can’t tell me. Why can you not trust me? I promise you that I’ll do all in my power to heal you, day and night, and I’ll swear this by book or bell.’

‘Then lady, may I place all my trust in you. But I need you to understand that the pain that I’m suffering is because of you. I have no energy, I flag and pine, night and day, my health is failing and I can’t think straight. You must believe me when I say that I love you. I’ve loved you for a long while now, but I’ve never had the courage to tell you, which only makes it worse. Unless you let me make love to you, my life will be over.’

‘Sir, are you aware that I’m married?’ she replied. ‘My husband is the emperor! He chose you for your loyalty, to look after me. If I were to agree to what you’re asking me now, I would deserve to be burnt alive! By Mary, that sweet flower! Your words are treasonable! You deserve to be hung, drawn and quartered!’

‘Ah, madam,’ replied the knight, in a panic. ‘For the love of God Almighty, don’t be so upset. You can put your full trust in me. I only meant to play a joke on you and to frighten you. I swear this. And remember you’ve sworn not to breath a word of this to anybody else. So I ask mercy, for God’s love! If I say a word about it myself, to anybody, may warhorses tear me apart.’

‘Then I forgive you,’ said the empress. ‘I won’t say anything about it. It was said in confidence, and I’ll respect that. But make sure that in future you’re as faithful and loyal to



my husband as you can be, in every way.'

'Yes, lady. It would be very wrong for me to do otherwise, I see that. I've served him for a long time now, and he's rewarded me well.'

He said no more, but went back to his friend, a curse on them both!

'How did it go?' the other asked.

'Not well. I've never been so frightened in all my life, to be honest. It's a waste of time and completely futile to ask her for sex.'

'You didn't go about it in the right way, that's all,' his friend replied. 'I'll have a go myself. I bet you anything I'll succeed.'

Things remained in the air like this for three days, and then this other scoundrel knight saw his opportunity. 'I'll see if I can find a chink in my lady's armour now,' he thought to himself. 'She seems to be in a good mood.' And he went over to her, sighing and looking as though he didn't care if he lived or died.

'Lady, in all honesty, unless you can help me, I don't think I'm long for this world,' he moaned.

The empress courteously replied: 'I'll do my very best to advise you. What's the problem? If you tell me what the matter is, and if I'm able to help, I'll gladly do so.'

'Madam, I understand that it's customary to hold up your hand to signify that anything spoken between two people will be in absolute confidence.'

'You're right; and here I give you my oath that what's said between the two of us shall remain between the two of us.'

'Madam, now that I'm speaking to you in confidence, I can tell you that I'm in such a lovesick trance all the time, because of you, that it's making me quite ill, and that's the truth. Can you see how pale and thin I've become? It's slowly killing me. Dear lady, allow me to make love to you, for the love of God, who was wounded by a spear.'

'Sir, is this what you've come to tell me? If I agreed to it, I'd deserve everyone's rebuke! What kind of a woman do you think I am? I'm under your protection, for God's sake! What can you have possibly seen or heard me say that might have put thoughts like this into your head? Do I look like a common whore? Were I not sworn to discretion I'd have you hanged from a gallows tree!'

The knight had never been so terrified in all his life.

'Mercy!' he cried. Good madam, it's all my fault, I'm very sorry. Lady, please don't have me killed. I ask for mercy. Let me keep my life.'

'I grant you your life. This shall remain between the two of us. But I don't ever want to hear you say such things again.'

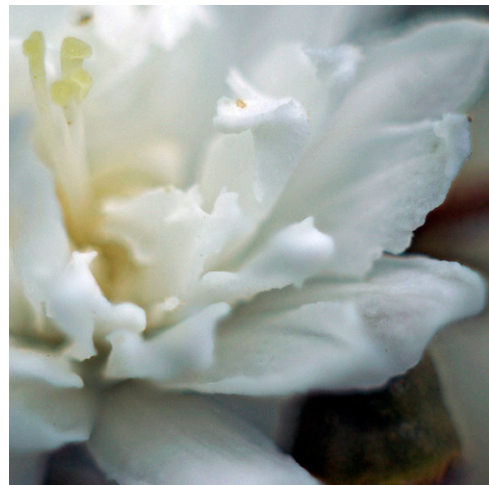
The knight went away and said to his friend: 'That didn't go very well. So what's your advice now? If she says anything at all to the emperor, we're dead men. A woman's tongue cannot be trusted. If the emperor gets to hear of it, we'll have taken our last meal and that's for sure. My friend, instead of living the rest of our lives in fear of what the next few hours may bring, before she serves us with this, wouldn't it be better if she was to die herself?'

'How can that happen? I'd be happy to see it, but it can't be done.'

'Yes, it can. Give me a little time and I'll quickly arrange it. Have no fear. Before three days are out, she'll be in a great deal of sorrow. She'll get her reward for what she's done to us.'

So they both agreed to bring down all the harm they could upon this noble lady, may the devil take them.

Soon it was getting dark, and supper was laid out in the hall. They accompanied the empress with everybody else and laughed and joked in order to keep her in a good mood. When the meal was over, knights retired to the empress's chamber where the two knights danced and revelled as though they didn't have a care in the world, in order to use up the time until everybody was ready for bed.



One of these miscreants went over to a young knight who carved at the lady's table. He was an earl's son, a good-looking young man, twenty years old, bold, generous, but rather too willing to oblige.

'Sir, are you game for a laugh?' the villain asked him. 'Will you help us to put on a spectacle for the empress? You'll make her laugh so much that, were you her greatest enemy before, you'd be her greatest friend afterwards.'

The young man answered: 'By my knighthood, I'd love to! I'd run through the wind and rain for her, if it would please my lady, even if I caught my death of cold by doing so.'

'Then, sir, take off all your clothes and hide behind that curtain over there. Wait for me until I come to tell you what to do. Then you'll see a wonderful joke played!'

'I'll do that, by Saint Jermaine!'

The young man suspected nothing as he cast off all his clothes and went behind the curtain.

'Make sure you stay there until we call for you,' the two knights instructed him.

'Sirs, I will.'

The dancing continued for quite a while, and nobody suspected that these two knights

were up to something. At last, the chamber was cleared and they left this young man sitting alone, behind the curtain, with only the empress in the room with him.

The lady lay in her bed and fell asleep with no inkling that anything untoward was going on. The young man began to wonder why these knights were taking so long. He played out many scenarios in his mind, and at last: 'Lord, have mercy! What's going on?' he thought. 'I think they must have forgotten me. If I call them, I'll frighten the empress. She's lying alone in her bed over there, by Christ!'

So he sat as still as he could. He didn't dare make a sound, or move a muscle even, for fear of frightening the empress.



May great harm come to these two despicable knights! They went to their room and armed themselves, then went about the castle shouting to all the other knights and lords to wake up and gather arms: 'Get up and help to seize a traitor!' they cried. 'He's been in my lady's chamber making love with her all night!'

Soon, every knight was armed. They followed these villains to the empress's chamber with naked swords and burning torches thrust before them. They went behind the curtain and found the young knight cowering naked there. One of the despicable knights took his battle sword and thrust it through the young man's body, to guarantee his silence.

The lady woke up, and was very frightened when she saw all the torches burning around her. 'For the love of Christ! Who are you?' she screamed. The knights called back, very rudely and unsympathetically: 'It's us, you faithless whore! We've seen what you've been up to. You've betrayed the emperor. When everybody learns what's happened, your infamy will go down in history.'

'I'm not a whore!' the empress screamed back. 'Such a thought has never entered my head, by Saint John!'

'You're a liar as well then! Your lover is lying dead before us.' They dragged the corpse in front of her. 'See? Here's your generous lover. Can you see how generous we've been to him in return, with our blows? Your unfaithfulness shall be punished. You won't get away with it.'

They tied the lady up and bundled her into a deep prison. It was pitiful to see.

But we must leave this lady for a moment, in her sorrow, and go to her lord, who is quite a long way away. One night, he dreamed a dream, as the story tells us. He imagined that two wild boars were coming after his wife, they tore her to pieces and ripped her body in two. The emperor was no fool and he worried that the dream might be telling him

that his wife was in some sort of danger, so early the next morning, he instructed all his men to make themselves ready to travel. He sent pack horses on ahead, had wagons filled with provisions sent twelve miles ahead of him and didn't rest until he'd met up with all his knights and earls and barons and they were all travelling home as quickly as they could. He was very concerned about his wife.

They travelled day and night until they came to the city where the lady was staying. News of the queen's infidelity reached the first noblemen to arrive and they waited outside the city, so sorrowful that many wept. They couldn't stop crying. They knew that when the emperor learnt what his wife had been up to, he'd be distraught. So they led the horses to the stables and took him into the hall, to try to put him into as good a mood as they could before they told him. But the emperor insisted upon going to his wife's chamber. He longed to see his sweet and beautiful lady, and when he arrived he called to the knights who should be keeping watch over her: 'Where's my wife? Is she sleeping? Is she well?'

'If you knew what she'd been up to, you'd want to condemn her to death,' these two traitors replied.

'What the devil... ! What do you mean?'

'Sir, by God's grace, that young knight who carves meat at her table, Sir Antore – he was caught in her bed. They were having sex together. We killed him. She's in prison, and by God who died for us, the law decrees that she should be burnt alive for it.'

'Alas!' cried the emperor. 'Has she dishonoured me like this when I loved her so much? I wouldn't have thought for a moment, not for anything in the world, that she would do this to me. I'm utterly devastated.' He took a knife and would have killed himself with it had not another knight managed to stop him in time. His arms sank to his sides in despair and he fell onto the bed in a faint, then began to sob. He was in great distress.

The next morning, by common consent, a parliament was convened to decide what to do about the empress. They couldn't find any law or precedent that might save her from the ultimate penalty. An old knight spoke up.

'By God Almighty it puzzles me, though, that when Sir Antore was caught naked in my lady's chamber, those knights who discovered him weren't anxious to hear what he had to say, but killed him at once. No one claims to have seen them in bed together, except for these two knights. It may be that they harbour some malice against my lady, so I would advise this: that we make them prove the truth of their claim. One way of saving



your wife from the flames would be to find a knight who is willing to help the empress defended herself against these two knights in a trial by combat.'

Everyone agreed to this. They thought the idea was reasonable and fully sanctioned by the law.

'God bless you for this advice,' said the emperor. Then he called some trusted knights to him and instructed them to make it known throughout the land that if any man was willing and valiant enough to dare to take on this fight against these two accusing knights for the empress, he'd be well rewarded for it.

Messengers proclaimed this announcement throughout the country, from shore to shore, and in every city. They made it clear that if any man was brave enough to fight for the empress, his status would be greatly advanced because of it, if he survived. The Earl of Toulouse heard of the lady's plight and thought it a great shame. If he could be sure that she was innocent, he would gladly risk his life to fight on her behalf.

He thought about this for a long while. 'If I could find out the truth of the matter,' he mused, 'I'd be happy to make her accusers pay dearly for their crime: if, indeed, the accusation is false, or unless they withdraw it. By Saint John, I'll go into Germany, which is thick with my enemies, and I pray to almighty God that I may find good reason to fight for this lady and rescue her from the distress she is in.'

The earl went out hunting one day and met a merchant going about his business.

'Where are you from?' asked the earl.

'I'm from Germany.'

The earl asked him what was happening, regarding the empress. 'Why is she being put through all this?' he asked. 'Is she guilty?'

'No, no chance!'

'When is she going to be burnt alive, then? Has the date been set?'

'Yes, in three weeks' time, unfortunately.'

'I have good horses to sell, and two or three warhorses as well,' said the earl. 'If I thought I could make this sale quickly, I'd like to travel with you into Germany and see this spectacle for myself.'

The merchant was very courteous. 'If you come along with me, you'll be doing yourself a big favour. You'll sell them very easily.'

'Sir, listen then,' replied the earl. 'I'll give you twenty pounds if you'll let me come along with you.' The merchant agreed. 'That's settled, then,' said the earl, and he told the merchant where to stay to wait for him. Then the earl got ready, and told no one what he was doing, for he trusted the merchant. Then he said: 'Sir, let's go!' They took seven horses, the most handsome and valuable that anyone might wish for and, disguised as a

horse dealer, the earl rode into Germany.

The merchant guided them well, and before long they came to the place where the empress was being held prisoner. A mile away from the city lay an abbey, and they obtained leave from the abbot to rest there for a while and let their horses recover from the journey. This was good fortune! The abbot was the lady's uncle, and he was very sad and upset by what was happening to his niece.

One day, the earl went into the church to hear Mass. He was a tall man, and very fair. When the abbot saw him, he said: 'Come over here to me, sir. Sir, when the service is over, have lunch with me, if you would.' The earl eagerly agreed to eat with the abbot. Before the meal, they washed and went together into the refectory. After eating, they went into an orchard together.

'It is no lie to say that I am in great sorrow,' the abbot told the earl, with a sigh. 'A lady has been accused – Oh, the thought torments me – she'll go to her death because of it! She's entirely innocent, but unless she has help, she'll be burnt alive in a fire, in a week's time.'

'I think this is a great pity, if she's innocent,' replied the earl.

'I would lay my soul upon her innocence, by Saint Paul!' exclaimed the abbot. 'She would never think of doing such a thing. The only thing she's ever done is to give a ring to the Earl of Toulouse, for his own peace of mind and not for any sinfulness. She told me this in the confessional.'

'If this is so,' replied the earl, 'may God, who redeemed her with his blood, avenge her sorrow. Will you promise that what we say to one another from now on is in strict confidence? It may be to your advantage to do so.'

The abbot swore by many sacred things, and by his holy office, that he would hold to this. He would be mad not to.

'Then I must tell you that I'm the man she gave that ring to,' declared the earl. 'It's me she gave that token to. But keep this to yourself, by the Holy Cross. I've come to take on this trial by combat for her, and to stand on the side of justice. But first, I would like to hear her confession myself, and if I find her to be as innocent as you say she is, my heart will be light indeed. Let me dress myself in a monk's habit, and then you can take me to the place of execution as she's being led to the stake to be burned alive. When I've heard her confession, then, upon my true knighthood, I'll be her champion willingly!'

The abbot was delighted to hear this. He was nearly delirious with joy! He kissed the earl, and they both did a little dance together. The earl stayed at the abbey for another week, and received some fine hospitality there.

On the day that the lady was due to be burnt alive, the earl donned a monk's habit and went with the abbot to the place of execution. He knelt before the emperor and asked him if he might hear the lady's last confession. The emperor gave his assent.

The earl examined the lady intelligently and thoroughly, as it says in my source, and found her to be entirely blameless. 'In the name of Jesus Christ,' she told him, 'I've never committed an offense that deserved death as a punishment. Only once, I gave a ring to the Earl of Toulouse. Absolve me for this, if you wish. But my life is nearing its end. I am to be burned in this fire, and God's will must be done.'

The earl gave her absolution with his hand, and then quickly stood up and said: 'Lords, please be quiet! Those knights who have falsely accused this noble lady deserve to be burnt alive in her place!'

One of these knights made a rush for him. 'You churlish monk! For all that she's your abbot's niece, this scheming will not save her from the flames. You'd say the same if every

man in your abbey had slept with her. You're a liar.'



'This lady told me that you're one of those knights who fabricated this story,' shouted the earl, in reply. 'Although we are religious men, I require satisfaction for all this slander. I'll prove to everybody that what you've said about her is a pack of lies. Here's my glove. I'm willing to undertake a trial by combat on her behalf. I'll show you to be the liars that you are. May God give me the grace to send you both into the fire instead of her!'

All the people thanked God for this. The two knights were angry and swore that he would die. The earl drew to one side and armed himself. When they began to fight, great damage was done to helmets and chain mail. They rode at one another with their lances lowered, and both the knights' spears broke on impact; but the earl struck such a blow that his lance went straight through one of the knights and he tumbled to the ground, impaled. The other saw this and fled. The earl caught up with him beneath a tree and gave him a serious beating. This traitor quickly yielded to the earl and admitted to being a recreant and a liar. He had no other option. The earl dragged him to the emperor and made him tell the truth and explain what had really happened.

'We planned to have her killed, because she wouldn't do what we wanted her to,' he admitted.

'For this, you shall both burn in the fire,' said the emperor.

The earl grabbed them both and threw them into the flames, where their skin, flesh and bones burnt to ashes.

When they were both burned, the earl returned to the abbey. The empress was taken in a procession through the city, with great joy and celebration. The emperor was very

pleased. 'Fetch me that monk!' he instructed. 'Why did he disappear so quickly? I'll make him a bishop and give him a fine diocese. He'll enjoy my favour and my love for as long as I live, by God!'

The abbot knelt and said: 'Lord, he's gone back to his own country. He lives in Rome with the Pope. They'll be very pleased at his return, I have to tell you.'

'Sir abbot, I feel that this is a great dishonour to me. Please go and fetch him back so that I can see him, or you'll never receive anything more from me ever again, on that you have my word.'

'Lord, since I have to do this, then, you must give me a guarantee that if he turns out to be your enemy, you promise not to harm him. If you do this, so may I prosper, I'll go after him as quickly as I can, so that you may be his friend, if this is what you wish.'

'Yes,' said the emperor, happily. 'Even if he were to have killed every one of my relatives, he's welcome.'

'Lord, I trust you and believe that you'll do as you say. So I can tell you now that it is Sir Barnard, the Earl of Toulouse, who has saved the empress.'

'This news comes as a great dishonour to me,' said the emperor. 'But go after him anyway, sir. I ask you to bring him here, and then the earl and I shall kiss and be good friends, by God.'

'I shall go at once!'

The abbot caught up with the Earl of Toulouse and said: 'Sir, come back with me. By Saint John! You and the emperor shall be reconciled and made good friends.'

The earl was happy to hear this, and when they met, the emperor said: 'My generous friend. All my anger at you is passed. You shall enjoy my patronage and my friendship, for as long as I live, by Christ who died on the cross!'

They embraced and kissed one another. Everyone was delighted to see this, as the romance tells us. The emperor made the earl steward of all his land, and gave him back all the lands that he had seized from him.

The emperor only lived for another three years. The earl was elected by all the noblemen of the country to be their new emperor, for he had proved himself to be a valiant warrior. He married the empress, and they lived very happily together for another twenty-three years. They had fifteen children in all, many of whom grew to be very fine knights.

This tale has been told as a romance, but it is a Breton lai, and always shall be. Jesus Christ, bring us to heaven at last, so that we may live there in bliss.

Amen.