

# The Isle of Ladies

*anon*

*fifteenth century Middle English verse*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose**

**by**

**Richard Scott-Robinson**

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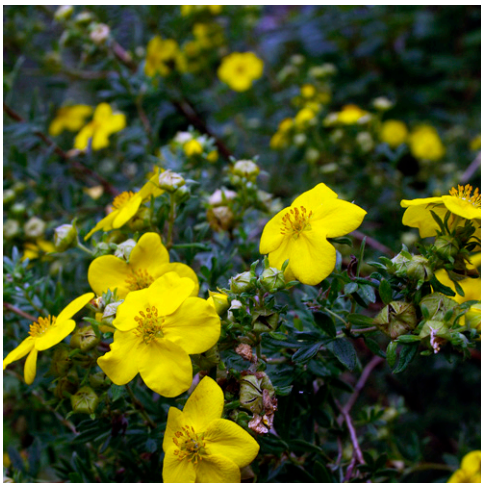


# The Isle of Ladies

anon

*fifteenth century*

**W**hen Flora the Quene of Pleasaunce · had hol acheved th' obessiaunce · of the freshe and new season · thorowte every region · and withe her mantell hol covert – When Flora, the queen of delight, had wholly achieved the obedience of the fresh new season everywhere and covered her green mantle over all that winter had laid bare, I happened to be lying alone in a hunting lodge in the dark, one May evening, thinking of my lady, and how the Lord who made her had done such a fine job in creating such beauty – more than in any other creature, I was sure – and as I lay deep in this forest, beside a spring, resting from the day's exertions and occupied by these thoughts, I fell into a sort of half-sleep and began to dream with a clarity and awareness that was more like being awake; for what I dreamed, it seemed to me that I really saw it, and that I wasn't dreaming at all.



Because of this, I still believe that some good spirit, by way of a curious route or some strange entrance-way, took me that night to a truly marvellous place. But whether I was awake or asleep, I can say for certain that I often laughed and wept at the pleasure and the suffering that I felt, and I'll try to set down on paper all the pain and the joy, which was like health and sickness to me. I wish to God that you could know every single detail of it, or even that you were able to experience a little of it for yourselves, because, although it might seem like an inconvenience, the next morning you'd wish that your visit had lasted longer! You'd likely say that you'd been very lucky, for the person who dreams and thinks that it's real, can understand much more clearly than before how things are and where his home really is, and he'll be less worried about it. To think, I saw this with my own eyes. I'm sure it was not a dream, but something very urgent and significant concerning our wellbeing and happiness.

On this night, as I've said, and in this manner, neither asleep nor fully awake, at about that time of night when lovers weep and beg for their lady's grace, this marvellous thing happened to me which I'll describe to you as fully as I can, in plain English – dreadfully written I know, but a writer who is asleep can surely be excused for not achieving the standards of one who's awake! Therefore, through your courtesy, I ask that you excuse the clumsiness as mere artlessness but hear what I have to say, and forgive as irrelevant the lack of polish and the simple words, for it happened to me just like this:

I found myself on an island whose walls and entrances were made of glass and so well enclosed that nobody could enter or leave without permission. It was all very strange to look at and like nothing I'd ever seen before. There were many birds singing. Every gate was of pure gold and had a thousand tiny windmills turning against the breeze, each with a pair of vanes like flower petals cutting the air and making a delightful sound. All the towers were shaped like flowers as well, everlasting flowers in a strange and colourful meadow, unlike any seen in May, and with many a small turret. I couldn't see any men around at all, only ladies, and they were clothed in such a way that I thought they surpassed all the women I'd ever seen, more beautiful even than goddesses. To see them dancing and singing was unlike anything on Earth. They seemed to do everything perfectly and they all appeared to be of the same age, except for one, who was too old for dancing, although she seemed to be as happy as the others, and no less able to laugh and to tell jokes than if she'd just stuffed her bag full of new fun and games! She'd been pretty in her youth and seemed to be the mistress of them all, which she well deserved to be, I think, for she was one of the cleverest of creatures and so said everyone who had ever known her, without exception. She was sensible, could be relied upon to do the right thing and, indeed, seemed to be without fault. Everything she did was guided by trust and honesty. It was a pity she wasn't young any more, but she was in charge everywhere and stood in such high standing with everybody that, in a word, she was incomparable. There was no one half as capable as her to look after these frisky young maidens.

*The Isle of Ladies was written by an unknown author in the late fifteenth century and is an example of a dream vision, a genre common in medieval literature and widely used by Geoffrey Chaucer – for example, in the Parliament of Fowls, the House of Fame and the Legend of Good Women – which, along with a certain 'Chaucerian' style, was perhaps why this poem was included in the Chaucer canon until as recently as the late nineteenth century. It may have been written as an occasional poem, for a wedding perhaps, like Edmund Spenser's Prothalamion, although no evidence for this exists apart from the general feel of the work; but it is replete with allusions to Celtic mythology, Norse mythology and Breton lai, including apples of immortality, a magic boat that requires no rudder but is steered by thought, a seed that brings the dead back to life and an Otherworldly island of women across the sea, like the one that the Irish mythical hero Bran sailed to – who in Christian hagiography became Saint Brendan, suggesting that the hagiographers recognised Bran's Island of Women as the representation of a pagan afterlife and made Brendan's destination, therefore, to be Paradise.*

*The story here is identical to the only other surviving manuscript copy, that in Longleat House MS 256.*

When I'd had a good look around this isle, I concluded that it must have been more wondrous to create than Paradise itself – I dare say – for there lacked no flower or tree or anything else that might give pleasure to the beholder. Whatever anyone desired, be it wealth or beauty, health or comfort, anything at all, you just had to imagine it and it would be there. I'd never seen anything like it, or ever heard of anything like it, in the natural world.

When I'd finished exploring this island, I grew very happy in my heart, convinced that my body was very fortunate to be in this place with all these ladies. They were so beautiful, I can assure you, that in my opinion, although nature might have striven as much as she liked to improve a feature, there was no improvement possible. It would have been a waste of time and effort, so generously had beauty been granted to these ladies at birth.

There was one other thing about them too: their beauty never faded, even to death, which is very unusual and only seen here, I believe. They were very marvellous to behold, and if they'd been certain of their lives, they would have been without a care.

When I'd looked around so much that I thought I must have seen just about everything there was to see, as far as beauty or pleasing craftsmanship was concerned, suddenly, this lady, who was capable of such goodness, approached me smiling and said: 'Bless you! You're the first man I've seen here all year. What's your name and how do you come to be here? Where are you from? You must also tell me who you're looking for and how you arrived, and it may be to your advantage to tell me the truth, for otherwise you'll be the prisoner of these ladies and I, who govern this Isle.' Then she smiled, and so did all the young ladies who surrounded her.

'Madam,' I replied, somewhat alarmed. 'This night just gone, I was asleep in a forest, beside a spring, and now I'm here. I've no idea how I came here, nor at whose command. Perhaps only by Fortune's decree, which often causes much travel and effort, does nothing for the reliability of promises and can result in death, the more's the pity, therefore I suspect her motives and her trustworthiness and remain fearful and rather dismayed at my being here; for it's a truly remarkable thing, it seems to me, to see so many young and beautiful ladies, and not a man in sight. I've no idea how I come to be here, that's all I can say. I won't spin you a yarn, and whatever it pleases you to command I'll be willing to do, and to go as your prisoner and do whatever you wish me to, to the very best of my ability, until you've received all the answers from me that you need.'

This lady seemed pleased with my reply; she took me by the hand and said: 'Welcome, prisoner-by-chance! I'm very happy to hear you say this. And since you fear displeasing me, let me try to put your mind at rest.'

With this, she gathered all the ladies quickly into an assembly and held a council, and when they had finished they sent for me and told me the following, which I reproduce word for word:

'We think it a wonder that you're here,' she said, 'and how, without boat or sail, or any subterfuge on your part so it seems, you've managed to gain entry to this isle. But despite this, you'll see that we're gentlewomen and loath to displease anyone, notwithstanding our great right. But so that you may be made aware of the ancient custom of this land, which has been followed for many years, you should understand that you cannot stay. There are two reasons for this, which we will explain to you now:

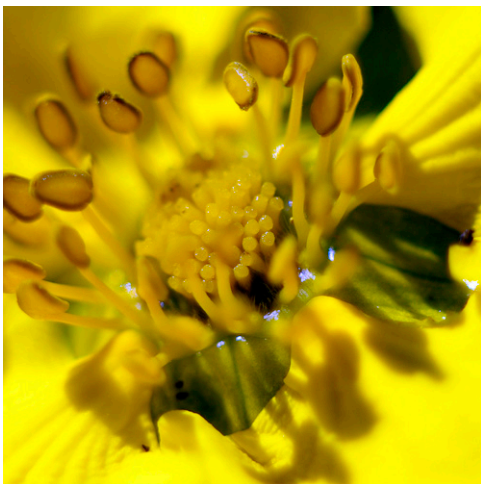
'The first is that our rule, which is longstanding, prohibits any man from living here. Therefore, you must return. You cannot stay. The other is that our queen isn't here, as you can see, and this makes us even more reluctant to risk doing anything wrong while she's absent – anything which might contravene our old customs and traditions – and it may come back on us if we let you roam about freely.'

When I'd heard this explained to me, God! I felt a sudden pain around my heart. It was

as though I'd been silently robbed of all my wellbeing. A panic of terror began to overwhelm me. Then, as I was standing there, a lady approached quickly, surrounded by a crowd of other ladies. She announced that the queen had arrived outside and was about to enter.

All the ladies hurried off to greet their queen. There wasn't time for them to put bridles on any horses but, now ten, now six, then two, now three, they all sped away in groups and left me standing on my own. Not one of them stayed behind with me.

I followed after them at a leisurely pace, trying to work out how I might so ingratiate myself with their queen that she would allow me to stay for a while – until such time, at least, as some guide might appear to lead me back home again, for I had no idea which way to go and no way of leaving anyway, for the island was surrounded by sea. It was no wonder that I felt little inclination to smile. My predicament seemed strange and unfamiliar, like some perilous change of circumstance.



Absorbed by these thoughts, I walked alone, observing the ladies, and in order that I might be able to persuade them to come to some sort of understanding regarding my predicament, I drew near. At once, I became aware of the queen. The ladies were all on their knees welcoming her with joyous words that would have sufficed had she been a princess ruling over all that is surrounded by sea. And although I was in sombre mood I suddenly became very happy, so happy in fact, that no man, I swear, has ever been more joyful than I was at that moment, for I suddenly saw my lady standing there with the queen! They were both dressed in a similar outfit and there was a well-dressed knight with them also, who had come with the queen, and whom the ladies of the Isle were all wondering at. They stared at him for a long while until the queen, wisely and with a friendly seriousness, explained softly to these young and intelligent ladies what was happening.

'My sisters, I know that you're all aware of how things are, how for a long time I've been here within this Isle, living as your queen, in comfort, so that no one has had a more perfect joy than I, and nor could they have. I've ruled over you for all this time, in a way that has brought you happiness, as you know, according to our custom and our law. And I know that you're aware how these laws were founded and how the queen of this Isle – that's me – must visit a heavenly hermitage every seven years which stands on a high rock in a strange sea, a huge distance from anywhere, having completed a pilgrimage which is known to entail a long and perilous voyage – for if the wind is unfavourable, the journey ends in certain death for those who undertake it. Not one in twenty thousand escapes.

'Upon this rock grows a tree that in certain years bears three apples which confer upon

anyone who possesses them immunity from all harm and unhappiness for seven years. You all know this. The first apple, the highest to hang down towards anyone reaching for them, has three notable virtues: it will not let you age but will maintain your youth, your health and your beauty. The second apple, which is red and green, will nourish you just by looking at it – more so than a plateful of partridge or pheasant! It feeds every living creature, just by the sight of it. The third apple, which is the lowest on the tree, brings you anything you want. So your happiness, your beauty, your youth that never fades, your virtue, your intelligence and your wellbeing have always flourished, and your good health as well, and you have lived here without experiencing any sickness or pain, or anything unpleasant at all; you've lived as goddesses, each of you more blessed than any princess.

'Now, as you know, I set off at the appropriate time, to gather these apples as I've often done, but when I arrived, I found, up upon the rock, my sister here, who had those apples in her hands and was inspecting them quietly and looking very pleased with herself. I looked at her, very downheartedly I may say, since I knew that I'd lost the apples, and as I did so this knight appeared before me and, before I knew what was happening, he caught me in his arms and took me to his ship, saying that although he'd never seen me, I'd been his lady for a long while so that I should come with him and he would be my servant to the end of his life; and then he began to sing, like a person who's just won a magnificent prize.

'At this, my spirits wilted and I nearly expired! I felt neither life nor breath, neither good nor harm, the sudden pain was so new to me, and had this gracious lady not rushed from the tree to comfort and aid me, I would have died. Of the three apples she was holding, she put one into my hand, which restored my senses, and my breath. She saved me, and therefore I'm in her debt, so much so that I would do anything for her. She brought relief to me, like a physician, and God knows she did everything in her power to comfort me. And in all honesty, so did this knight as well: he told me how distressed he was to see me so unhappy and he cursed the ship that had brought them there and cursed the mast and the shipwright who had made it. And to bring this account to a conclusion, since everything must have an end, my sister, this friend of your brother, this man whom I can see standing over there – she cast her gaze in my direction – is so comforting and gentle, and so persuasive, that this knight agreed that we should both sail with her in her beautiful ship that's so splendidly made and so clean and well equipped. We both agreed at once. And to comfort me and to put me at my ease, she took great pains to bring us as quickly as she could to this Isle, as you can see. Therefore I ask you, one and all, to thank her as fervently as your imaginations will allow.'

At once, right there and then, men would have seen a world of ladies fall to their knees before my lady. Not one of them was left standing. They all fell to the ground together, regardless of their rank, and oblivious to the stones beneath their knees, and they made such a fuss of my lady, and said such kind and friendly things to her, and the very least of what they said was so sincere and heart-warming, that it was a wonder, seeing how

young they all were, to hear such lovely words and to see how warm and respectful they were. They certainly displayed their virtue, and all said that they were more than delighted to do as they had been asked and to put themselves at my lady's bidding. I got as much pleasure from seeing this as the mighty Greeks must have got from seeing the city of Troy fall, when it had been won after such a prolonged siege... to see my lady so honoured before them all!

When my lady and all the other ladies had chatted away about the Isle and about this and that, the queen herself entered the conversation and light-heartedly asked the old lady: 'Don't you think it would be a good idea, while we're all assembled here, to decide how to arrange things convivially between this knight and I? For a feeble woman is ill-advised to wage war against a powerful knight, and since he's here at my invitation and reliant upon my goodwill, it would be a great dishonour to do him any harm. But I would prefer it if he was in his own country right now, I in peace here and he at ease there. This would be a way of pleasing us both, I think. So if you wouldn't mind, I'd like you to have a word with him about it.'

This lady smiled and paused for a moment or two before replying: 'Madam, I'll go and speak to him right away. I'll sound him out and try to find out what he wants.'

With great seriousness, this old lady took two other ladies along with her, approached the knight and said: 'Sir, the princess of this Isle, whom you have travelled so many miles looking for before finding her at last – to your great joy, I understand – has sent me here, with two other ladies, to hear what you have to say and to find out why you've been searching for her. She'd gladly know the whole story and would like to understand why you are causing her all this grief and why she's your enemy. She'd like to know why you took her by force to your ship, without any warning, causing her to be so stunned that she could neither think nor speak but, like a creature dying in pain, could only resign herself sadly to her fate. I can tell you plainly that you were clearly in the wrong to watch her endure such suffering, seeing that she is a princess.'

This knight, who was not a bad man, was ashamed to hear her say this; the blood drained from his face, he took on the colour of lead and looked like death. He couldn't utter a word, looked very ill, and suddenly, as if in confirmation of this, fell down in a faint as though he was dead. The old lady became alarmed and afraid for him, and hurried back to the queen.

'Come quickly!' she said. 'There's something wrong and only you can help, I'm sure. The knight's dead, or will be soon. He's fallen down in a faint. He didn't say a word in reply to anything I asked him, and I fear that some blame may become attached to you



because of this. Your good reputation has blossomed here for many years and I'd give anything that he didn't die here. I think it would be good if you hurried over to save his life at the very least. Then, when he's back on his feet again, you can command him to either stay or leave, but there's no way I want to be involved with this any more, given the peril that seems likely to ensue from it.'

The queen hurried at once to where the knight was lying, full of fear and with many ladies in train, and made a lady shout at him: 'Lo! Here is the queen. Wake up, for shame! What are you thinking? Is this a sensible thing for you to be doing, lying here like this? Have you gone mad? Are you a fool? To see all these ladies here and to act as though you wish to insult them... Get up, for Jesus' love!'

The knight uttered not a single word in reply.

The queen, eager to save her own reputation as well as his life, shook with fear and said anxiously: 'Alas! What shall I do? What can I say to this man? If he dies here, my good name will be destroyed. How shall I play this perilous game? If anything is amiss here, it'll come back on me with a vengeance, and this knight certainly looks as though he's going to die.'

She laid her hand upon his chest and, with genuine pity, said: 'Awake, my knight. I'm speaking to you. Tell me why you're doing this and why you are in pain, when this country is safe and you're among friends who wish you nothing but good health and happiness. If I knew what might help you, or bring you comfort, it would be here without fail and you would be healed. So I pray with all my heart, rise up and let us make jokes and chat together. Let's see how many ladies here are willing to have a laugh with you and to cheer you up.'

But it was all for nothing. He hadn't heard anything that the queen had said. He lay as still as a stone and didn't utter a word for a long while.

Then at last, he gasped: 'Mercy!' He cried this twice, and it was pitiful to hear his voice and to see the agony he was in, which wasn't feigned in any way, you could see that on his face, and in his eyes. He looked at her, gave out an explosive sigh and then cried out in a way that was a wonder to witness. Never since pain was first given its name has such an agonised cry of sorrow been heard. Then, with a voice that was strained and barely audible, he began to murmur to himself: 'I, a woeful man full of misfortune, am worse than dead, and yet I endure in spite of pain and death. I feel myself breathing against my will. Why aren't I dead, since my lady wants me to die and I cannot serve her? Where are you, death? Are you afraid? We'll meet together shortly, that's for sure. It's pointless hiding from me like this. Wherever you are, I shall find you, in spite of your subtle, double Janus face. Here I'll die, right here, despite your reluctance, and it will be to your dishonour and to my relief that I die here. You are without courtesy. What need is there to hide from me and prolong my suffering? You know that I shall not live. There is nothing in the world that can save me now. I have lost health and happiness and become joyless and friendless through my own cowardice. I've made my sovereign lady hate me and I



know that she'll be my enemy now, for as long as she lives. Was I too hasty? Did I delay too long? At the hermitage, where I first set eyes on her, I climbed as high as I could and then silently crept down until I had her in my arms, but she seemed displeased when I carried her off to my ship and I was terrified at her boundless sorrow and wished that I had never gone there, and do so still, for it's been the cause of her displeasure and it will be the cause of my death.'

Then he began to scream: 'Death! Death!' and then he muttered something inaudible. Through sheer pity, the queen took him into her arms and said: 'Now, my own knight, don't be upset that I sent a lady to find out what you wanted. I sent her in good faith. I meant well and have no intention of hurting you. You need to believe this.'

Then she kissed him, and asked him to rise, and said that she was truly concerned for his welfare; she told him that she was very sorry for his mortal pain and wanted to please him. She said these words in order to save his life, and many more as well, to comfort him, for she was eager to ease his distress.



The knight looked up, and when he saw that it was the queen who was speaking to him, he began to gather his senses and tried to scramble onto his knees. But as he rose, he overbalanced, and the queen once again took him into her arms, and looked pityingly into his eyes. But for all that, she said not a word, and didn't seem particularly happy with the situation. She betrayed no emotion except for that which she always presented, to everybody – a polite courtesy without noise or debate, just a womanly and friendly concern, without a hint of submission.

But she tried her best to comfort him, to lessen his anguish and to free his heart from the burden it had taken on, for her intention was to take him to his ship before evening, with certain ladies, and to say goodbye to him, and to ask, through his nobility, that he might leave her in peace. If he would do this, as other princes had done before, then from that day on, forevermore, she would worship him in every way that courtesy allowed, and would work to promote his happiness and his desire, with her honour intact.

But while all this was taking place, I noticed ten thousand ships in one direction alone, coming across the waves with sail and oar, and I stood marvelling at the sight and wondering where so many ships could have come from, for I'd never seen such a fleet before in my entire life! My heart beat two and fro in my chest for joy, continually, for they bore sails full of flowers and had huge towers at the stern, bristling with shining weapons, so it seemed. It was all so magnificent! There were huge masts with brightly painted crow's-nests high above, and every now and again small birds would fly down and alight upon the ships' timberwork and sing joyous ballads and lais, very loudly and in perfect harmony; but to write down all that I saw and heard would be impossible, and it would

take far too long to name all the birds or to describe the songs that they sang.

Shortly, when the ships were brought to the queen's attention, there was suddenly a lot of fearful uncertainty. The old lady began to weep and cried: 'Alas! Your joyful sleep will soon arrive, long before nightfall! We are destroyed by this knight. These must be his friends, who've come looking for him. There's no other explanation.' Then words failed her.

'We're all destroyed,' the ladies echoed, and they quickly concluded that it would be best to shut the gates immediately and arm themselves with words, which had served them very well in the past, and to shoot clever language in their defence. This was what they decided to do and they made their way to the walls of the Isle to do it. But their walls of glass were no use to them, this mighty lord wasn't hindered by them at all and the barred gates were no barrier to him. The ladies' defences were useless. As soon as his ship found land, this lord hurried quickly onto the Isle carrying his bow, and before the ladies could get to the walls, they were met by the great lord of above, who's called the God of Love, who seemed to be angry with them. Accompanied by a huge number of his followers, he took no heed of the queen or any of the ladies but went directly to where the knight lay on the ground, with all the ladies following behind him.

When the God of Love arrived at the place where the knight was lying, he summoned the queen and all her ladies and in a demonstration of his power, said: 'Is this not pitiable, to see my servant in such pain, so thin and ill and with no idea whom to complain to, except for one, and one alone, who could heal him of his malady but instead hates him for it? Is this a fitting reward for his faithfulness?'

With this, the mighty lord turned his angry gaze towards the queen, looked fiercely at her and commanded her to be a physician to this knight. And to come quickly to the point, he expected swift obedience. He shook his bow and said that his authority would be acknowledged, and because she'd disregarded his laws and refused his servant for so long, he needed her to know that he was angry. Then he bent his bow, stepped forwards a pace or two, drew the bowstring past his chin up to his ear and with a new, sharp arrow he gave the queen a wound that pierced her to the very heart. Such a wound can be terribly painful and take many years to heal.

'Be of good cheer, my knight,' he said then. 'I'll restore you to perfect health, and for every sorrow that you've endured, you'll have two joys coming to you instead, to make up for it.'

Then he walked about grimly amongst the ladies, and I tried to hear what he was saying, for he well knew who his servants were and as he walked he found my lady, took her by the hand and treated her as though she was a goddess, calling her a princess because of her beauty, her generosity and virtue, and said that she possessed no characteristics that were blameworthy except for a lack of pity, which was why he'd sought her out, to point out this fault. And since she had the whole gamut of feminine virtue and friendliness, there was no need to deny Pity his place.

They chatted away and he complimented her repeatedly on her beauty and said that she was a creature whose name should be included everywhere in books that are widely read, so that she'd be remembered forever. And he spoke to my lady in a friendlier way, it seemed to me, than to anybody else there; but it was for the apples that she had, I'm sure. They walked together for a long while, arm in arm, and he didn't do this with anybody else. All the others he commanded, but what he desired from my lady he asked for as a request.

When they had been together for a long while, he brought my lady to the queen and said: 'You must agree to show grace to this lady, this is what you must do.'

My lady, then, very cleverly and judiciously, knelt down amongst the flowers, which April had nourished with its sweet rain, and said to this mighty lord: 'Whatever pleases you, I shall obey, and I shall restrain all other thoughts. All things shall be done as you command.' And still kneeling, she began to shake.

This mighty lord took her in his arms and said: 'You have a servant, and there's none more faithful than he. Therefore, seeing that he's pledged his word, it would be good if you showed him a little pity and listened to him, with the intention of relieving his pain. For you can be sure of one thing: he'll be yours for as long as he lives.'



At this, I saw him smile and laugh, and I could have sworn that he mentioned my name, which filled me so full of awe and fear that I didn't know what to do, whether to stay where I was or to run away, for I well imagined that my lady would think that I'd made a complaint to this mighty saint and that I'd told him everything, because he seemed to know it as though he'd been reading my thoughts. He explained to her all my uncertainty and my willing faithfulness, better than I could have done myself, even if I'd been rehearsing it for a week! He certainly knew that I was ill, and desperate to be cured of this sickness, which I knew was entirely of my own making.

When this lord had finished speaking, and had been with my lady for a long while, she looked happy and smiled. But that was all the answer she gave, which only increased my agony. What should I say? What could I do? My heart was in a turmoil. Could her smile be taken as a sign of approval to a reasonable request, since a smile usually denotes a favourable response? But immediately I began to worry that a wordless answer is never used to confirm an obligation – nowhere is this the case – and it can't be held as surety for anything! So in doubtful joy, both sure and unsure at the same time, I oscillated between hope and fear until at last I could take no more of it and resolved just to continue as I had been doing all along, and hope for the dawn of a new era, a year of grace, which

may yet come before I die, if it pleases she whom I serve, and have served, and will always serve – for there is nothing more precious to me than serving her, and her presence is all the heaven I require. Her absence is a hell full of torments that's driven me near to death on many occasions.

As I stood deep in these thoughts, I saw the queen slowly approaching this mighty lord. She knelt down in the presence of all the ladies and with great care and precision, briefly explained and presented a petition to him, making all her intentions clear, in writing. She asked, since he knew every thought and every motive, that through his godhead and his grace, he might forgive old trespasses and forget all that had gone before, for she would endeavour to be steadfast and turn all her thoughts in future to his service, for as long as she lived; and then she sighed, and wept a little, and said no more. All this was written into the contract.

The lord smiled at this piece of paper and declared that he would be lord and master of this Isle and called it his new conquest, and he took the queen off and they discussed things for a long while. He read through her bill three times and looked very happily into her face and at her expression, and wished her well and said that she deserved to be made a saint, and then he put the contract into his sleeve and everybody watched to see what would happen next. He walked around a little, looking at all the lovely ladies, smiling and thinking quietly to himself, until at last he turned to the queen and said: 'Tomorrow, I desire you all to assemble here on this plain, those of you whose custom it is to wear flowers, or to use my bright colours. Nobody is excused, not you nor anybody who is able to be in my service. For as I've said before, I shall be lord here forevermore, over you, this isle and everything in it, and all your people shall have joy, peace, comfort and a pleasant life. But here I will be seen to be lord and master.'

Then he said: 'You shall make my commandments known, those I have made in response to your petition.'

There was no dissent. No words were spoken at all, the ladies seemed very obedient, and the queen as well; they seemed to be of one mind, although very fearful. All of them went to lodge nearby and none of them left that night. Some occupied themselves by reading old romances for pleasure, some sang poetry to one another, others found different things to do. I took up a romance, and as I was reading this book I imagined the spheres must have turned so much that the sun was about to rise again, so I went out and saw such a gathering assembled on the plain that I was hardly able to move or to find a space even to stand, it was so crowded.

Within a couple of hours, this mighty lord, covered in blooms of many colours, hovered twelve feet in the air so that all could see him. He sent for the queen and for the knight, for my lady and for everyone else, so that nobody was missing and everyone was there; and when they were all assembled, without further delay, up rose an official, one of Love's servants, so that everybody could see him. He was held in honour, and explained that no dissent could be allowed or tolerated. Not even courteous discussion. Whatever

his lord wanted, everybody must accept with peace and accord; this was his instruction. And he was so eloquent that I've never heard anyone of his age speak with such surety, nor with such sincerity, for everything he said seemed to have the stamp of authority on it, the seal of approval and the mark of truth. Such was his eloquence, and his use of words, that when I'm alone, wherever I might be, I can hear him still.

First, he spent a little while talking about the Isle and describing its condition, and the circumstances that had caused his lord to pay it a visit, and every virtue and every blemish, every cause and every effect, slowly and in terms that we could all understand. He revealed which of us were well and in good grace and how the sick had need of a physician, he explained all this plainly to us, and at last, in conclusion, and very politely, he said that this prince, this mighty lord, would bring to agreement all the disputing parties

before he departed, because this was the reason for his being there.

'Witness his presence in your sight, who sits amongst you in his majesty!' the man cried. Then he knelt down and was silent.

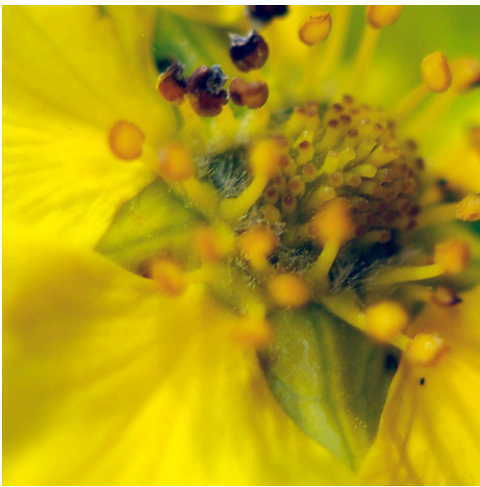
This powerful lord then gathered himself as though he was about to distribute gifts and said to this knight and to me: 'Your joy shall be restored, and because you've been faithful, the two of you, I grant you here a thousand joys for every pain that you've suffered. So buck up now! Cheer up a little. Both

your ladies – look, these two – take them! This dawn has seen the beginning of your happy day. And to all you others, I grant that you shall stand wholly in my grace and be advanced, provided that you actively serve me, with honesty and vigour.'

Then this knight and I knelt down, full of happy expectation, and said: 'Oh lord, your great mercy has so enriched us that we surely do not deserve the least part of it, but we will serve you forevermore, in body and soul, both you and yours, until we die.'

This fine and wonderful knight and I then went quickly to our ladies, both of us ecstatically happy, like two men who suddenly possess everything they desire and owe nothing, and we humbly asked them to accept us into their service and to smile at us and show us their affection, for they'd kept this hidden away under lock and key for so many years, to our great hurt. We told them that we had always been and always would be, to our dying day, their true servants, that we would do them no harm, give no offense but would strive to satisfy all their desires and obey all their wishes, and we made fresh oaths that we would continue in this service and be wholly theirs forevermore, and never be slow to please them, nor ever be unfaithful – not even to think about it! – with all our will, for as long as we lived.

Shortly afterwards, one evening, this lord took his leave of the queen. He said that he would return soon to spend more time on the Isle, both for his honour and for her good,



and ordered her to please the knight. He put all his commandments into writing and appointed clerics, then went to his ship that same night and sailed away.

The next morning, as the sun was drawing away from the horizon – and the air was warm and the weather fair and we were enjoying ourselves on the beach – my lady spoke to me of a voyage she was accustomed to making and how she made small journeys to visit unfamiliar countries. She went to the queen and explained her intentions fully, and then tearfully took her leave. It was pitiful to see this parting, which seemed as distressing for the queen as seeing a martyr newly slain, and I weep still at her tender agony when I recall it to mind. She offered to give the Isle to my lady, eight or nine times she offered this, if she would only stay, and said that her descendants would do homage to my lady and be heirs to this custom forevermore.

But my lady, with many gentle, well-chosen words, replied: ‘No, God forbid that such a thing should ever come about! I could never give my consent that a queen of your standing should be demeaned in any way. But I’d be happy, with all my heart and at whatever cost to me, to be a comfort to you, and to please you.’ Then she kissed her, and wished her goodnight. There, might men have heard my lady praised to the rafters and her name exalted, for her friendliness, her beauty and gentility, her light-heartedness, intelligence and her constant good nature over the years. It was a wonder to see how everyone went to such pains to speak well of her, and everybody wept to see her taking her leave.

The next morning a crowd accompanied her to her ship, and you would have marvelled at the lamentation they made when the sails were unfurled, if you had seen it.

Out went the ship, down went the sounding line, and I, like an unbound madman, terrified of being left behind, leapt fearlessly into the sea and ran towards the ship until a large wave bowled me over and dragged me backwards and forwards in the surf. My mind and breath all but expired and I didn’t know whether I was alive or dead, but at last, men in the ship did their very best to save my life in a way that, if you knew, you’d wonder at, for they fished me out of the water with two boathooks and, agreeing that I was surely going to die, they laid me out on the deck beside the mast and threw some clothes over me. Here I made my confession, hardly knowing what I was saying, but when I’d said all that I wanted to and told everything to the mast, and taken my leave from everybody, I closed my eyes and prepared for death. But then, through her grace – which was very much in need at this moment – my lady took pity on me and thinking that it would be a shame to see me die, she approached me sombrely and said quietly:

‘Get up, please. Come with me and stop all this nonsense! All will be well, don’t worry. I’ll obey and wholly conform to what that lord commanded when he spoke to us both. I’ll do exactly what he wants, since there can be no resistance against him without causing great offence. So hear what I have to say. I’m your friend, and I always will be, so get up. Look at this advancement I’m going to give you, which is your heritage; it will bring you peace without any struggle, all the days of your life.’

She put one of the apples into my sleeve. ‘May he who made the world bring you health

and happiness,' she said.

At once, all my pains left me and my limbs felt so light that I wanted to dance! I got up with a joyful heart, as healthy as anybody now and all thoughts of death forgotten. I went over to my lady and said: 'May he who first created the joys that give pleasure to people send them to you now, in as great an abundance as he's given you beauty, and since he created them let him give you health and everything else good that can be imagined as well.

'Madam,' I continued. 'I've been your true servant for a long time, and will be as constant and faithful as I've ever been, without any regrets. Nothing brings me more pleasure than pleasing you. You are my love and my heart's content, my life, my health, my doctor. You heal every malady that I have and give me help whenever I need it. You're my guarantee of happiness and the person who makes everything possible for me. The grace, madam, that you showed to me just now, has been such that I shall be in your debt forever, may Christ save me. You've given me health and life, therefore it's reasonable that I should serve you with due obedience until I die, and so I shall, madam, I shall serve you always, if death and life are yours to command.'

My lady gave a little smile and explained everything to me very concisely, in plain English, according to her view of the matter, and she told me how she felt towards me, without any wasted words, charging me to be discrete if I wanted to attain her grace, and I was happy to receive this commandment. But I'll pass over all this for now, for things said in confidence don't lend themselves to being recorded in writing, and it would be better that I hadn't been born than to break the oath that I swore. I'd be held as untrustworthy forevermore and never be told anything again that might be to my advantage. I'd be despised, and that is a dreadful thing to have to endure. Therefore, I'll say nothing more about it. I refuse to put a secret into verse.

Sailing for two or three days in this way towards her country, over waves which were high and green, with deep valleys between them, my lady called me over to her on one occasion and said that she was very pleased that I was well, and she talked with me for quite a while about the queen and the Isle and of all that she had seen there, about how things were and all about the queen and the ladies, referring to each by their own name. She spoke to me for about two hours or more, until at last the wind picked up to such a steady breeze, and carried the ship in such a favourable direction, that everyone said: 'Madam, before evening, if God wills, you shall be where you most want to be. In less than six hours, rest assured.'

She smiled at once and said that it was not a long time to wait, then she got up and walked about the ship and exchanged some light-hearted conversation with everybody on board until she could see land. God knows, she was very happy at this. She had a boat lowered and, to get to the point quickly, she went to where she was accustomed to living, and was received, as was rightfully due, with joy and delight as a happy new circumstance, pleasing to everybody.

I woke up at this point and found my chamber full of smoke and my ears, my cheeks and my whole body wet with tears; I was so weak that I could scarcely rise, and so faint and exhausted that I knew neither church nor saint, I didn't know what was what nor who was who and had no idea where to go. But I softly arose and crept about until by chance I found a spiral staircase and, supporting myself against the central column as I climbed, I came to a place where it seemed I could sleep with more comfort, somewhere with more privacy, where I could sleep leisurely and in peace until I'd recovered from the strain of my journey and my anxiety, for this was all I wanted.

In a chamber that was decorated with pictures taken from various old stories – more than I can tell you about – I staggered softly and quietly onto a bed like a man who is completely exhausted, and lay there; and as I lay, as far as my mind would allow me to I recalled all that had happened to me that evening past, just like a child reciting a lesson, eager to retain something that he knows will be well worth remembering for the rest of his life. I wanted the memory to stay with me, I wanted to be able to recall the pain and the pleasure of everything that had happened, just as you've heard me describe it.

And as I lay deep in thought that happy, or unhappy, day – I'm not sure which you would call it – it happened that my thoughts turned by some new process and I found myself back on the Isle! I could see the knight and all the ladies assembled on a green, and the queen was there, and they were all saying how pleased and content they were that the knight should be king over them all. And they vowed that in accordance with the commandments they had been given, they would all be married, every one of them, they gave their total consent to this. So it was concluded that the knight should depart at once, that same evening, to journey for his marriage and to return with such a host of men that all the ladies could be married as well. This was decided and put into writing with a seal, so that it couldn't be denied or retracted. It was made into a firm commitment, with a date agreed for both the wedding feast and the coronation.

The knight was brought to a little barge, late in the afternoon, where he said goodbye to everybody. This barge was steered by a person's mind and carried them wherever they wanted; the queen herself was accustomed to sailing in it. It needed neither mast nor rudder and no captain or crew either, I haven't heard of any other like it. It sailed by thought and by desire – east or west, calm or storm, it made no difference.

At the knight's request I went along with him, and I was the first to be invited to the wedding feast. When we'd crossed the wavy sea and reached his land, he left this rich and noble vessel in a large and deep inlet and went straight to the court where he was accustomed to being present. He was properly received as a worthy knight and as heir to the kingdom by all the noblemen of the land, who had come immediately upon learning of his arrival, happily and loyally, loath to seem disrespectful in any way or tainted by any suggestion of sluggishness – for each man's wealth rested upon his family's established loyalty, which had been demonstrated meticulously since the country had first been won. So they received their king, and nothing was forgotten that ought to be done, or might please their sovereign or bring comfort to him, or as longstanding custom dictated.



It had been seven years and a little more since the father, the old, wise and aged king of this land, had said goodbye to all his barons one evening, telling them that his days had reached their end, and he heartily prayed them to remember his son, who was young and of tender years, born to be their prince, if he ever had the fortune or grace to return to that country within a reasonable length of time. For it was widely known that, at a tender age and with no great fanfare, this young prince had embarked upon a marvellous voyage to strange lands in order to find a princess whom he desired more than wealth itself, because of her great name, which had blossomed so much at this time that there was none to compare with it. Nobody, anywhere, had an unfavourable word to say about this princess. So they should be as friendly and faithful to their prince as they had been to himself. This was all that he asked. Then he took his leave of them, forever.



So this is what they had done. And they made such a fuss of their lord on his return that it was a joy to be there to watch their loyalty and sincerity. They were so happy that there was not one amongst them who preferred anything other than that their lord should have his princess, and that they should have a beautiful lady to please; for they were very keen that she might provide them with an heir, for in this way lay security. And since they seemed so enthusiastic, the prince decided to tell them everything, so in plain English he described his whole journey to them and asked for their support, and told them that he had made a commitment and couldn't be late arriving back without incurring great shame and dishonour. He asked for their agreement to this, and for their advice and cooperation, and that within ten days they might release such resources and so organise things that it would burden and inconvenience the country as little as possible, but that he might have sixty thousand men at least, to take to the celebrations. For he intended to return to the Isle that he had come from as quickly as possible, and not to be late. Nothing should stop him.

The lords retired to a chamber to discuss and consider how best to achieve everything that their lord desired and to provide both for his happiness and for their realm's security and continuity, so that it might remain in the honour that it had always enjoyed. And at last, they decided upon a plan of action that would allow everything to be achieved within fifteen days, with much diligence and effort on everybody's part. They arranged the finances, decided where the money was to come from and, in conclusion, they made provision for everything.

When they had finished, the lords all assembled before the prince so that he could hear what they'd accomplished. They explained to him that there was no way that it could all be done within the next ten days, as he had asked, but that within fifteen days it would be possible for him to return to his celebrations. They explained in detail why this was, and how it was impossible to organise things as quickly as he wished, and how there

was no chance at all that he could return on the day that had been fixed. There were too many insurmountable difficulties.

When he heard this, the knight was so angry and distressed that he made himself ill because of it. He lay in his bed for the whole week, and most of the next as well, through shame and anxiety for the blame that might become attached to him. Often he hit himself on the chest, crying: 'Alas, I'll lose my honour forever. I wish I was dead! I'll never be believed again!'

He was so distraught that, in all honesty, it was pitiful to see. But the fifteen days soon passed, and the lords, that evening, went to tell him that everything was ready and they explained to him briefly how they'd arranged things. They said that twenty thousand knights of great renown and another forty thousand who were very well regarded, all of them from the nobility, had assembled beside a river to await his instructions. Joyfully, the prince rose from his bed and went straight to where these knights were staying, that very same evening. He ate his supper and talked with the men until dawn, and at first light, he rode beside the river towards an open inlet until he came to his noble barge. And when this prince, this lusty knight, with all his people in bright armour, arrived at this place of embarkation, and he knew that everybody was there and nobody had been left behind, he spoke to them and explained what he intended to do. He made a proclamation twice that day, commanding everybody to assemble beside the river the next morning, when they would all embark upon their journey.

Morning arrived and the terms of this proclamation were followed to the letter. Few had slept that night, but had busied themselves packing and preparing themselves for the morning. Their greatest concern was the lack of ships, and I have to say, except for the barge and two other vessels, I couldn't see any other ships anywhere! Everybody stood beside the water in puzzlement, watching the tide coming in. Then a cry went up: 'Go into the ship, everybody!'

Everybody rushed who was able to rush, and I thought I saw everyone entering the barge until not one person was left on the shore; nothing was left at all, no horse, armour, bag or crate, lance or squire, everything was stowed on board with room to spare! I laughed at this incredible feat of stowage, and wondered to myself how such a ship could have been constructed; for had the people increased in number to such a multitude that no crowd like it had ever been seen before, there would still have been plenty of room for everyone. Nobody on board was cramped or uncomfortable. I was one of the last to go aboard and found plenty of space beside the mast, and as I looked, I saw such a great expanse that it looked as if everybody was lodged in a town.

The ship cast off and prayers were said. Everyone, both the prince and everybody else, went down onto their knees for a while to pray for a successful journey, and that they might reach the Isle safe and sound. And the prince, along with everybody else, prayed that he might safely reach the Isle with no shame and no dishonour for being late, because it had taken him so much time to gather all his men together. This was everybody's

prayer, for the delay might cause their lord's sincerity to be questioned, and as a result of this uncertainty this prince, this knight, managed to get not a wink of sleep, such was his sorrow and his anguish, for fear that the queen should be displeased with him when he arrived.

The ship sped forth swiftly, just as the prince desired it to in his thoughts, until, in his great need, it brought him to the Isle. He and all his men quickly disembarked onto the sand with happy smiles and light hearts, thinking to be in heaven that night. But before they'd gone a mile inland, they met a distraught lady clothed in black who'd never been cruel or unpleasant in all her life, but who now stopped him as he rode and in her distress cried: 'Stop, there's no need for you to hurry, go back! Your unfaithfulness has destroyed us all. A curse that we allied ourselves with you! You've shown yourself so quickly to be untrustworthy, I curse the day that we met you. Alas, the day that you were born! All this land is lost because of you. Cursed may he be who brought you to us, for our joy is now reduced to nothing. You're the cause of all our pain.'

'Alas, madam!' exclaimed this knight. He dismounted, and all the colour drained from his face. 'What do you mean? What are you saying? I've no thoughts of going back on anything that I promised. Your princess is my heaven and all my wealth, my world's joy and all my happiness. Why are you saying these things? Tell me, madam, I beg you, for never in my life have I felt such sickening apprehension. Speak to me, madam. Tell me what's going on.'

'The queen is dead,' the lady replied bluntly. 'For love of you, and through pitiful sorrow at your faithlessness, this land has been lost. Two thirds of the vibrant ladies who used to dance here, and chat and laugh with one another, are now dead and gone; they've taken new lodgings under the earth. When the time you had agreed upon had passed, the queen convened a council to decide what to do, and said that you had brought great shame upon her, and asked for the ladies' advice, for there was need to show wisdom. They had to try to prevent any possibility that stories and songs could be composed about them by evil tongues about how easily they'd been won over and what a shabby affair it had turned out to be and how they'd disregarded their honour and chosen to risk their wealth and happiness, health and high reputation and lost it all. The ignominy would last forever, she said, and couldn't be mended, for every man would likely view it as open season on their Isle now, since this knight had shown how easily they could all be deceived.'

'All this was put forward for debate three times, and the conclusion was always that it was better to die a shameless death than to lose their reputations in this way. So they chose to have an acquaintance with death, their happiness lost, for fear of otherwise living in shame for having been so quick to believe you. They swore unanimously that neither food nor drink would pass their lips, but they would huddle together in one place, silently weeping, and suffer quietly and willingly for their mistake, without asking for any help.'

‘So the queen took her leave, and said goodbye to all those who were present. She said that she was truly sorry for all her failings and then she died, there and then. What more can I say? Come with me. Come and see the hearse, and you’ll see the most pitiful sight that a knight can ever have been shown. You’ll see ladies clothed in black, with pale faces drained of all blood, each with a rod in her hands ready to hit any lady who isn’t weeping or is too tired to stand any more. They’re all so bruised by this that they’re blue all over, like freshly dyed cloth. They obey their queen’s command and will do so for as long as any breath remains in them.’

This knight took the lady into his arms and exclaimed: ‘Alas, that I was born! My life is worth nothing!’ Then he drew a knife and stabbed himself through gown, doublet and shirt with it, causing the blood to spurt from his heart. He fell down upon the grass, said how sorry he was, closed his eyes and drew a final breath before he died.



Sixty thousand men who were assembled nearby raised such a cry for sorrow that the sound was heard in heaven – and just as far down beneath the earth – and wild beasts were so suddenly startled that they ran in fear of their lives from the woods onto the plain, from the valleys into the high mountains, running as sightless beasts who’d completely forgotten their nature.

In great distress, these lords called a meeting and sent for the lady and asked her to advise them what could be done. Clothed in black and weeping copiously, this lady said gently: ‘My lords, by my faith, this whole disaster has been caused by your indolence. If you had had – if only you had the intelligence to see this! – a prince who’d been a proper knight, then all those of you who are noblemen would have obeyed his request at once, or died for failure to do so, every one of you! If you’d been as dutiful as your nobility requires and done what your prince had asked you to do in the first place, this carnage would instead be a celebration! But the harm is done, a shame to us all, and one that will last forever.

‘So if you’re asking for my advice, I cannot help you. But if you like, for remembrance, you could find the money and arrange it so that the queen, who was so modest, and all her women, dead and dying, might have some resting place in your land, a chapel perhaps, with markings on their graves to denote the tragic circumstance of their death, in some notable old city with good roads where people can easily come to pray for the queen and for all her loyal ladies.’ With this, she became as pale as death and twice wished that she might expire, then she sighed and breathed her last.

All the lords whom the knight had brought with him, from the greatest to the least,

swore that from henceforth they would live in houses of thatch, wear only black, forsake all enjoyment and take pain and penance as their sole pleasure in life. They carried the dead prince to the barge and appointed men to watch over his body; others went to where the queen lay on her hearse and falling to their knees, they held their arms aloft and cried: 'Mercy! Mercy!' three times, and cursed the day that laziness and disobedience could have gained the upper hand over honour and obligation. They carried her over a mile to the barge, and at last, all the ladies, one by one, were brought to the vessel by companies of men, until there were none left to bring.

They crossed the sea and reached the shore, and on a sandy beach the bodies were put onto new hearses and taken quickly to a walled city where it was customary to bury the kings of that country after they'd reigned with honour. The deeds and conquests of these kings were inscribed on monuments there, in an abbey of nuns who were clothed in black and accustomed to keeping vigils and rising each night to pray for the living.

And so it happened, as was the custom, that a service was arranged and conducted for the prince and for the queen, a very devout service, and afterwards, many prayers and unaccompanied verse was sung around the biers, very softly and with great sincerity, so that all that night, until dawn, the people in the church prayed that the Holy Trinity might have pity upon these souls. But then a strange thing occurred that caused much wonderment among the people, and soon changed each lamentation into a joy, and sometimes two!

When the night had passed and a new day had dawned, with rays of red from the sun spreading over everything – and the young morning was clear and warm and the air was fresh and pure – a bird with blue and green feathers and bright streaks of gold in its plumage, like threads separating blocks of colour – a truly stunning bird that had never been seen in the city before – alighted on the queen's hearse and began to sing with a soft harmony. It sang three times and nobody disturbed it, until at last, an old knight, deep in mourning and oblivious to anything else, with a tear-stained face and the look of a man who hadn't slept all night, doffed his hood beside the hearses for a prince who was passing and frightened the bird so much that it stopped singing and flew off.

The bird spread its wings and flew in a panic towards an open window where, to get to the point quickly, it injured itself on some broken stained glass that depicted the lives of many saints and fell down, flapping and bleeding, onto the ledge inside the window, where it quickly died.

The bird lay there for an hour or more, and then twenty others arrived all at once. They perched on the outside ledge beneath the broken window and made such a lamentation that their mournful melody and doleful warbling was pitiful to hear; it was the absolute opposite of the joyful song the people had been treated to before. Then one of these birds flew through the space in the window carrying a green herb in its colourful beak, with no flower but a sprig of small, long, dark leaves that were veined and quite plain-looking. It laid this herb carefully beside the dead bird's head, arranged it with care and

then hung its head and waited; and in less than half an hour, this herb developed buds, then flowered, and the flowers developed into seeds; and just as an adult bird puts food into the throats of its chicks, so this bird put one of these seeds into the beak of its dead companion. And in no time at all, its fellow was up and preening itself, although we'd all seen it lying dead there just moments before. Then both of them flapped their wings and took off together, singing. Nobody had any wish to hinder them in any way.

When all the birds had gone, the abbess had all the remaining seeds gathered up while she held the herb in her hand, inspecting it closely, leaf, seed, stalk and flower. She said that it had a good perfume and was no common herb but something quite unusual, with more healing power than most, it seemed. Whoever was able to use it in his need, she thought, flower, leaf or seed, would be certain of a cure. Then she laid it all down upon the hearse where the queen lay and began discussing what had happened with those around her. And as they spoke, one of the seeds became green and began to sprout upon the dry hearse – which I thought was a wonderful thing to witness – then it flowered and produced seeds, by which time the people were all staring at it and saying that it was a miracle! It seemed to promise much more potential as a medicine than treacle! And some were keen to see if it might have any effect upon the corpses that they'd stayed awake all night keeping vigil beside.

So the lords soon gave their consent and the people had no objections, and with little fuss the queen's face was uncovered. When everybody saw her features again, they fell onto their knees and couldn't stop weeping. It was a hateful thing to have to remember what their prince had done, and their lives seemed just a painful burden to them now, for they were plain and honest folk.

Soon, the good abbess chose three of the seeds and with her small, clean fingers she put them dextrously, one after the other, into the queen's mouth. And they soon proved to be a true medicine! Their efficacy was quickly seen! For with a smiling countenance the queen rose up and, in her customary way, she greeted the people around her. At the sight of this, the people kneeling on the flagstones and cobbles thought they were in heaven, soul and bones!

When the queen was told what had taken place, and how good this medicine was, she asked if she might have the seeds in order to relieve the knight from the pain that they'd both endured. So they went quickly to where the prince lay, to see if the same thing would happen, and she ministered to him and cured him so completely that, within a short time, he was alive and well, animated and very talkative.

'Thank you, doctor!' he exclaimed.

The joy throughout the whole city was such that the bells were rung loudly and steadily, as though it was a state occasion. People from miles around came running up in a panic to see what the fuss was all about. The queen and the abbess energetically and diligently tended to the ladies and soon a throng of them were following behind the queen. She checked them all by name and made sure that no one had been forgotten. Never had

such joy been seen as when this wonderful medicine restored every single one of them into perfect health and happiness. They were in such bliss that nobody could desire a more perfect paradise!

The next morning, when all sorrow had turned to happiness, the king, the queen and every lord, and all the ladies, agreed that a general assembly should be convened, and here it was ordained that a parliament should quickly follow, and when this parliament was held, everything was settled and agreed in such a way that everyone was very pleased, for it was announced, with the full consent of young and old, the commons and nobility alike, that a marriage feast within the Isle should be held exactly as had originally been planned. So everybody took ship and sailed to the Isle. Messengers were sent into far-off realms, to kings, queens and duchesses, and many princes and princesses, to ask if they would come to visit the Isle on the day of this marriage feast, if it was their desire to do so, and for their entertainment there would be jousts and tournaments all day long, and other contests as well, and it was to be held after April, sometime in May, probably.



It was agreed that two ladies of suitable nobility should take the magic barge and search for my lady, looking everywhere until they found her, and do whatever it took – both the prince and the queen commanded this – and that when they found her they should implore her, as their lady and mistress, and for her courtesy, to be present at the wedding. They should take with them certain knights and squires who would act as the queen's officers, a sort of embassy, with sealed letters. The queen asked them to be as quick as they could, for if my lady wasn't at the wedding, everything would be spoiled and the feast would be an empty and joyless affair, she said, and she gave the messengers tokens that my lady would recognise, and wished them Godspeed.

The two ladies and the knights departed and were away for fourteen days, and then, amidst great joy, they returned with my lady. The queen was delighted when she saw the ship approaching and went down onto the sand to welcome my lady in person, and she embraced her so enthusiastically that it was a wonder to see. By my reckoning they chatted away for twelve hours, oblivious to rain and sun, and no one interrupted them but let them carry on as their youth and exuberance demanded. And afterwards, they went with some knights to a place where they stayed together and enjoyed one another's company to the full – the queen and my mistress – all that night. This was the only business they wanted to conduct, and in the morning, this prince, with a huge number of lords and knights around him, came to tell my lady how pleased he was that she was there, and thanked her very eloquently and sincerely, and laughed and smiled, and said:

‘What was in doubt is now assured!’

Then he stirred everybody into action and urged them to spare no expense but to make everything ready, for the following day, there was no doubt about it, he was to be married.

Morning came, and the wedding ceremony was such that no prince nor conqueror has ever been married with more honour, nor with such a fine and chivalrous assembly of knights in attendance, nor with such a huge gathering of beautiful ladies, and I can say this with certainty, I’d stake my life on it. The marriage feast was held in tents and pavilions in a large meadow beside a wood, between a river and a spring, where no abbey or monastic cell, church, house or village had ever been known to exist – not within living memory.

The feast lasted for three months continuously and didn’t cease for a moment. From the early rising of the sun to the end of the day there was jousting, dancing and merriment – everything that young noblemen like to do. On the second morning, when every man had lawfully spent the night with his lady, the prince, the queen, and everyone at the feast made a request to my lady, begging her, in fact imploring her, to be my friend and to remember the faith that I’d shown to her, to take pity on my anxieties and to accept me into her service in such a way that we might become as one. And to preclude any possibility of refusal, they abandoned the jousting for the whole day in order to put their effort into this endeavour, to try to persuade my lady to be content and not to worry but be genuinely happy at the prospect, at which she smiled and replied:

‘I know that he’s my servant and desires only the best for me, as I do for him, and I wish that he knew how, if I could be sure of his fidelity and knew that it would continue – as you all insist that it will – then I would consent to your request and be named at your wedding feast. Then I would throw myself into the spirit of things and do as you wish.

‘So I will consent to do as you say; and also the sovereign above commanded me to love and to prefer him before all others, and against this Prince there can be no war, for his power over everything is such that no one has a chance against him, and since his desire and yours are the same, I shall not fight against it, but willingly comply.’

Then, as I imagined, everybody desired that this promise of marriage should be made, so that everybody’s doubts could be put to rest; and so it was. In the morning, I thought that the prince and the princess took me into a tent, with my mistress, and said that it was time for us to be married. And in front of ladies, knights and squires, and a great host of musicians with diverse instruments, and tuneful melodies that would take far too long to describe here – but this tent was my parish church, which had been decked out especially for the feast and the ceremony – an archbishop and an archdeacon sung the service, according to tradition and the Church’s guidance, and after this we were taken to dine and to dance, with numerous entertainments, and everyone prayed for our happiness and everybody was very merry and said that the feast was now restored and were delighted, lord and lady, to have witnessed our marriage. They wished us health,



happiness and a long life together, and urged the minstrels to play their chords and their harmonies and to produce some joyful music so that everyone would be moved to show their merriment, and they asked each of the musicians to give the best performance on his instrument that he'd ever given in his entire life before, for the entire day.

Then some marvellous entertainment began! Harmonies and melodies issued from numerous tents, from thousands of instruments, so that everybody was keen to dance and nobody had to pretend to be merry – which so animated me as I slept that I leapt out of my bed, thinking that I was dancing at the feast...

...and I woke, and it was all gone.

There was nobody there, nothing, except for old paintings on the walls, of horsemen, hawks, hounds and injured deer covered in wounds, some mauled by the dogs and others with arrows and bolts sticking out of them. My dream had vanished completely.

When I realised the truth... if you'd been there you would have wept for a week out of pity for me, for never before has a man been half so overwhelmed with despair and escaped with his life – and this was only because there was no blade lying about, or anything sharp that I could use to kill myself with. Lo! Here was my bliss! Here was my pain!

So this is my complaint to my lady. I ask that she show me the grace and the mercy to end my sadness and distress and to accept me into her service, so that the substance of my dream might turn into reality, with her full consent and willingness. Otherwise, this very night, before daybreak, I ask that I may return into my dream and, thus sleeping, go and live forever on that delightful Isle, seen by my lady and in her service, in any way that pleases her, and to achieve the grace to be accepted there, as I was when I dreamed, and to survive for a thousand years and ten in her good grace.

Amen.

### *Epilogue*

Most beautiful amongst the beautiful, and the fairest alive, I confide and confess all my secrets to you, so that with your grace all my troubles may be resolved, or else may I die like a martyred saint, for I swear by my faith, and by this book, that you have the power both to heal and kill me, with a single look.

Go forth, my innocent and faithful heart, and offer your allegiance with humility. Go down upon your bended knees and pledge once again your service to my lady. Reflect upon how wonderful it is to live under her governance, she who is able to transport you into the bliss that you desire, with a single look.

If it happens that you find her name written in a book, or on a wall, make sure that you worship those words like a true and faithful servant, for being faithless where love is concerned will lose you the grace of she who can transport you into the bliss that you

desire, with a single look.

Be diligent, wakeful, fearful and obedient, not too carefree or exuberant but happy and humble as you nourish your very being with the pleasure of doing what she desires; and when you sleep, keep her always in your mind, she who is able to transport you into the bliss that you desire, with a single look.