

# Sir Cleges

*anon*

*an early-fifteenth century Middle English Breton lai*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose**

**by**

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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 Bodleian Library MS 6922 (Ashmole 61).

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# Sir Cleges

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*early-fifteenth century*

**L**istyns, lordynges, and ye schall here · Off ansytores that before us were · Bothe herdy and wyght · In tyme of Uter and Pendragoun · Kyng Artour fader of grete renoune · A ssembly man of syght – Listen all you lords and noblemen and hear of our esteemed and warlike ancestors. This story takes place in the days of Uther Pendragon, King Arthur’s renowned father, who was a magnificent man of great stature. He had a knight whose name was Sir Cleges, and no finer man could be called upon in battle. He sat at the Round Table and was a warrior of great worth; he was handsome, tall and strong.

There was no more courteous knight than Sir Cleges in the whole world; he was noble, generous and gave gold and property to squires who had fought overseas and since fallen into poverty. He treated his tenants very fairly, was slow to use violence and would drive nobody away from his land. He was as gentle as a maiden! Sir Cleges would entertain all his visitors with great largesse and there was never any shortage of food in his hall; his table was open to anyone. He had a beautiful and caring wife whose name was Claris and she possessed every fine quality that a woman should possess. Sir Cleges and his wife gave greatly to the poor and to the mendicant orders; they dealt fairly and with justice to both rich and poor alike and their gifts brought a smile to many a face.

Every year it was Sir Cleges’s habit to hold a Christmas feast to honour the day of Christ’s birth. He would provide for this grand occasion as though he was a king. Everybody for miles around was invited, and nobody refused to come, least of all the minstrels who could earn a good bob or two by entertaining everybody who was there. They were given fine gifts when the celebrations were all over: horses, clothes, rings with precious stones in them, gold and silver. Sir Cleges put on this feast for ten or twelve years in a row, to honour He who governs over us all and who died on the cross for us. But then his money started to run out; although in all honesty, he continued to spend just as much as he had always done. A determination not to allow his reduced circumstances to stop him from putting on the Christmas feast as usual persuaded him to start borrowing money, putting his manorial estates up as security. Things went on

*The tale of Sir Cleges is a short Middle English Breton lai set in the days of King Arthur’s father, King Uther Pendragon. Known also from two early-fifteenth century manuscripts, the reader is invited to follow the fortunes of a hero knight, Sir Cleges, as he makes a complete revolution on the Wheel of Fortune from wealth to destitution and back to wealth again. Perhaps significantly, this journey involves the consumption of some magic fruit at the very bottom of the cycle, when King Uther Pendragon believes Sir Cleges to be dead. Like the magic apples in the Isle of Ladies, this fruit seems to have restorative qualities. Like the pomegranate seed in the myth of the Greek goddess Percephone, it could be said to herald his return back into the land of the living.*

*The story here is identical to that found in Oxford MS Bodleian 6922, dating to around 1420-1430.*

like this for a few years more until at last, when he had mortgaged everything that he owned and all his gold and silver had run out, Sir Cleges still determined to put on his Christmas feast as usual. God would find a way of putting things right!

Sir Cleges put up all his estates as security for his loans until there was only one left that had not been entirely sold off and lost to him; it was of little value and could barely support he and his wife Claris, let alone anybody else. The men whose services he had once retained with such honour had melted away on every side until there was nobody left but himself. Nobody lived with him at all, except for Claris and his two children. He had known happier times than this, it must be said.

Now it happened one Christmas Eve that Sir Cleges and his wife were in their manor at Cardiff, and as the day wore on, Sir Cleges began to feel sick and weary as he thought of the fine banquet that he should, on this day, have been in the process of having prepared for all his guests. But now his manors and estates were all sold. He wept and wrung his hands; his life and his fortune seemed to have fallen to such depths! And as he wandered disconsolately about his hall, he began to hear laughter, music and dancing, the singing of carols, flutes and harps, the playing of drums and pipes, the sounds of joyous Christmas celebrations outside. He wrung his hands in even greater despair, sighed piteously and began weeping again.



‘Jesus, King of Heaven and maker of heaven and Earth!’ he cried. ‘Thank you for the joy I once felt on this occasion when I fed rich and poor alike in Your name! And you will remember that all who came for your sake, they found themselves lacking neither beef nor venison nor any expensive spice that I could obtain from anywhere in the world!’

And as he stood lamenting so, his wife came and took him in her arms. Kissing him, Claris said: ‘My faithful husband, I have listened to what you have been saying. But it does not help to hold so much grief in your heart and I urge you to stop. Away with your sorrow! Give thanks to God for all that you still possess. Everyone should be merry and satisfied with whatever they have on this holy day. You as well! So cheer up! Let’s go to our meal with a little thankfulness in our hearts. I’ve prepared the food in a way that I’m sure you will like.’

‘Very well,’ replied Sir Cleges and he walked with Claris towards the warmth of the fire, now in a slightly better frame of mind. And whenever he lapsed into despair, she would steer his thoughts away from his grief. And after a while he began to cheer up a little more and wiped the tears from his face. They both washed, sat at a table before the best food that they could afford, and tried to make merry. When they had eaten, they passed

the rest of the day in happiness and festivity as best they could. They played with their children, and when it got dark they went to bed. Sir Cleges and dame Claris slept until the church bells rang to herald in Christmas Day and summon everybody to the church. They arose, and as soon as they had all dressed they went to church together, Sir Cleges, dame Claris and their two children.

Sitting in his pew, Sir Cleges knelt and prayed to Jesus Christ, thanking Him for giving him such a fine wife. 'Gracious Lord,' he prayed. 'Keep Claris and my two children in your tender care. Let no harm come to my family.' And dame Claris prayed: 'God, keep my lord's soul in your care and receive him into Everlasting Joy when the time comes.' The service came to an end and they all went home, thanking Almighty God that they had a home to go to.

When they arrived back, Sir Cleges found that his spirits had lifted. He sent his wife and children on into the hall but went himself into a garden that they kept, knelt down



upon his knees and opened his heart to God. Sir Cleges thanked Christ Almighty for all the poor and distressed folk he had been able to feed and nourish at his banquets in the years gone by. And when he had finished these prayers, kneeling beneath a cherry tree, in order to raise himself to his feet again he grabbed hold of an overhanging branch and noticed that it bore green leaves and had ripe cherries growing all over it.

'Dear God!' he exclaimed. 'What sort of fruit grows at this time of year? I have never seen cherries growing on trees in the middle of winter!' And overcome by curiosity, he put one of the cherries into his mouth. It tasted just as it should, the best he had ever eaten. Sir Cleges broke off a small bough and carried it into the hall to show to dame Claris.

'Look at this!' he called to his wife as he entered. 'Here is a novelty! I found these on a tree outside, in our garden. Honestly! The tree is full of them! But it worries me a little, though, I have to say. Perhaps it is a sign of more grief to come, for all my complaining.'

'It is a sign of better things to come!' replied dame Claris, exultantly. 'But let us thank God for whatever He shall send to us, be it less or more. And I suggest that we fill a pannier with this fruit that God has sent. And when day breaks, go to Cardiff where the king is holding court and present these to him. And he will give you such a gift in return that we shall all be the better off for it, I am certain!'

Sir Cleges agreed to his wife's plan. 'As soon as it is light,' he said, 'I shall prepare to go to Cardiff, as you suggest.'

That morning, as soon as the sun had risen, dame Claris filled a pannier with the fruit and said to her eldest son: 'Take this basket on your back and follow your father with it, for it is not heavy.' Then Sir Cleges took up a staff to walk with, for he had no horse, as the book tells us, and a stick was the only help he could call upon for the journey, as is the way with the poor.

So Sir Cleges and his noble son took the most direct route to Cardiff on that Christmas morning and arrived outside the castle gates at midday, just as all the nobility were assembling in the hall for the Christmas banquet. He was clothed very shabbily in a poor man's outfit and as he made to enter the castle the porter said: 'By God and Saint Mary, I suggest you quickly withdraw, I warn you. If you come any nearer I'll give you such a nasty clout you'll have a headache for a week! Go and stand in beggar's row!'

'Good Sir,' replied Sir Cleges. 'I pray you, let me in. I have a present for the king, a gift from He who made this world. Look and see!'

The porter went over to the pannier and lifted the lid. Inside were all the cherries. It was obvious that the king would give a generous gift to the man who brought these to him on Christmas Morning!

'By He who bought me with His blood!' exclaimed the porter. 'You shall not enter here unless you grant me a third part of whatever the king gives you for these cherries, whether silver or gold, by He who made the Earth.'

'Then I shall have to accept your terms,' replied Sir Cleges. resignedly.

So the porter gave them leave to enter and Sir Cleges and his son went deep into the castle until they came to the doorway of a great hall. It was guarded by an officer holding a large stick. Sir Cleges pushed bravely forwards.

'Stop right there!' shouted the man. 'If you come any further I'll break every bone in your body!'

'Good Sir,' said Sir Cleges. 'For the love of Christ, cease your anger! I have brought a present from He who made this world and who died on the cross for us. This fruit grew on my tree last night. Look! See how magnificent they are.'

The usher quickly lifted up the lid of the pannier and saw inside the fairest cherries that he had ever seen. 'By sweet Mary!' he exclaimed. 'I assure you, your feet shall not step inside this hall unless you grant me a third of everything you receive for these. Yes or no?'

Sir Cleges could see no alternative. 'Yes,' he said. He had no other choice. So he went into the hall with a sinking heart, leading his son who was carrying the pannier behind him. The king's steward was standing with some noblemen who were dressed in their finest miniver and ermine, but he immediately left those he was with and strode towards Sir Cleges. 'Who made you so bold,' he hissed, 'as to come in here without being summoned? Churl, you are far too brave for your own good. Take your shabby clothes out

of here at once!’

‘Sir,’ replied Sir Cleges. ‘I have a present for the king, a gift from He who bought us with His precious blood on the cross.’

The steward plucked up the lid as quickly as he could. ‘Dear Mary!’ he exclaimed when he saw what was inside. ‘I have never seen cherries like these at this time of year in all my life! But you shall come no nearer to the king unless you grant me, by Almighty Christ, a third part of anything the king gives to you for these. Or else, out you go!’

Sir Cleges stood speechless. Now I’ll be left with nothing – he thought. Nothing but a handful of dry oats! He stood sighing as he mulled this dilemma over, in his head.

‘Wretch! Have you no tongue? Speak to me! Be quick! Agree to what I say or I will take a staff and shove you headlong out of the door with it!’

Sir Cleges saw that he had no other recourse but to grant the steward what he demanded. ‘Whatever the king rewards me with,’ he said, sighing, ‘you shall have a third of it.’ The bargain was struck and the steward went off without another word. Sir Cleges made his way towards the king and proffered his pannier on bended knees. He took off the lid and showed the king the wonderful cherries that were inside. ‘Our Saviour honours you,’ said Sir Cleges, ‘by sending you this fruit that was growing on my tree this Christmas morning.’

The king looked at the fresh, ripe cherries and said: ‘Here is a perfect gift. Thank you, sweet Jesus!’ Then he invited Sir Cleges to sit at a table and asked if he could have a word with him after the meal. The king gave the cherries to his wife – the beautiful Queen Igraine who was born in Cornwall and was to be King Arthur’s mother. She had the cherries served throughout the hall and then the king declared: ‘Be merry, I urge you! And the man who brought me so many large, ripe cherries shall shortly enjoy the full measure of my gratitude!’



When everyone had eaten and drunk and the hall was filled with merry laughter, the king summoned a squire: ‘Go and fetch me that poor man who brought all those cherries.’ The squire hurried off to expedite this royal errand and arrived back very shortly with Sir Cleges. Kneeling before the king, Sir Cleges could only reflect upon the swift loss of any gift that he might now receive. He spoke to the king as though he was a commoner: ‘My liege lord, what is your desire?’ he said. ‘I am a free-born man and your humble servant.’

‘I wish to give you my hearty thanks for that magnificent gift, those wonderful cherries!’

replied the king. 'You have honoured all at my feast with this fruit and brought great distinction to my banquet. Whatever you would like in return shall be yours, so God save me, whatever it is that you desire – property or rank, or anything, just name it.'

'My lord King,' replied Sir Cleges. 'This is a great gift indeed to bestow upon one such as I; to grant me land or leadership, or any property at all, so God help me, it is too much. But since I am able to choose for myself, I ask nothing but twelve stout blows with my wooden staff. Grant me this! Grant it to me so I can pay back all those wretches in this castle who have justly earned my resentment, for the love of Holy Charity.'

'I regret making you this offer now,' said the king. 'By He who made us both, you would be far better advised to take gold or the income from some property. You appear to have much need of these, if you don't mind me saying so.'

But Sir Cleges replied: 'Lord, you made this offer! You cannot withdraw it now!'

The king angrily gave vent to his frustration and disapproval, but nevertheless he ordered that the strokes should be given. Sir Cleges immediately went down onto the floor of the hall, amongst all the great lords, and looked for the steward. He owed this man four sharp strokes with a wooden staff and Sir Cleges was eager to discharge his obligation! When he found the steward amongst all his fine companions he gave him such a blow that the man dropped to the floor like a stone! Three more harsh strokes followed. 'Sir, for your courtesy!' cried the steward. 'Strike me no more!'

Sir Cleges then went outside the hall, intent upon delivering the rest of his gift to those he owed it to. When he came to the usher, he gave him some violent blows over the head with his staff. For many days afterwards, the man was totally incapable of carrying out any duties. 'By my virtue!' declared Sir Cleges. 'Here's a third part of the gift that I'm obliged to give to you!'

Next he came to the porter and paid him his four strokes as well; and for a long while afterwards this man was unable to shout any instructions or command anybody to ride away from the castle gate! The first blow that Sir Cleges laid on him broke his shoulder and his right arm. 'Here is a third part of my gift, as we agreed!' cried Sir Cleges.

By now the king was sitting in a room aside from the hall, conversing merrily with his noblemen. Sir Cleges approached as a bard had just finished singing one of the king's favourite *lais* that had pleased Uther Pendragon no end. The king turned to the harper and said: 'You probably get to hear of a great many things as you travel so widely around my kingdom. Now tell me honestly, if you will: do you know who that poor man is who gave me the cherries today?'

'My liege,' replied the bard, 'in all truth, he was once called Sir Cleges and he was a very fine knight of yours, when his fortune was much greater, and a man of high stature.'

'This cannot be Sir Cleges!' exclaimed the king. 'He has been dead for a long while now, that man whom I loved so. I wish he *was* here! I would rather have him standing beside

me than three other knights, he was so strong in battle!

Sir Cleges knelt before the king and thanked him for granting what he had requested. The king asked why he had wanted to give those three men such harsh blows with his staff and why he thought they had deserved it. 'They were going to prevent me from seeing you,' Sir Cleges explained. 'They wouldn't let me in until I had granted to each of them a third part of any gift that you might give to me. But this left nothing for myself, so I thought it best to deal amongst them those twelve heavy blows.'

All those who were with the king enjoyed this joke immensely. The noblemen all laughed, young and old alike, and some laughed so much that they fell off their chairs! They said: 'This is a jest that can only have come from the mind of a nobleman, by Christ!'

The king sent for his steward. 'If this man still owes you any gifts, you have a right to ask for them now,' he said, still laughing.

The steward looked grim. 'I don't want anything more to do with this man,' he replied. 'I wish I'd never seen him.'

'Tell me, good man,' said the king to Sir Cleges. 'What is your name? It will not harm you to tell me.'

'My liege, the bard is correct. Men once called me Sir Cleges. I was your trusted knight.'

'Are you the man who served me so well? – with such strength and valour on the battlefield and with such generosity of spirit?'

'Yes, I was, my lord, until God visited me and chose to take it all away.'

The king immediately conferred upon Sir Cleges not only all that a knight requires in terms of clothes and accoutrements but Cardiff Castle as well and all the lands and estates that it controlled. Then he made him his steward, with responsibility for protecting and administering all of his lands – his rivers, his forests, his farms and estates. And he gave him a cup of gold to take to his wife Claris as a compliment to her and to convey this merry news. Then King Uther Pendragon made Sir Cleges's son a squire and gave him a collar indicative of this rank and lands worth a hundred pounds a year. Sir Cleges returned to his hall and to Claris, and she thanked God! She thanked Him in every possible way, for giving her both a knight and a squire. And as quickly as they could, they arranged for the repayment of all the money that was owed on the security of their estates until everyone had received what they were due and they had their manors back once again.

Sir Cleges was known for being a good steward thereafter, and he was loved and recognised everywhere he went. And he amassed such wealth, it is said, this courteous knight, that his entire family was advanced because of it. He and Claris lived for many years in health and happiness until God sent for them. And for the goodness that they had shown here on Earth their souls went straight to heaven, where there is everlasting joy.

Amen