

Sir Degaré

anon

fourteenth century Middle English Breton lai

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by**

Richard Scott-Robinson

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Lysteneth, lordinges, gente and fre · Ich wille you telle of Sire Degarre – Listen, all you well-bred and generous people out there, and I will tell you of Sir Degaré.

Knights in olden times were strangely fond of seeking adventure wherever they could find it – all of them, night and day – and Sir Degaré was no exception.

In Brittany there was once a powerful king who was very strong in battle. No one, neither in war nor in joust nor in tournament, could ever manage to knock him out of his saddle, he was so strong.

This king had no heir except a young daughter, whom he loved very much, and it was through bringing her into this world that his wife had lost her life.

When the maiden came of age, princes came to ask for her hand in marriage; and dukes and emperors also. They saw rich lands to be acquired through matrimony. But the king always replied that no man should have her unless he could bring him personally out of his saddle in a joust. Many tried, but none succeeded.

Every year the king held a festival in memory of his wife, who was buried in an abbey in a nearby forest. He would ride out with many knights, preside over a requiem Mass, feed the poor, clothe the destitute and treat the nuns and monks to a banquet. His daughter always accompanied him.

As they were riding towards the abbey one day, to celebrate this annual service, the king's daughter called to her chamberlain and requested that they stop in the forest to rest, for she needed to go to the toilet. So with two maidens to accompany her, she went off and performed her ablutions. The others, meanwhile, had continued on their way and when she returned, everybody had vanished. She quickly rode after them.

Soon, though, she and her two damsels lost the path. The

*Some have suggested that this tale of Sir Degaré may be based upon a lost Breton lay, the *Lai d'Esgaré*. Others see parallels in Irish mythology. What is most striking, however, (aside from a dragon and some magic gloves) is that when Sir Degaré seeks his father, who declared himself to be a fairy knight when he ravished Degaré's mother in a forest twenty years before, he finds him in the real world, a knight of flesh and blood. Although curiously, in order to reach him, Degaré has to pass through a land where he finds shelter for the night in a very strange, Otherworldly castle. In fact, Sir Degaré's journey takes him through a region where the passage of time seems a little strange as well. He discovers his mother in a way that seems odd, as though time has stood still for the last twenty years. The denizens of the Otherworld in Irish mythology are the previous inhabitants of Ireland, and their world is often one in which dislocations in space and time exist.*

The tale of Sir Degaré survives in a number of manuscripts, including two in the British Library, one at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and in the famous Auchinleck MS now lying in the National Library of Scotland, a book believed once to have been owned by Geoffrey Chaucer. Dating to 1330–40, this manuscript also contains the tale of Sir Orfeo.

forest around them became thick; they tried to go south but went west instead, into the very heart of the woodland. Coming to a large clearing, they dismounted and called for help. There was no one to answer them.

They did not know what to do, for the sun was at its hottest, so they lay down on the grass, beneath the shade of a chestnut tree, I believe, and there, they all fell asleep; all except for the king's daughter, who went about gathering flowers and listening to the birds. She walked such a long way through the forest clearing that she forgot where the chestnut tree was. Running back, she couldn't find it at all.

'Alas!' she cried, 'that I should become lost twice in one day! I shall be eaten by wild animals before I come across anyone to help me!'

Then she saw riding towards her a handsome knight, a young man dressed in scarlet. He looked very noble and courteous: 'Damsel,' he cried, 'welcome! There is no need to be afraid. I am a knight from the Otherworld and it is in my nature to wear arms and carry a shield, so do not be frightened. I have only my sword. I have loved you for many years, and now we are alone you shall be my lover, whether you like it or not!'

The damsel shrieked and tried to run, but he grabbed her and ravished her as she lay. And when she was no longer a virgin, he stood before her and said: 'My sweetheart, you shall have a child, a boy; take my sword, and when he reaches adulthood, give the weapon to him and tell him to search through every land for his father. It is a good sword. I used it to fight a giant and the point broke in his head. When my son comes to me I shall know him by this sword. Farewell my darling, and goodbye!'

The knight vanished as quickly as he had come.

Picking up the sword, she made her way across the clearing, weeping to herself, and at last found the tree beneath which the damsels still lay asleep.

Hiding the sword as best she could, she woke them up and urged them back onto their horses. And not long afterwards they saw two young squires riding towards them on horseback, sent by the king in search of his daughter. They led her to the path and soon they all arrived at the abbey, where the service was conducted, Masses sung, offerings made, and when it was all finished, they returned home.

The king happily ruled his kingdom, but his daughter hid herself away as best she could, to hide her pregnancy.

One day, as she sat crying to herself, one of her maidens heard her.

'Madam,' she said, 'tell me for charity! Why do you weep?'

'Oh help me!' exclaimed the king's daughter. 'I have always been unable to look after myself, and now I am pregnant! If anybody was to know, they would say that my father had given me this child, and I have never been intimate with any man. If my father finds

out, he'll take it dreadfully. I dare not think what he'll do!' And she told the maiden what had happened that day in the forest.

'Madam,' said the maid, 'don't worry. The child can be taken away as soon as it is born. No one will know anything about it except for you and I.'

The damsel's time came and she delivered a healthy little boy, much to her joy. The maiden assisted at the birth, wrapped the child up, laid it in a cradle and was eager to be off, but the king's daughter made her wait until she had cuddled it and placed four pounds of gold and ten pounds of silver under the baby's feet. She took a pair of gloves that her lover had sent from the Otherworld, that fitted her alone, and put them under his head. Then she wrote a letter and tied it around the baby's neck – and it read: 'If any good man finds this helpless child, may he let it be christened and let it live, for it comes of fine parents. Use the money to raise it, and when the child is ten years old, give him the gloves and tell him that wherever he goes, he should love no woman before he has offered her these gloves to wear.'

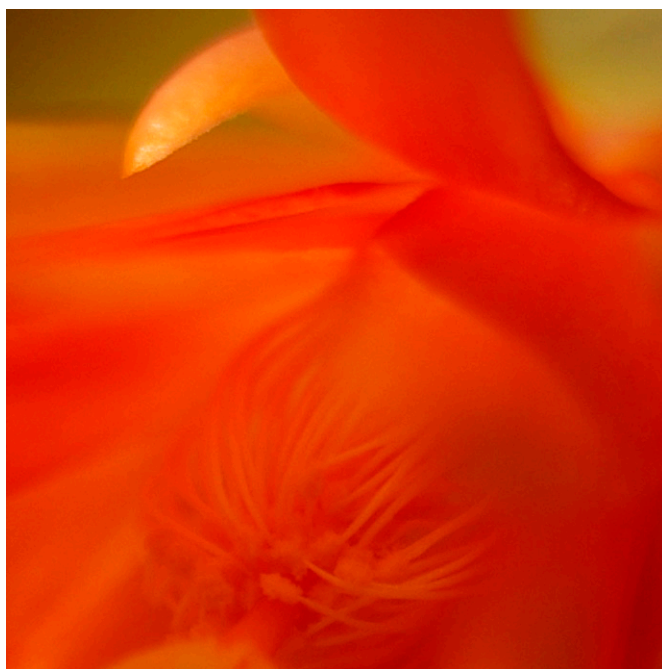
In the evening, the maiden took the child away and carried it through the cold spring night until she came to a hermitage. She set the cradle down at the holy man's door and hurried away.

Arriving back the next day, the maiden found her mistress very upset and dejected, so she told her that she had left the baby in a place where it was sure to be looked after properly. She had not exposed it.

The hermit arose early, and his boy as well, and they said Matins together and prayed to God and to the saints. Then they heard a baby crying, so the hermit went to his door, opened it, and found the cradle with the child inside. Reading the letter, he held up both hands and thanked God!

Taking the baby to his chapel, he rang the bell, wrapped the letter and the gloves safely together, and christened the child Degaré in the name of the Trinity.

The hermit had a sister who was married to a rich merchant in the city and he sent the infant to her, along with the silver, asking her to look after the little boy until he was ten, if God allowed this, and then to send him back to the hermitage where he would give the child the foundations of a religious career.



The baby was taken to the city, and the wife and the husband looked after the little boy as though he was their own. And by the age of ten, the child had grown into a strong and good-looking young lad who knew no other father and mother but the merchant and his wife. And when he reached this age he was sent to his uncle at the hermitage where the good man received him welcomingly and set the child to his lessons: Latin, Scripture, the lives of the saints; and when he was twenty years old, Degaré was so strong that there was no one in the land who could withstand a blow from him. And the hermit decided



that he was ready to make his own way in the world, for his physical strength and the depth of his learning surpassed all others of his age. So he gave him the gold and the gloves, and the letter to read.

‘Oh Uncle,’ said the young man, ‘do these really belong to me?’

‘Yes, by our lord who shall help us!’ said the hermit. ‘This is how it was...’ and he told him everything there was to tell about that spring morning twenty years before. Degaré knelt down and thanked the hermit, and swore that he would not rest until he had found his true

mother and father. For the letter said that the gloves would fit no other hand but hers, if she still lived.

Degaré gave half the gold to the hermit and, keeping the other half for himself, after an emotional farewell the young man set out. He travelled through the forest for most of that day, and for a weapon he cut down the sturdy trunk of a very young oak tree, but he came across nobody at all. Then in the afternoon Degaré heard the sound of shouts and blows in a valley and, with his curiosity aroused, he hurried towards it.

An earl, a knight and four squires had sent their hounds after a deer and had been attacked by a dragon; a grim beast with venomous fangs, huge teeth guarding a gaping throat, and dreadful wings. It had a long tail, the feet of a lion, and fire and smoke issued from its nostrils. The knight and the squires all lay dead, both man and horse, and the earl was defending himself as best he could with his sword; but to little avail because the beast’s hide was as hard as iron. The earl fled from tree to tree trying to escape, but the dragon kept attacking him.

Seeing the young man approaching, the earl cried for help.

The dragon saw Degaré coming and turned his attention towards him, gaping and snorting as though he would swallow him whole. But Degaré was made of stern stuff. He took his oaken cudgel and smashed it against the dragon’s forehead, splattering its brains everywhere.

The dragon fell immediately, but its tail caught Degaré on the side, knocking him head over heels. But Degaré leapt up again and smashed every bone in the creature's body until it lay as still as a stone.

The earl knelt, thanked the young man for saving his life and invited him to his castle, offering him anything he might desire in the way of lands, rents and treasure, in payment for his services.

'Let me first see your wife,' said Degaré, 'and all her ladies, maidens and widows, young and old; and if my gloves fit any one of them then I shall accept your kind offer of lands and wealth, but if they do not, then I shall take my leave of you and be on my way.'

All the women in the castle were sent for, and all the ladies in the countryside round about, and each tried, but none could put on the gloves.

So Degaré took his leave of them all. But not before the earl had given him a fine horse and armour, and a youth to be his squire, and a bright sword with which he dubbed him 'knight'. And the earl swore by God almighty that the sword suited him better than the oaken cudgel he had had before.

Sir Degaré was very pleased to receive all this, thanked the earl many times, then leapt upon his horse and set off with his squire following behind, carrying his lance and shield.

One day they came across a gathering of knights and Sir Degaré asked an armed yeoman what was going on.

'Sir,' said the yeoman, 'we have just come from a parliament at which the king has announced that any man who has the courage to joust with him might win the hand of his daughter in marriage, along with all his kingdom, since he has no other heir. But no one has the courage to throw his hat into the ring, for many have already tried and failed. Earls, knights and squires – everyone who has jousting with the king so far has swiftly received an evil payment for his trouble, in the form of a broken neck or a spear through the heart or the groin!

Sir Degaré thought to himself: 'I am a strong enough man with a horse of my own and some fine arms and trappings. And if I defeat the king at jousting, my renown shall go far and wide, and if he hurts me, nobody shall know who it is that he's hurt anyway. Come life or death, then, I shall ride against the king!'

Sir Degaré took lodgings in the town and made merry. And then he arranged for an audience with the king.

He knelt and said: 'Sir, in response to your announcement, my lord has sent me to inform you that he would be prepared to joust with you and to win your daughter, if he can.'

'By God!' cried the king, 'he is welcome! Be he knight or earl, merchant or churl, I will

fight anyone. If he wins, he shall take all!

The joust was arranged for the following morning and the king made himself ready. Sir Degaré had nobody to help him prepare except for his trusty squire, but put all his trust in God. The breaking dawn saw him in church hearing Mass; one florin he gave for the Father, one for the Son and one for the Holy Ghost. The priest accepted these offerings and lent his weight in prayer.

When the service was finished Sir Degaré went to his hostel and armed himself. Mounted on his horse and with his squire behind him carrying his lance, he made his way to the jousting field where he stood and waited for the king.

The king emerged from the city surrounded by many fine warriors and distinguished noblemen; although all present said that they had never yet seen such a likely looking young knight as this unknown contestant.

The king and Sir Degaré faced one another, although Sir Degaré had never jousting in his life. The king had a bigger lance and a lot of experience. Intending to break Sir Degaré's neck, the king aimed a blow at the young knight's head which shattered his own lance into pieces. But Sir Degaré was so strong that he remained in his saddle, keeping his stirrups, although I assure you that he knew nothing of jousting!

'Alas!' cried the king, 'it has never happened to me before that a man I've just struck as hard as that has stayed in his saddle!'

The king took a bigger lance. 'If his neck will not break,' he said, 'his back will, before I'm finished with him!'

The king struck Sir Degaré a blow on his chest and the lance drove forwards so violently that Sir Degaré's horse reared with the force; but the young knight was able to absorb the impact as the king's lance splintered into a thousand fragments.

Now the young knight was angry. 'Alas!' he cried, 'for villainy! The king has struck me twice and I haven't managed to hit him once yet!'

He turned his steed with a grim heart and rode towards the king, who responded in kind. Each lance splintered against the other's shield right up to the hilt. All the noblemen watching this said that they had never yet seen a man last so long against their sovereign.

'Bring me a lance that will not break!' cried the king.

He took up a huge lance, Sir Degaré another, and they galloped towards each other once more. The king missed but Sir Degaré hit his mark; his lance was strong and very sharp and catching the king behind his shield, the horse reared and the king was catapulted over its backside head first onto the ground!

Shouts rang out and knights ran onto the field to help the king back onto his horse. 'Child Degaré has won the prize!' shouted everybody. And the damsel, the king's daugh-

ter, was sorry, for she knew that now she would have to marry someone she had never seen before in all her life.

The king said to Sir Degaré: 'My noble son, come to me. If you are as good a man as you seem, and as wise as you are strong, my kingdom will be in good hands. But whatever the case, you have won the prize. Here is my daughter's hand. Take it, and with it all my lands. You shall be king when I am gone.'

Sir Degaré thanked the king many times. A great banquet was prepared and Sir Degaré and the king's daughter were led to church and married; and when the day was nearly done and it was time for the happy couple to go to bed, Sir Degaré remembered that the hermit had instructed him never to lie with a woman unless he had first offered her the gloves to try on.

'Alas!' he cried.

'Is there anything wrong?' asked the king in surprise. Sir Degaré explained as best he could about the gloves. The king's daughter overheard this and blushed bright red, remembering the gifts she had left with her child. 'Bring the gloves here,' she instructed. She put them on and they fitted her perfectly.

Falling down upon her knees, she cried, 'Mercy! Mercy! Sir knight, you have married your mother! I lost you, and now I have found you. May Jesus Christ be thanked for this moment.'

Sir Degaré took up his mother and held her in his arms, kissing and hugging her many times. The king could make no sense of what was going on and said: 'Daughter, what is happening?'

'Father,' she replied, 'I will tell you. You think I am a maiden, but I am not. I lost my virginity in a forest and this is my son. I know this for certain by these gloves.' And she told her father all about the day that they went to the abbey, the day she had become lost in the ancient woodland, and also about the birth of her son and how he had been taken secretly away and that that had been the last she had seen of him, until now. 'But thanks be to Jesus, heaven's King, I have found him alive! I am his mother and also his wife!'

'Dear mother,' said Sir Degaré. 'Tell me the truth, for charity: into which land may I go to find my father?'

'Son,' said the king's daughter, 'By the King of Heaven I can tell you nothing except that he left me his sword with the instruction that I should give it to you when you were a man.'

She brought the sword to him and he drew it from the scabbard. It was broad and long and heavy, and Sir Degaré had never seen one like it before.

'Whoever wielded this was certainly a man!' said Degaré. 'Now that I have this sword, I shall search night and day until I find my father, if God wills it.'

He spent the night in the city, and at first light, rose to hear Mass; then he armed himself and set off. Nobody would go with him except for his squire. So he rode with many a weary step and many a hard day's riding, towards the west, his squire looking after his horse and his armour, until he came to an ancient forest; it was the one that he was conceived in.

Degaré rode through this forest for many days, and saw no cattle nor sheep but only wild beasts of the woodland and birds in the trees. And he wished, one evening, as the sun was setting, that he might find some town that he could shelter in, but he had no idea in which direction to go.



Then, through the trees, he glimpsed a castle standing on an island surrounded by the clear water of a river. Thinking that it might offer comfortable lodgings for the night, he said to his squire: 'I cannot go a foot further. Whatever the outcome, we shall go up to this castle and see if there is anybody there.'

They found a bridge over to the stonework and, seeing the gates of the castle lying open, Degaré entered and found a stable for his horse, along with oats and hay, and instructed his squire to look after everything.

Making his way into the hall, Sir Degaré looked around, and called, but there was no sign of life, neither on the floor of the hall nor on any balcony. But there was a vigorous fire burning in a hearth and Degaré thought to himself: 'By my faith! I am sure that whoever made this fire intends to return tonight, so I shall wait.' He sat on the raised platform where the high table was placed and warmed himself in front of the fire. Then four damsels entered, each wearing a short dress. Two of them carried bows and arrows and the other two held the spoils of their hunting. Sir Degaré stood and called a greeting out to them, but they totally ignored him, carrying the venison into a side chamber through a door which they locked behind them.

Then a dwarf came into the hall. He was four feet tall, barrel-chested and ugly, with yellow hair and a beard to match. His hands and feet were disproportionately large and he wore a fur-trimmed surcoat and the patterned slippers of a knight. Sir Degaré laughed at the sight of him, but greeted him courteously enough. The dwarf, however, ignored Sir Degaré completely, as though he was invisible, and set to the task of laying out the trestles and boards for the evening meal, lighting the torches and getting everything ready.

Then from a door onto the balcony emerged a very beautiful damsel, accompanied by ten maidens, some dressed in scarlet, some in green. Sir Degaré rose to greet them, but they took no notice of him at all as they made their way to the table.

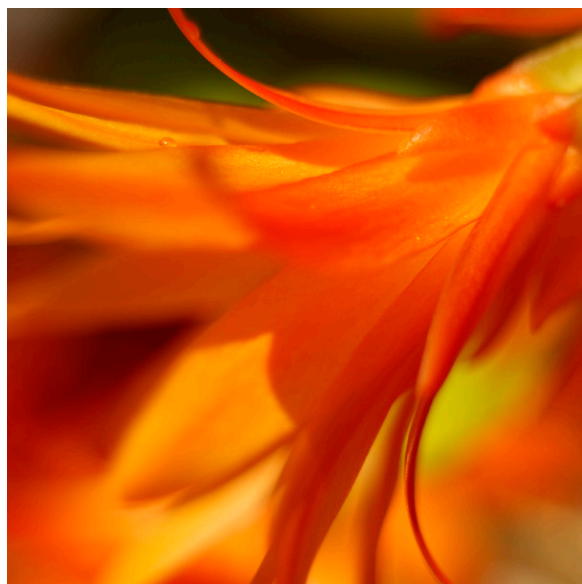
‘Goodness!’ exclaimed Sir Degaré, ‘they just ignore me! I shall wait for them to tire of this rudeness, unless they turn out to be dumb.’

The lady sat between her maidens, five to each side of her, and the dwarf served them all with fine dishes and goblets of wine. Having had enough of this, Sir Degaré seized a chair for himself and brought it up to the table, where he cut some venison and took some bread. But he ate very little that evening, for the lady sitting opposite him was the fairest he had ever seen.

When the meal was over, the dwarf cleared the table and the women all retired into the private quarters after washing their hands and faces.

Sir Degaré followed after them and burst into the room. The lady was sitting on a bed with a maiden at her feet playing a harp. Another brought spices and wine. Sir Degaré sat down on the bed. The sweet music soon made him realise how weary he was, and he fell asleep. The lady put a blanket over him, placed a pillow under his head, and lay down beside him.

In the morning, with the light streaming through the window, the lady was already up when she woke Sir Degaré.



‘Arise!’ she said. ‘Dress yourself and go! Shame on you, for lying so near to all these lovely maidens and sleeping the whole while.’

‘Oh, gentle lady,’ said Degaré, ‘forgive me!’

‘But tell me, before I leave your chamber, who is lord of this land, and who owns this castle? Are you a widow or a wife, or a maiden perhaps? And why are there so many women here alone, with no man to look after them?’

The damsel sighed bitterly and began to cry.

‘Sir,’ she said, ‘I will gladly tell you. My father was a rich baron with many a castle and town to his name. I was an only child and his heir. I had many knights and squires to serve me, and doughty warriors to protect me. But there is a stern nobleman – and none is so strong as he in the whole of Brittany – who has loved me for many years, but I cannot bring myself to return his love; and when he realised that this was the case, he tried to force me to marry him. My knights defended me but, as the war raged on, they were all killed, and my squires fought bravely, but it was hopeless. So now all my knights and squires are dead and I am defenceless.’

She fell to the ground and lay unconscious for a long while. Her maidens entered the room, took her up into their arms, and she revived.

‘Lovely madam,’ said Sir Degaré. ‘I am yours to command, should you wish it.’

‘If this is so,’ she said, ‘I will give you all my lands to hold, and my body also, if you can rid me of him.’

Sir Degaré was eager to fight, and more eager still to win the fair lady’s body. And as they all stood conversing: ‘Here comes our enemy riding towards us!’ screamed a maiden. ‘Drop the portcullis and raise the drawbridge, or he will kill us all!’

Sir Degaré rushed to a window and saw coming towards the castle the biggest horse carrying the most magnificent knight he had ever seen. He dashed down to his own steed, quickly armed himself and rode out.

The battle commenced at once. The intruder knight broke a lance against Sir Degaré’s shield but Sir Degaré’s lance struck home with greater integrity, although the belligerent knight remained firm in his saddle; so firm, in fact, that his horse broke its back and he fell to the earth.

‘Get off your horse,’ cried this knight, pulling himself up, drawing his sword and brandishing it at Sir Degaré. ‘Get down off your horse! We shall fight on foot! Death shall be your reward for killing my steed!’

Sir Degaré dismounted and they began to crash blows down upon one another with all their strength. Their bright swords clashed again and again, and then Sir Degaré cut through the knight’s shield and helmet. The other was aggrieved that his armour had failed him and they traded blows ever more fiercely, until a final blow brought the contest to a close. The intruder knight lay dead at Sir Degaré’s feet.

The lady had been watching all this from her battlements and joyfully thanked God for the victory. Sir Degaré went to meet her and she thanked him many times. Then she took him into her chamber, took off all his armour, set him on her bed and said: ‘Sir, for charity, live with me and I will give you all my lands.’

‘Mercy, madam!’ said Sir Degaré. ‘I shall take the wealth you offer and travel into foreign lands, and at the end of twelve months I shall return.’

The lady bemoaned her knight’s all too prompt departure, but gave him a strong horse and some good armour, gold and silver to spend, and they wept a great deal before he rode off.

Sir Degaré journeyed through many strange lands, and rode ever westwards. And in a wooded valley one day he came upon a knight bearing a shield of azure with three boar’s heads picked out in gold. Sir Degaré greeted this knight courteously and said: ‘Sir, God be with you.’

‘Villain!’ shouted the other. ‘What are you doing in my forest? Chasing my deer?’

Sir Degaré replied politely: ‘I do not seek your deer, Sir. I am a knight-errant seeking armed combat.’

‘Then I will gladly provide it for you!’ shouted the knight.

Sir Degaré's squire helped his lord to arm himself in the fine plate that the damsel had given him, placed a helmet studded with precious stones on his head, and around his neck he hung a shield depicting the heads of three maidens wearing gold crowns.

His lance was not small.

With his squire on hand to replace any broken weapons, the battle commenced. They bore down upon one another, lances levelled, and Sir Degaré left the tip of his spear in the other's shield as the wooden shaft splintered into pieces. They both chose heavier lances and ran against each other again. Both came to grief as they clashed together and each was cast heavily to the ground. They ran at each other brandishing their swords. And the one knight noticed that the weapon of his adversary had a broken tip.

'Stop!' he cried. 'Where were you born? In which land?'

'In Brittany,' cried Sir Degaré. 'My mother is the daughter of a king, although I have no idea who my father is.'

'What is your name?'

'Degaré.'

'Oh, my son!' and the knight took out of his saddle-pouch a piece of steel which exactly matched the end missing from Sir Degaré's sword. They both fainted, and when they had picked themselves up off the ground again, Sir Degaré cried mercy for attacking his own father. The man led him to his castle and invited his son to stay with him permanently.

'I cannot,' said Sir Degaré, 'but were it your desire to travel to my mother, we could go together, for she is very unhappy.'

'Swiftly, let us go!' said his father.

So Sir Degaré and his father went into England. And when Sir Degaré's mother saw these two armed knights approaching, she recognised her lover, went pale and said: Degaré, my dear son, you have brought your father to see me!

'I have searched far and wide for him,' he cried. 'and here he is, in flesh and blood!'

'Thank God!' exclaimed the king. 'Now we know who Sir Degaré's father is.'

So the marriage between Sir Degaré and his mother was dissolved and she married Sir Degaré's father instead. Then they all rode to the castle in the forest where Sir Degaré married the lady he had rescued from her unwanted suitor.

And they all lived happily ever after.

Amen.