



Sir Launfal and the Fairy Princess

Overview



This tale, signed by the name of the bard, Thomas Chestre, is one of the few that give the name of the first author. Though it was signed as such, it was often believed to be a tale of Geoffrey Chaucer, the author of *The Canterbury Tales*. *Sir Launfal* much resembles Chaucer's

Tale of Sir Thopas, both of which involve knights and fairies.

The story is especially interesting because it tells of the charming fairies who form so important a part of English folklore. The famous American poet, James Russell Lowell, used the knight of this tale as hero of his poem, "The Vision of Sir Launfal."

The Tale of Sir Launfal and the Fairy Princess

In King Arthur's court there was once a knight named Sir Launfal, and of all the knights of the Round Table there was none so generous as he. He gave many gifts of gold and silver and silken robes to knights and squires.¹ At last, as a reward for his generosity, he was made the king's steward and served for ten years.

In the tenth year at Pentecost, King Arthur was married to Queen Guinevere with much pomp and ceremony. No man can begin to tell of the noble folk that came there from countries far and wide.

No one was seated in the hall who was not a baron or a prince. When the lords had feasted and the cloth had been drawn from the table, the Queen gave gifts of gold and silver and precious stones to show her favor. To every knight she gave a brooch or a ring, but to Sir Launfal she gave nothing. She had taken a great dislike to him and was jealous of him because the King loved him so well.

Now Sir Launfal felt badly because the Queen had given him no gift. He decided that he could no longer stay in court since the Queen did not like him and did not wish him in her service. So when the bridal feast was at an end, he went to King Arthur and told him that he must leave court at once.

"Well, Sir Launfal, if you must go, you must," said King Arthur kindly, "but I will give you money to spend and will send my sister's two sons, Sir Hugh and Sir John, with you to make sure that you come back to me again."

Sir Launfal took leave of the knights of the Round Table and set out on his journey with Sir Hugh and Sir John. He traveled until he came to Carlisle, to the house of the mayor of the town. He and this mayor had once been friends. When the mayor saw him come riding with two knights, he went to meet him.

"Sir," he said, "you are welcome here. Pray tell me how fares our King."

"The King is as well as any man," answered Sir Launfal, "but I have left him and am no longer in his service. That gives me much sorrow, for no man will speak of me any more as Arthur's knight. Sir Mayor, I pray that I may stay in your service because we were once friends."

The mayor stood and thought what his answer might be. At last he said, "Sir, I have already engaged seven knights of Little Brittany to come here in my service and I am waiting for them even now.

Sir Launfal laughed scornfully and said to his two knights, "Now you may see what it is to seek service under a petty lord."

He started to ride away, but the mayor called after him, "Sir, there is a chamber in a lodge by my orchard in which you may live if you wish."

Sir Launfal turned back, and he and his two knights lived in the lodge together. So fast did he give away his money to the poor and needy that before the end of the first year he had not a penny left. Thus it happened that when Pentecost was again at hand, Sir Hugh and Sir John wished to go back to King Arthur's court.

"Sir, our robes are all in rags," they said, "and your treasure is all spent, and evil days have come upon us. Pray return with us to King Arthur or, if you do not wish to go back, give us leave to return alone."

"Go, and may my blessing go with you," answered Sir Launfal, "but see that you tell no man of my poverty."

The knights said that they would not betray him to win all this world. With these words they went from him to Glastonbury where the King was staying. The King and Queen saw the knights returning in robes all ragged and torn, the same robes they had worn a whole year before.

Then said Guinevere with a cruel smile, "How is that proud knight, Sir Launfal? Is he as generous as ever? Is he in the service of any other queen so great as I?"

"He is well and happy," answered the knights, "and he loved us so much that he wished to keep us with him always, but we were homesick. One rainy day Sir Launfal went hunting to chase the wild hare. We wore our old robes that day and both left him just as we were."

So they kept secret Sir Launfal's poverty. King Arthur was glad when the knights said that Sir Launfal was well and happy, but Queen Guinevere was sorry, for she wished with all her

might that he would be in more and more trouble every day.

Back in Carlisle there was a feast of much joy and ceremony. Earls and barons and fair ladies came together in the city, but Sir Launfal was not bidden to the feast because he was so poor. His clothes were so ragged and his horse was so lean that no lady, even of the lowest degree, would wish to have him serve her. For three days he had had neither meat nor drink on account of his poverty. At last he decided to ride into the woods and try to forget his sorrow.

He went to the stable, but he had to saddle his horse himself because he did not have money to pay a servant. When he started to mount, his horse slipped and fell, and all the stable knaves standing by laughed at him. As soon as the horse was on his feet again, Sir Launfal sprang into the saddle and rode away alone.

It was a hot summer morning. After he had ridden a short way into the forest, he became so hot and tired that he alighted and sat down to rest in the shadow of a tree. As he sat there sorrowing over his poverty, two gentle maidens suddenly appeared before him. They had rosy cheeks and brown eyes and were as fair as fair could be.

Their gay colored kerchiefs were worked with fine gold wire, and their mantles were of green velvet embroidered in gold and trimmed with gray fur. Each maiden wore a golden crown set with sixty gems and more. One bore a basin of gold and the other a towel of fine white silk. As they came toward Sir Launfal, he greeted them courteously.

"Sir Knight," they said, "our Lady Tryamour bids you to come and speak with her at once, if you please."

Sir Launfal followed them in wonder. Soon they came to a grove of tall trees. In the midst of it stood a pavilion of tapestry with cupolas of crystal. On the top was an image carved of gold and set with jewels. Its eyes were glowing carbuncles that shone like the moon at night. Not Alexander the Great or Arthur in all his glory had such jewels. In the pavilion was a throne chair spread with fine purple. There sat a lady so lovely that Sir Launfal no sooner saw her than he wished to serve her with all his heart, even more than he had wished to serve good King Arthur and proud Guinevere.

“Most beautiful lady, what do you wish of one so poor as I?” he asked.

“Gentle knight, I know of your sad poverty already, for I know of everything that happens on earth,” she answered. “I am Tryamour, the daughter of the King of the Fairies. I know that you are a noble knight and that there is no man in this world, not even a king or emperor, so generous as you. I need a good knight among mortal men to do my bidding and give my aid to the people I wish to help. If you will serve me truly, I will make you rich and happy. I will give you a purse of silk and gold embroidered with three images. Wherever you may be, if you need money, you have only to put in your hand and you will pull out a golden norm. I will give you also Blanchard, my own swift steed, and Gyfre, my own servant, and magic armor so that no knight can harm you.”

Sir Launfal kissed her hand and promised always to serve her truly. Then she bade her maidens spread the table, and she and Launfal feasted upon everything good to eat.

When at last it came time for him to leave, Lady Tryamour said, “Sir Launfal, I shall come to you from time to time to give you my orders, but I shall come in secret so that no man alive may see me. One thing above all I must warn you. Never say one word about me. If you do, you will no longer be in my service.

Then Sir Launfal took his leave. Gyfre, the fairy squire, brought him his horse. He leapt into the saddle and rode home to Carlisle. As he still wore his ragged clothes, he stayed in his chamber for the rest of the day, but he was no longer sad.

The next morning ten young men clothed in richest cloth of India rode into the city. Some carried gold and some carried silver and some carried fine garments and bright armor. Gyfre, the fairy squire, rode behind on Blanchard, the steed as white as flour.

When they had come to the market place, a boy standing there called out, “Pray tell us, for whom is all that treasure?”

“It is sent as a present to Sir Launfal,” answered Gyfre. “Can you tell us where he lives?”

“Why, he’s only a poor wretch who lives at the mayor’s house,” said the boy.

At the mayor’s house they alighted and presented Sir Launfal with all the riches they had brought. When the mayor saw all the treasure, he was sorry he had not treated Sir Launfal better, and he wished to make friends with him again.

“Noble sir,” he said with a sickly smile, “pray eat with me in the hail today. Yesterday I meant to take you with me to the feast, but I entered one of the games; and before I could come home to ask you, you had gone away.”

“You never had any intention of taking me to the feast,” answered Sir Launfal firmly. “While I was poor, you never came near me. Now you make excuses and wish to win my friendship because I have more gold than you and all your family.” Then the mayor went away because he was ashamed.

Sir Launfal began to enjoy his new riches. All the money that he had borrowed when he was poor, he had Gyfre pay back in full measure.

He clothed himself in purple and ermine and held a great feast. He hired fifty minstrels to play to him at the feast, and invited as guests of honor fifty poor men who were in trouble. He gave fifty strong steeds and suits of armor to needy knights and opened fifty prisons and set free all who were unjustly in them. He helped the poor just as the fairy princess told him to do. Soon the fame of Sir Launfal spread through all the land. Then all the lords of Carlisle held a tournament in honor of him and his good steed, Blanchard.

Sir Launfal was such a strong knight that they wished to try his skill. Before the tournament began, trumpeters rode out on the field and blew loud blasts and set forth the rules of the fight.

These rules provided that the losers’ horses be given to the winners and that the prize of the tournament be given to the knight who was judged bravest. Then all the lords of the town rode out in a row. The tournament began, and each knight struck out fiercely with mace and sword. Many a bold lord of Carlisle was cast down that day.

Never had there been a better tournament since the founding of the Round Table.

First, the mighty Constable of Carlisle rode against Sir Launfal. The two knights smote each other with grim strokes. Launfal used all his strength and skill. Soon he bore the Constable out of his saddle to the ground. Then Gyfre leapt into the saddle and rode away with the horse. Next, the bold Earl of Chester rode up to Sir Launfal and struck the crest from his helmet, but Sir Launfal was mightier than he and knocked him from his horse. Thus Launfal won his second horse that day. At last a great band of Welsh knights attacked him. Then one might see shields split and spears shatter on every side. No one could count the number of knights Sir Launfal cast down before he conquered them all.

So everyone voted to give the prize of the tournament to Sir Launfal. With many rich lords beside him, Sir Launfal rode proudly back to the mayor's house. There he held a merry feast that lasted a fortnight. Many earls and barons from the country all around were guests. Now and then when he was alone, Lady Tryamour, the fairy princess, came to visit Sir Launfal and give him her commands, but no one could see her except Launfal and Gyfre, the fairy squire. Soon tidings of Launfal's new riches and of his bravery in the tournament reached the ears of King Arthur. At once he sent a letter bidding Sir Launfal to come back to him. He wished to hold a feast for all his lords, and he wanted Sir Launfal to be steward of his hall and receive all the guests.

The next time Lady Tryamour came to Sir Launfal, she gave him permission to serve King Arthur during his feast. At once he set out for court. There he found a large company of knights and ladies from all over the kingdom. The feast lasted for forty days, and there was much mirth and revelry. At the end of the forty days, the knights and earls and barons returned to their own homes.

The next day after the midday meal, all the knights of the Round Table went out to dance upon the green. Sir Launfal was chosen to lead the dance, for he was loved most of all on account of his generosity. Now Queen Guinevere with sixty ladies and more was sitting at the foot of the castle tower watching the dance. She was angry because the King had taken Sir Launfal into his service again, and wished to do something to make him go away once more. She took her fair company of ladies and went down to dance among the knights. The Queen took the

foremost place between Sir Launfal and Sir Gawain. All the ladies followed after. It was a fair sight to see the ladies and the knights dancing two by two to the merry music of the trumpeters and fiddlers. They danced until near nightfall.

Then Queen Guinevere said to Sir Launfal, "Just because you are chosen to lead a dance, you think you are a great man, don't you? I tell you that if it were not for the King's foolishness, such a knight as you would never be in my service.

Even if you searched the whole world over, you could never find another rich and fair lady who would have such a man as you to serve her." Sir Launfal was so angry that he forgot Lady Tryamour's warning and said, "I have served a fairer princess than you have seen in seven years or more. Even her lowest handmaiden looks more like a queen than you ever did in your life."

Queen Guinevere was almost mad with rage. She went to her tower without speaking a word more to all that company. She lay down upon her bed and swore that she would have revenge on Sir Launfal so that within five days all the land would be speaking of him. Soon King Arthur came in glad and merry from the chase.

"I must be avenged or I shall die," the Queen cried to him. "Sir Launfal has insulted me. This afternoon in the dance, he boasted that he had served a princess whose ugliest handmaiden was fairer than I."

King Arthur was angry and swore that Sir Launfal should be hanged. He sent four stout knights to fetch him. Meanwhile Sir Launfal had gone to his room. There he found all his treasure had melted away like snow in the sun.

He had lost the good will of the fairy princess because he had forgotten her warning and had spoken of her. His shining magic armor had turned black as pitch. He put his hand into the magic purse that always gave him a golden florin. It was empty. He looked out of the window and saw Gyfre, the fairy squire, riding away on Blanchard, the fairy steed. Then he was filled with sorrow.

"Alas!" he cried, "now I shall never see the fairy princess again. I have been the worst fool ever

born, for I did not even have the sense to hold my tongue.

In his grief he beat his body and tore his hair and fell to the floor. Just then the four knights came in, bound him, and took him to King Arthur. Then he was in double woe.

“Foul traitor,” said the King, “why did you make vain boasts? How did you dare say that you served a princess whose lowest maid was fairer than my wife, the Queen?”

“Sir, she jeered at me and said that no fair lady ever wished to have me in her service,” replied Sir Launfal. “I answered her saying that my princess 5 lowest handmaiden looked more like a queen than she.”

Then the King and Queen were angrier than ever, but they could not hang Sir Launfal at once. He was a knight and had the right of trial by his fellow knights and Arthur was a just king. All the knights knew the Queen’s ugly temper and her hate for Sir Launfal. So they agreed that if he could bring his princess or the maidens who were fairer than the Queen within a year and a fortnight he should be set free. If he could not bring them, he should be hanged as a traitor.

Sir Percival and Sir Gawain promised to help him and to see that he returned by the appointed day. Then Sir Launfal was sadder than ever. He knew that he could never find the fairy princess if she did not wish to be found. Although he lived in sorrow and repentance all that long year and searched everywhere, he saw not a thing of Lady Tryamour. When the appointed day drew near, he went back to court with Sir Percival and Sir Gawain. The King in a loud voice called for Sir Launfal’s princess to come forward and speak for him, but there was no reply. Then the King commanded the council of knights to sentence Launfal to be hanged as a traitor. The council went outside to talk over the matter.

Then said the Earl of Cornwall who was one of the council, “We do not wish to sentence Sir Launfal to death. It is a shame to hang that free and courteous gentleman. My advice is to persuade the King to go off to the woods on a hunt, and then we can let Launfal escape from the country.” While the knights stood talking, they saw ten maidens ride toward the castle. These maidens were so beautiful that even the least fair among them was fit to be a queen.

Then Gawain the Courteous said, “Launfal, dear friend, have no fear. Surely here comes your princess.”

Sir Launfal looked and answered, “Alas! I know none of these maidens.”

The maidens rode up to the castle and alighted at the gate. They went before King Arthur and bade him quickly have a chamber prepared for their lady, who was of king’s kin.

“Who is your lady?” King Arthur asked. “You will soon know,” said a maiden, “for even now she is riding hither.”

The King commanded the best chamber in the castle to be prepared for her. Then he sent to his knights for their judgment upon Sir Launfal. “We have seen these fair maidens,” answered the knights, “and we wish to wait longer before giving our judgment.”

And while they were outside thinking of more excuses to delay the judgment, ten other maidens even fairer than the first ten came in sight. They were clothed in gleaming satin such as no man had ever seen, and were mounted upon Spanish mules.

Then Sir Gawain said again, “Launfal, surely here comes your princess.”

And Sir Launfal again looked and again answered, “Alas! I know none of these maidens.” They rode into the castle and alighted before the King. When they had greeted both the Queen and the King, one of the maidens said, “Deck your hall and cover your walls with rich tapestry in honor of the coming of my Lady Tryamour, daughter of the King of the Fairies.”

Now the Queen was afraid that Sir Launfal’s princess was really coming, and she did not want to lose her chance for vengeance upon him.

“Sir,” she said to the King, “if you were truly courteous and loved my honor, you would hang that traitor Launfal quickly and avenge me of him. I fear that your knights plan to let him escape, for they love him dearly.”

Even as the Queen was speaking to the King, the knights saw a lady come riding alone upon a comely white palfrey. They had never seen so

gay a lady upon earth. She was as gentle and pretty as a bird upon a bough, and as bright as a blossom on a tree. Her gray eyes shone like glass, her cheeks were pink and white as hawthorne buds in May, and her hair gleamed like golden wire. She was clad in purple pall bordered with ermine, and wore a crown of gold and precious stones. The harness of her palfrey was worth an earldom. The trappings were of green velvet bordered with tiny golden bells. In each saddlebow were two gems from India. The lady bore a snow-white falcon on her hand, and two white greyhounds with golden collars ran by her side. She made her palfrey walk slowly through the streets of the town so that all might see her beauty.

When Sir Launfal saw that lady, he cried gladly to young and old, "Here is my princess!" Lady Tryamour rode forth into the hall where King Arthur and Queen Guinevere and their company were sitting. As soon as she entered, all her maidens came running to take her stirrup while she alighted. At once she slipped off her mantle so that every one might see her better.

The Queen and all the ladies stood up to look at her closely. Beside Lady Tryamour, they seemed as dull as the moon when the sun is in the sky. Even King Arthur was dazzled by her beauty. Then she said to him, "Sir, I have come here to free the noble knight, Sir Launfal. For a long while he has served me faithfully in secret. The Queen jeered at him one day, and he replied that his lady's lowest maiden looked more like a queen. He spoke no lie and I prove it.

"Yes, each man may see that he spoke the truth," answered King Arthur slowly. "You are the fairest woman in the world."

At those words, the fairy lady smiled scornfully at Queen Guinevere; and the Queen covered her face with her hands, in shame. Then the fairy mounted her palfrey and rode away with all her maidens. At the same time, Gyfre hastened out of the forest with the steed Blanchard and stood beside Sir Launfal. The knight sprang upon his horse and joined the princess and her maidens.

They went on and on through city and town and far beyond until they reached Olyron, the isle of the fairies.

Thus Sir Launfal, who was once a knight of the Round Table, was taken into Fairyland, and no

man can tell more of him. But every year upon a certain day, men can hear his steed neigh and can sometimes see him. Then whatever knight wishes to keep his arms from rust can always find an encounter with Sir Launfal.

¹ A squire was a man who was armor-bearer to a knight. Usually squires were young nobles who became knights themselves in time.