

HEIMITO VON DODERER

The Last Adventure

A Tale Of Knighthood

*Translated by
Vincent Kling*

1.

The dawn rising over the wooded ridge of the hill applied its changing colors, clear and smooth as lacquer, to the cloudless sky. A blunt projection of rock, jutting up out of the woods to the right of the sunrise, would later be suffused with a pale rose color of flesh.

But now the east was green still, and here at the edge of the forest, under the towering trees, the darkness densely brooded. A small flame leapt out of it, crackled, grew, and now a man could be seen tending to the fire, awakened again to life. The horses were stamping backwards. Now that the pot was hanging over flames playing all around it, the man, dark and wavering in outline, moved toward the edge of the forest and looked after the animals.

Life began stirring under the trees in other ways as well.

Men unwrapped themselves from blankets and furs in which they'd been sleeping half-dressed and got up on their feet. The first was Gauvain, Écuyer or squire to the standard-bearing Sir Ruy de Fanez. After him, the second of the horse carls awoke, but not before his comrade had shaken him. They let Sir Ruy sleep on until the morning repast was ready.

They could smell the thick meat soup as it simmered and bubbled. Meantime, after their feeding and watering, the light horses standing at the edge of the forest and the three pack horses with their saddles were made ready for the start as much as possible, for Sir Ruy slumbered peacefully on in his blankets, while the pot and the mess gear still had to be used. The two lads then saddled the rest of the horses, but without drawing the saddle girths tight for the moment. Sir Ruy's destrier or battle steed remained as it was, though, with only a blanket and a halter on; following the general custom, he usually let his horse journey unmounted and rode a different one, a light, small bay. Gauvain chattered and murmured into the ear of his mount—Beaujeu was his name—while saddling him. The boy was sixteen years old. Both lads' horses were heavy, unflagging, and stolid, as were the pack animals. Each of these was carrying scarcely half the weight of a rider on its saddle, for which reason they could be drawn on during long rides to relieve the horses that grew too tired. From the saddles of the carls and the boy were hanging short bows in leather holders, and next to them were quivers filled with arrows.

While Gauvain and the two lads washed at a nearby brook, where they had also filled the buckets for watering the horses, growing lively and merry as they did so, Sir Ruy finally began moving and pushing his fur covers aside. He stretched, looked up at the ink-dark forest and the rose-colored rock, put two fingers into his mouth, and whistled. Gauvain came running with the two carls. Between the tree trunks, paths leading deep into the forest were glowing red. The globe of the sun, round and radiant, had risen over the edge of the sky.

Half an hour later, after everyone had eaten the morning soup and drunk a mouthful of wine from the leather bag, they rode into the forest, which was level

here and which soon closed in all around them. Sir Ruy and his party, having reached this forest plateau, were thereby leaving behind the fields and meadows of the open foothills. There was a sort of path between the tree trunks, and it was wide, for that matter, but it did not appear to be ridden or walked smooth any more. It was soft with moss and grown over again with bushes here and there. Sir Ruy's bay was leading with his brisk step, and his rider was wearing just a light, pliable hauberk, but no helmet, preferring to leave his head with its thick black hair uncovered. His red lance, which he was holding as it rested on the right stirrup, accompanied and exaggerated each of the horse's steps with the motions of its point. On the left, next to the banier, Gauvain was riding, and the carls were following at some distance. They weren't leading the pack horses, though, for these were trotting along behind in a leisurely way on their long lines.

"This is the path!" cried Gauvain. "It's the one you knew about from the troubadour."

"I can't say that I knew about anything," Sir Ruy answered slowly. "I can only say that the troubadour told me about it. Such tales are most doubtful as knowledge, though."

"But not this time."

"Let's just wait and see," suggested the Spaniard. "But if he's as right about what's coming up as he is about the path here, then things look fine."

The boy's eyes gleamed more darkly, as happens with people of strong imagination when a lively and stimulating picture steps within range of their inner vision. Rising up in his saddle, he cried, "We will ride through the forest, however deep it is, and smite the dragon, however large he may be, even if he measures not just sixty, but a hundred horse lengths. By doing this, we fulfill the conditions made by that duchess, and we will arrive at the place called Montefal; they will sound the trumpet, and you will take Lidoine as your consort. Will you be in love with her?"

"How should I know that?" asked Ruy laughing. Behind his laughter he was concealing the uneasy awareness of how totally alone he was in the company of this high-spirited child rapt in reverie; perhaps, also, of the folly of this venture he was embarking on, for he was by no means such a total unbeliever in the troubadour's narrative.

The forest resembled an enormous, empty pillared hall. The detached mood of early morning, prevailing now despite the ample meal he'd enjoyed, caused Sir Ruy to perceive everything more clearly and distinctly. Every hoofbeat, the creaking of the leather gear, the whinnying of a pack horse back behind—these sounds broke singly and sharply into the surrounding stillness. No wind grazed his cheek. There was no motion of the leaves or the long beards of moss on the pale branches, row after row of which entered the corner of his eye and passed out of view to the rear and some of which would now and then be ranged by a long sun ray in a row leading into the forest's intertwined depths. They would

also be connected by the ray, as the strings of a harp are connected by the projecting sounding board.

After a most eventful wandering life of a kind that still seemed to be considered suitable for a social caste already on the decline, he might now possibly be riding forth to his last adventure, and not at all in the sense that death could be waiting at its end or that he might gain insight of the most deeply disenchanting sort into the fraudulence of all those tales he'd heard. Rather, the real, the great adventure would still have to impart meaning to this state of being tossed hither and thither when he looked back over it; yes, it would even have to be capable of revealing the very meaning of his own life in the first place. Sir Ruy was now a man forty years old, and this age is in a certain respect mysterious, especially when one has never settled anywhere, never finally tied up one's skiff anywhere. He was a man forty years old who had seldom lived in any one place for any length of time and so had gained hardly any friends. The horse nodded and stepped along, as the red lance pointed up its movements. He was alone.

He was alone, and he was carrying an extended world inside himself. It was made of turrets and gables of the cities, of woodland valleys, of castles that sat, small and looking like high-polished stone, in the westerly gleam of the sun, far above the dusty ribbon of the road; a world into which there also entered, as though both sustaining and ending it, here or there, at some coast he had reached, the blue sea, leaving him no choice to do anything but to lose all track in gazing out at it; and not until much later would he have thoughts of finding a ship. The soil in the Holy Land was yellow, as were walls of the cities there, and in battle the war whoops of the motley, tawny enemy were more piercing than anything he'd ever heard before. The king's court also, like the sea, both ended the world and sustained it, however, for in quiet rooms the women walked completely under glass, which they would then completely shatter. Even today there would come, welling up out of his memory like a narcotic, thoughts of a white neck under a coif of lace and gold, or of a gathered dress. All the way at the bottom, though, in those storerooms of the past, a point would shimmer here or there, a house perhaps, a forgotten room, or a landscape where he surely must have been once upon a time and to which all of his movements were now the stages of a constant return journey. In it there were lush valleys watered by tranquil rivers where the green on the banks darkened in its reflection.

"What kind of a man was the troubadour, and what did he look like?" Gauvain was talking again. "I've been wanting to ask you that for a long time."

"The troubadour..." said Ruy in his slow way, and then he was silent.

"Yes, the man who told you about Montefal and who made the song you taught me."

"He was a remarkable man, even aside from his art, and with his slightly slanted eyes he looked almost like a Saracen. What's more, he was excellent at handling a bow." And Sir Ruy nodded with a motion of his chin toward the weapon hanging from Gauvain's saddle. "His rank must be about the same as yours; his

father was probably a squire of the knightly class. His name I've oddly enough forgotten, as you know."

"But there really is a Castle Montefal and a Duchess Lidoine and a sealed-off land, as you said?"

"That's what I've been hearing for several years now, ever since they said the dragon came up out of the forest here. Yes, the duchy, the castle, and the Duchess Lidoine really do exist, for I once spoke personally with the duchess's emissaries at court. Hence there is no doubt in my mind, and it's general knowledge besides."

"Is she still alive?" asked Gauvain reflectively. Not only in relation to the dragon, it seemed, but also to Montefal and its chatelaine was he only too glad to receive assurance.

"Certainly," said Ruy in a casual way.

"But how can anyone know that? How can any tidings come out of the sealed-off land?"

"You've misunderstood me, my boy," said Ruy. "That land is sealed off on one side only—on the side toward which we are riding—sealed off by the forest and, as they say, above all by the dragon. Otherwise it lies open to the world."

"Yes, but listen, Sir Ruy, that means anyone can get there before you!" Gauvain had turned in his saddle and was facing his lord.

"No, they say that Lidoine will bestow her hand on none but a hero. And do you know, really, what a hero is, Gauvain?"

"Of course. Why, my lord?"

"Because I'd be glad to know myself. Now then, she lost her second husband some years ago. Yet she's still young. She swore an oath or a vow to take only a man who had made his way through this dragon-ridden forest."

"And the emissary at the king's court that time—didn't he know anything about the dragon?"

"No, but he couldn't have anyway, because I spoke with him at a time when Lidoine's second husband was still alive, and the dragon never appeared, strange to say, until she'd been widowed."

"I see. And I suppose that wasn't at all long ago?"

"Yes, it was. You can see that by the path here, which the troubadour described to me so accurately. Once it was a well-traveled road to Montefal. These days, since fear of the monster has spread, moss and weeds are growing over it, and they've grown more than a little, as you see."

"So then the troubadour's talk about the dragon would..." Gauvain said, broke off, and his eyes darkened again. "When were you at court? When did you speak about the duchess with the emissary?" he added after a short while.

"It's eight years since I last rode to court."

"Eight years!" cried Gauvain. "I'm sixteen, so that's half my life. I was still a child at the time."

"And that's what you still are today, Gauvain," said Ruy, "even though you're a fairly good squire at the same time. If we come out of this well, you'll be knighted at the duchess's court. Of course you're still a bit young to be her husband. Now on the other hand, I'm forty, so I've been around far more than twice as long as you. When you were in your cradle, I'd already been a knight for a long time."

Gauvain looked at his lord in total perplexity. Not for a while did he seem to get his breath back.

"In this world twice as long as I, and even more..." he said, and then, "You will marry the duchess, won't you, Sir Ruy?"

"Well, I think we'd better arrange that with the dragon first," said the banier, and he gave a short laugh.

The horses went on constantly at the same pace; sometimes they would go a short distance at a trot, and then the tip of the red lance would move at a slow tempo up front, as it had done earlier. The path remained as it was, and the forest passed by silently on the third and fourth day as on the first. There was no dearth of small brooks, and most of them could be heard in this quiet place murmuring from afar. The way rose steadily, dropped off, then leveled out again. It curved hardly at all, so they could see far along it—a ribbon of moss and short grass, and above it the ribbon of the blue sky between the treetops.

Clear meadows opened up here and there, the tree trunks parted and receded, and grazing for the horses was good.

For a long time, starting on the evening when they'd camped at the edge of the forest, Gauvain had been noticing a strange kind of bird that now began to appear more frequently. They were heavy and strong, like pouter pigeons, but far bigger, and were adorned with powerfully long, smooth-hanging, loose tail feathers whose color sometimes seemed exactly like gold. Their tendency was to gather motionless in small groups on the lower branches. They weren't timid and didn't fly away at the riders' approach. There was no kind of song or sound to be heard from them, no chirping or cooing at all. Once, when they were riding beneath one of those white-gold flocks all perched on the branches, Sir Ruy called for arrows to be used on them, for he thought those plump fellows might make good roasting. Gauvain didn't take a sharp arrow out of his quiver, but one with the rounded tip used when hunting birds; he drew the small bow skillfully while still on horseback, fired it, and hit his target. One of the birds fell, not fluttering, but already killed by the arrow's impact alone. It seemed astonishing to Sir Ruy that so large an animal would be so easy to kill, and even more so that the others remained calmly on the branches, even after Gauvain shot more arrows, two of which reached their goal. One of the carls dismounted, fetched the birds, and gathered up the scattered arrows. The birds Gauvain had bagged felt very promising, meaty and strong. They roasted them over the fire that evening and every day from then on.

Sir Ruy would often ride away from the path with the boy, into the depths of the forest, while the carls kept on going, chatting and riding at a leisurely pace. These detours, which led back to the path in a wide arc, showed the forest at first to be almost the same everywhere, clear and empty, with little underbrush. During the past few days, though, the tree trunks seemed to be packed closer together in places, and young trees and thickets would bar the horses' passage more often. The ground grew more uneven. Soon the path was going uphill for long stretches.

Now this ride through the forest closing in on all sides had gone into its tenth day.

That was how long they'd now had to do without any glimpse into the distance. They kept riding as if along the bed of a deep body of water that seemed as endless as the sea but as motionless as a mountain range. The sky shone hot and blue across the trees, not a twig stirred, the sun sent down straight or slanted rays through the branches, cast its play of shadows onto the forest floor, glowed on the trunks in the evening as it soared just above the trees.

Infrequent but large herds of red deer would come into view; Gauvain and one of the lads were able to shoot a stag each.

At night, guard duty was assigned by lots with no differentiation between man and master. Whoever was on duty sat by the glowing fire with his weapon at the ready and a bow at hand prepared for firing. The others slept soundly for the most part, tired out by the day's ride. The nights were soundlessly still here. Every noise, however slight, would be bound to rouse the watcher when he'd been staring into darkness for two long hours. The occasional fluttering of a bird or the falling of a tiny twig would have a hand reaching for the sword handle.

During the day, however, they would ride, and if their riding was at a leisurely rate because of the length of the journey, it was also with short interruptions only.

Meanwhile, Sir Ruy was leaving the path more and more often with Gauvain and penetrating deep into the forest. One day, while on one of these rides, he said, "It looks to me as if I've become a real knight errant, because I feel as though we're never going to get out of this forest, as though I'd been riding in it for six months." "It's beautiful here, though," the boy answered. They had just stopped before a dark green thicket of young trees and bushes and were looking for a way to get through. When they had ridden around this obstacle, a wide vista, something they'd long since grown unused to seeing, opened up before them. It was the mirror of a narrow, elongated lake that stretched along here, gradually widening and dividing the closed forest in this way. The trees at the other end looked very small. Reeds bordered the open water all around like a gray-green band.

"Look!" said Sir Ruy fiercely and pointed upwards, over the other end of the lake.

There the forest climbed up on a slope that grew steeper as it went higher and seemed to form the beginning of a chain of elevations. Farther back they saw the trees on the crest surmounting each other as they wandered up ever higher. It was a dark pine forest. Out of it, bare rocks were projecting here and there.

"Finally we will see, finally command a view, finally we can climb out of the depths!" cried Gauvain. The oppressive mood of these last few days, kept secret, held in check up to now, suddenly released him and his lord as well. They turned the horses around and rode speedily back to the path so as to hasten the march to the heights. The carls also brightened at the news. They all urged their horses into a fresh trot at once.

That evening they camped at the foot of the first hill in the rising pine forest. Sir Ruy was rubbing his hands at the fire. His whole being seemed changed and stimulated.

"The lake is another thing the troubadour told me about," he said suddenly to Gauvain. "That's the reason I've been riding off so much through the thick forest these past few days, so as not to miss the lake, since our path was leading in a different direction. I knew that. I also knew about the hills and the bare rocks we saw."

Gauvain kept silent. His lord grew talkative.

"He wasn't just spinning yarns, that strange man," said Ruy. And then he suddenly started telling a great deal about the troubadour, things it seemed he was now recalling better for the first time. For instance, he told how the man carried around a quiver decorated with numerous pictures, each of which cunningly depicted one of his adventures. The inner side of his bow had been covered with secret signs, any one of which was as weighty with meaning as a whole book, and taken together they would result in a complete branch of learning.

With that, Sir Ruy fell into silence and stepped a bit away from the fire, into the deep, soft shadows among the tree trunks.

"Sing something for us, Sir Gauvain," asked one of the lads.

"Yes!" called Sir Ruy from the shadows, "sing, Gauvain! Sing the troubadour's song!" His eyes sparkled suddenly, all round and black in the firelight.

The boy took the lute out of its sack, tuned it, played, and sang.

*The distance beckons,
The near ground's aglow,
The forest floor gleams now like high-shining jade.*

*Light sits the sword-blade,
The ringing one; life, begin singing
Your soft song to me. Oh, great secret,
Kiss my mouth now in the deep forest's shade.*

*Delighting in distances, harder at harvest-time,
Ways leading onward, a man's evil star;
To ride through the land by the road's narrow band,
The castles, the villages far.*

*And journeys and fighting,
A tense wait, exciting, for bright-sounding trumpets
At first break of day;
How deftly the hand moves, in effortless play.
To ride through the land by the road's narrow band,
The hillsides, the deep forest far!*

Sir Ruy joined in the singing of the last stanza. The moment the song was ended, an answering sound came from far out of the distance in the forest. It was a deep rumbling, as if the earth were trembling and lurching.

Gauvain leapt to his feet. The two lads sat motionless. The firelight flickered on their blanched faces. Finally one of them pulled himself together and said, "Why, that sounded almost like Sir Roland's horn at Ronceval!" Everyone else was quiet.

"Oh, troubadour!" whispered Sir Ruy intensely to himself.

No one slept very soundly that night, and whoever was keeping watch at any given hour could always find a partner for a whispered conversation.

They broke camp early. The path, here already beginning to be partially cushioned with a cover of brown pine needles, stretched along the elevations and gradually ascended. Ruy and Gauvain, impatient to reach a vantage point, left the carls behind, and when they saw that the path was keeping its direction, they headed to the left, into the forest, which, for the time being, was still rising at a gradual rate. Here there was again a mixture of leaf trees and evergreens, which made the path less smooth and impeded progress because of thickets. Sir Ruy's destrier—Ruy was riding his battle horse now, and it was in full equipment—stepped with ease and sureness of footing, even when the ascent grew steeper, and Beaujeu proved equally nimble.

Even so, the two riders were forced after a time to dismount and lead their horses by the reins, for the incline was growing steep. Overhead, mossy rocks, rubble, and single boulders were showing up among the trees.

Now a crevice came into view here. It led gradually uphill and traveled along the base of a projecting, twisting rock wall that wasn't very high. Over its edge, the roots of the trees above it were reaching out into empty air, twisted like snakes crawling downward. Weeds and grass, flowers and ferns grew everywhere among the rocks, wherever there was any room. Ruy and Gauvain pressed slowly forward in this gap full of plant life between the rocks on the one side and the steep slope of black earth on the other. Each was leading his horse

behind him. Heat collected in this rift, dust from the fallen limestone under the rock flew up at every step, and in the dense, thick silence here, every scrape of a foot or a hoof sounded compressed. But the gap now suddenly ended. There was a free view of a treeless hilltop all covered with short pasture grass. Ruy and Gauvain mounted their horses and rode through the last gently sloping stretch to the hilltop, which was almost even with them.

From this point the vista was complete.

As far as the eye could see, hills wandered beneath the dark waves of pine woods, looking like moss on the faraway knolls, or else beneath the lighter, gray-green foam of the leaf-bearing trees. And mainly off to the rear, whence they had come and where the sea of treetops fled away flat to the edge of the sky, everything seemed to be resting in a lighter color. Facing them at the beginning of the mountain range, however, individual rock projections jutted up out of the trees here and there, crags in zigzag form thrust upward, and pointed crests went off over the next mountain peak. Here they also saw the pine trees climbing up and up, ever higher over the wooded ridges, and behind their dark branches lay the distance of a pale sky that already belonged to the most distant mountains.

The two riders remained silent on the hilltop.

To the right below them they could see the strip of road ascending through the forest. It was much closer to them than they'd imagined. Now they also saw that the peak on which they were stopped could have been reached with much less effort, for in order to get back from here to the ever-climbing road by going forward, all they needed to do was cross a smooth hollow lightly grown with trees and ride downhill.

They were just beginning to talk about all they were observing, sending glances into the distance here and there between whiles, when Sir Ruy raised his arm with a brief shout and pointed to the rocky ridges over the nearest peak.

They could see, when they took a closer look, that those gray ridges were moving.

Under the blue of the sky, in this dense, bright silence, all breath and heartbeat stopped for a minute.

Meanwhile, the crests over there had kept on shifting even more, so now they could separate what was rock from what belonged to a living creature.

Some other things became immediately clearer. A round mass rose up about the crags, one foreign to their rugged forms—an arc now, the landscape visible below it—and the snake-like neck of the animal, swaying against the sky, twisting and turning in the air, extended up over the mountain, rising at least fifty feet, and then suddenly withdrew again. On or behind the rocky peaks, some long object now began to move. From every direction rocks rolled down into the woods below, thumping loudly onto the rubble already there, crashing now and again with a dull sound into trees, the two kinds of impact pretty clearly distinguishable. As when a snake is crawling through grass, the treetops

to the right of the peaks were now beginning to tremble, shake, and finally to rock violently to and fro, and at the same moment when the cracking and breaking of tree trunks became clearly audible, Sir Ruy and Gauvain saw for the first time the dragon's long back with its gigantic jagged crest high as a church roof moving among the crowns of the trees.

The horses had already been restive a good while.

"To the road!" cried Ruy and spurred his charger on.

They rode across the grass and down through the forest as fast as they could. Finally reaching the path with their snorting and skittish horses, they saw the carls and the pack horses coming far below. There was no time to worry about them now. From their left, coming down from above, they could already hear the forest starting to roar as if lashed by a storm, with its sound, both loud and dull, of tree trunks splintering, breaking, and falling.

Beaujeu and the destrier were standing rigid on their hind quarters.

Sir Ruy quickly slid out of his saddle. "Stay here and hold the horses!" he ordered Gauvain, who made a movement as though to follow his lord.

The noise came closer. Ruy drove his lance into the forest floor. He turned around again and saw the boy fighting with the frenzied horses. Then he drew his shining sword and ran along the path.

He ran. This was his only possible way to drive himself blindly forward and face what was now coming down the slope and onto the path from his left with crashing and roaring sounds. He ran along the smooth brown forest floor and could make out every single pine needle. The pathway was still clear as it kept leading on through the forest.

Just now, though, about a hundred paces in front of Ruy, first two and then several toppling fir trees fell across the path. They fell slowly, rebounded, and then remained still.

While Ruy was running, there arose in him like sharp-pointed crystals—and much to his own astonishment—scorn, disdain, even contempt for that unknown woman who, in her folly, considered herself worthy of such trials. After all, it looked as if a mountain were moving up ahead in the forest!

Much sooner and much closer than Ruy had been expecting, the mountain moved right onto the road and blocked it off. The creature towered over him, its skin brown and creased, crowned by a violet-colored horn which alone was as tall as a man. Ruy came to a stop not more than three steps in front of the dragon's massive head, which was lying on the path, while its endless neck bent off sideways into the forest. The beast's eyes were closed now, protected by tough armored lids. Indeed, every part of its body was covered by thick, heavy armor, with folds, crests, humps, and grooves in which a man could hide his whole arm and against which a long sword became a little etching needle, only good for clenching a fist around.

Recognizing that, Ruy became aware at the same instant of a wide and bright empty space inside himself, like someone who hasn't been living in his house for

very long and who one day discovers in it new rooms that he's never entered or even noticed before.

He fell and flew at great speed through these unknown and unused chambers of his soul, and while this rushing was going on, growing ever faster and faster and so making him apprehensive about falling on his face, he realized that in this place where there was nothing, deadly fear should have been dwelling. But he was completely at rest here in this condition, standing before the brown mountain range with its large, violet-covered ridges and waiting, as if behind him, between his shoulder-blades, his whole life—wherever and however he had lived it—were gathering itself together like a small pack he'd soon be able to roll down off his back. And that was what he was waiting for. Moreover, instead of falling down in his flight, he now found a new path opening out in spacious depth to his running.

It was in the dragon's eyes, which had opened all the way.

They lay before Sir Ruy like two small forest pools whose brown, marshy bed, picked out by the sun, shows the whole dizzying depth of the sky it is reflecting. These eyes led deep, deep inward, as if into forests that couldn't be ridden through in days, week, or months, but only in whole millenia. As the forest of Montefal was encompassing this one adventure now, so those eyes encompassed all possible earthly adventures, the whole of a life deeply entangled in forests like this one, situated in them like a dream in a sleeping body—a sweet and heavy dream of castles and villages, of journeys and fighting, of the dusty length of the road's narrow band when traveling, of a white neck under a coif of lace and gold, of the high-gleaming green of the sunlit forest floor, and of the blue sea. Sir Ruy, however, was passing through his hall of gold and brown, which was opening out and becoming mottled with green, with many isolated details. There, that fleck showed him an entire landscape, one with a large, empty, ruined windmill in a lush valley where the reeds grew high and thick along the gliding, flowing mirror of the slow stream whose bed shone dull brown when picked out by the sun. Sir Ruy passed through, and for the space of a breath he broke out of this immense forest, broke clear away from it, turned around, and saw the banier Ruy de Fanez riding in it, stopping with his squire on a knoll overgrown with thin pasture grass or standing here before the dragon's head. Now Sir Ruy, with his strong, compelling glance, was easily able to gather together into a small bundle between his shoulder blades everything that this man—gleaming in silver and iron, dreaming now before the dragon—might ever have experienced; and, lo and behold, he found it easy.

The dragon, on the other hand, seemed to have scant appetite for this iron man, who smelled only of steel, silver, and leather. Perhaps he'd already eaten. Yet the eyes of this diminutive creature, staring so hard into his own, were causing him uneasiness. The dragon drew his head back two or three feet.

Sir Ruy, who thought the animal was preparing to lunge, as snakes do, dropped away from all the visions he'd gathered together and into his own right fist. His

sword flashed and flew upward; he struck with a forward leap. The blade rang out, but with a tinny sound, as if someone were blindly laying about himself in a gravel pit or a tinsmith shop. This sound betrayed the sword's uselessness and impotence only too well. Even so, something went flying through the air, off to the side of the road and into the bushes; it was the tip of the violet-colored horn on the top of the dragon's head.

The dragon himself appeared either totally bewildered or else not in the mood to play, for he turned his gigantic head to the right, away from the road, and the whole mountain range of his body, extending from the long neck to the roof-high, jagged ridges at the crest of his back, and tapering off with his endless tail, passed by Ruy, who jumped back. The dragon moved in one looping, coiling turn that could only be called consummately graceful in view of the animal's bulk and size. Then there went through the forest the crashing sounds of splintering and cracking, downhill and away, leaving a ravaged forest clearing behind, the beast going so fast that it would have been hard to follow on horseback.

Sir Ruy stood up and looked at his sword, which now showed two nicks. His right arm was stiff where he'd fallen on it.

He stood there for a long time. There was a jingling sound behind him. He turned around, saw his squire Gauvain, whose face was shockingly pale before the brown-green depth of the forest, saw the carls, who were standing apprehensively off to the side and watching their lord like some paramount being, saw the chargers and the pack horses. Gauvain knelt before him and kissed the hand holding the sword. Ruy ran his left hand through Gauvain's hair, and then he clumsily replaced his sword in its scabbard.

"You are the greatest hero of all time!" cried Gauvain, still kneeling. "You smote the dragon before our eyes and made him take flight."

Ruy walked over to the destrier and patted his neck.

"We will ride on. Let's make camp soon," he said finally. "This way!" He pointed in the direction from which they'd come.

Gauvain stared at him perplexed. "Montefal...the duchess...and maybe the forest will end soon if we continue onward! The other way we'd have to ride upwards of three weeks," he brought out timidly.

"All right, then, I don't mind," answered Ruy. "Now then, mount up, to Montefal!" They rode off at a trot, in spite of the rise in the path, which held for a little way here.

2.

Some eight days after their encounter with the lord and focal point of the forest, they set up camp on a flat hill covered with only a few bushes. The next morning, after a ride of scarcely half an hour, the tree trunks began to separate more and more, as though yielding to the pressure of the open spaces now streaming this way. There was no doubt that the forest was coming to an end. Ruy sent a scout on foot, who soon came running back to report a wide land down into which and even beyond which he could see, to report villages, streets, and churches, but especially a castle with many towers and many portals that stood down there in the valley.

"That's Montefal," said Ruy.

He then had his triangular pennon, his due as a free lord, placed at the top of his lance, raised on his left arm the escutcheon of his house with its fess or and vert, which until now had lain face down on a pack saddle, put his helmet on his head, and slipped into his heavy gauntlets. The destrier had meanwhile been caparisoned as for a tourney. Ruy now swung up into the saddle. Each carl had taken a silver hunting horn out of the luggage, and they were now carrying them at their sides, sitting to horse more elated and self-assured than they'd been for a long time.

Gauvain was also wearing his best, a tight-fitting leather doublet and hose in his lord's colors.

They went at a trot, and finally at a gallop, past the trees and then beyond them. When they stopped, out in open space on a soft meadow, when the new wide vista—with its detailed and its blurred spots, with its sharply seen and its hazily seen places—lay before their sight like an enormous, green-blue billow, then there came blaring out behind them, played three times by the carls, the fanfare of the free lords of Fanez, which had once rung out for that family's more uncouth forebears at many a rollicking hunting party.

From far away, even as if coming down from the wide-spanning summer sky itself, there came in answer, after a few moments, many and ever more clearly audible blasts from the trumpets of Montefal, ringing out from the high battlements of the castle down in the valley.

These weeks passed like short days, but it was just as though time weren't flowing at all any more and everything that was happening were remaining altogether in the present, hanging in still-standing time like smoke in the unmoving air of evening or clouds in a summer sky when the wind is completely calm. Sir Ruy could still hear the thundering of hooves on the drawbridge under him when he'd come riding in and the flourishes of the trumpets above him in the gate tower, could still see the staircases of the castle coming down to the broad courtyard with the arrested motion of the whole milling retinue, the rich soft sheen of much brocade, the silver gleam of panoply, and in the midst of all

this the slender, graceful woman from whom everyone kept some distance, as if some danger stood about her. Only he leapt from his horse and went toward her, climbing the stairs, and she had graciously come down two steps to meet the jingling of his weapons. He could still hear himself giving an account, as she had charged him to do, sitting with her in the rather sparsely furnished hall of white and silver. His own voice had sounded very matter-of-fact to him, but this approach accorded entirely with his way of narrating events.

"So you let the dragon get away," she said, and then, "Where are you keeping that violet-colored horn?"

When he answered that it was probably still lying back in the bushes to the side of the road, he immediately felt her glance like a challenge.

All these things could just as well have been today or yesterday or a month before.

Ruy saw the duchess every day, and Gauvain paid his respects two or three times. She learned to play the lute from the Écuyer, whose induction as a knight was approaching.

"That boy of yours," she said once to Ruy, "relates the adventure of the dragon in so lively a way that one has the feeling of having been there. He loves you boundlessly and reveres you as a hero."

In the cathedral, where Gauvain had held vigil with his weapons during the night before his dubbing, the organ pealed at the high mass, and light came down steeply from far above, off to the sides, beaming through the rising blue smoke of the incense. The marshal of Lidoine's castle conducted the ceremony, and with Ruy's sword, as Gauvain had requested. Then he received the weapon from his former lord as a gift, and it still had the two nicks it had sustained from the blow to the dragon's head.

Henceforth, Sir Ruy had a new squire. This boy was the son of an English earl, a very bright child, translucently white of skin and red of hair. Ruy would play chess with the boy while lying on a couch in the open air, in the gardens with arcades and overlapping trees, out in front of the quarters he'd been assigned, high above the high walls and above the countryside. Now and then Ruy would hold a pawn or a rook in his hand for a long time. He wasn't looking at the board, however, but out at the horizon, onto which the contours of a rather large city seemed to etch themselves far off in the distance, along with villages nearby, and then a castle. The young earl pretended not to notice and never acted surprised, keeping occupied with the game instead.

One evening Ruy sent the boy for wine. When the vessel was set down next to the chess board, he looked up and found Gauvain standing before him. The new young knight had happened to meet the English boy and had relieved him of the vessel so as to be able to attend on his former lord once again. Here he stood now, in the colors of his own house, wearing a long mantle that flowed backward from his shoulders. The broad white deerskin sash over the tabard, the sign of his rank, carried the sword that had been Sir Ruy's.

"This is a great pleasure, my friend. Please sit down," said Ruy and got up. The new Écuyer had quietly entered behind Gauvain and filled the goblets for the lords.

Of the wide vista they could see almost nothing. Everything disappeared in the gold of the sun at its most oblique point, now beginning to glow red and make the green of the plants and the colors of the flowers, here climbing the walls in thick clusters, blaze out.

"I feel as though under an enchantment living here," said Gauvain as he looked out into the woven gold of the sun.

"I can understand the way you feel," answered Ruy without raising his glance.

"And you?" asked the youth, taken aback by the tone in Ruy's answer.

"I am not under an enchantment and will, as I now see, likely never be under one again."

"There are more than a few lords here at the castle," Gauvain finally said, "who would regard it as a great honor if you were to consider entrusting them with your anticipated courtship of the duchess."

"I suppose they're awaiting it with some impatience?"

"It would appear so."

"And with some consternation at the way time is passing by?"

"That too."

"I saw her in the dragon's eye," said Ruy suddenly, and he spoke rapidly now into Gauvain's open astonishment. For several moments he sat on the couch, only to stand up again and speak out into the evening. "I saw Lidoine there, just as I saw everything that my life contains, all pressed closely together, and it appears I saw the future as well as the past. As far as I was concerned, she was standing there all alone on the stairs when we rode in—small, slender, dark, not surrounded by any radiant halo of novelty or set off as though from another world made up differently. Montefal is no adventure for me, nor has it been my goal. I knew that the instant we arrived here, even before I'd stepped down from the stirrup. Here all the light is thin and clear. All that over there, by the way, now standing out from the glow of evening, is the contour of what appears to be a rather large city. Do not wonder, Sir Gauvain, but I am seeing clearly and in great detail, and I am seeing a bit beyond this castle, out to the point that concerns me, to what etches the edge of heaven. But it does not attract me any more. That's the difference from my earlier life and from yours as it is now. You are capable of yearning for a woman or for the outside world, and even of yearning for both at the same time isn't impossible, for that radiant halo I spoke about earlier can be around a country as well as a person. Sometimes it surrounds one thing and then another, or some long-forgotten locality."

Gauvain's eyes had grown darker, and the tension in his face seemed to go beyond just his interest in his friend.

"We come late to those concerns that make up our lives and have always made them up," Ruy continued, "to the center, that is. Ever since encountering the

dragon I've been seeing more clearly a lush, green valley watered by rivers where the green on the banks darkens and deepens a tone closer to the black and brown on the river bed, picked out by the sun. The reeds are tall. There are windmills. One of them is ruined and burned."

They kept silent. The sun was now moving behind the spires and battlements of the city on the horizon.

Ruy walked quickly over to Gauvain and clasped him by the shoulders.

"You are wearing the white belt," he said smiling, "but you still love like a page boy. I'll soon be riding away, though."

They kept standing like this, and Gauvain had laid his hand on his former lord's arm, when high above them, from the towers, a virtual storm broke out from the trumpets. While the castle began filling up on all sides with considerable activity, the noise thundered ceaselessly, breathlessly, like a cataract above them, and came crashing into their ears.

3.

Riders had lately appeared in the same place where the forest had released Sir Ruy and his men many weeks before. The adventure which led to Montefal seemed to have become a part of general knightly custom.

This time it was a German named Sir Gamuret von Fronau. He too had to narrate his journey and his encounter with the dragon while sitting beside the duchess in the rather sparsely furnished hall of white and silver. Ruy and Gauvain had also been consulted. The Fronauer, a cordial man with an unkempt head of curly blond hair and a build like a forest pine, told his story in Latin—which people all over the world then understood—with great relish and high spirits, mixing in German words and whole sentences in a strange jargon and taking frequent hearty drafts from his goblet.

"Sithen we had swayed faire three-and-twenty dayes thorough the forest—for, looke ye, doth not a man ride near ay-lasting at a walke, parfay, when longe a-journeying?—I had nay trow more in suchlike kine and besties and alle tales of them. The boy withal" (and he pointed with a motion of his blond head to his Écuyer standing behind his chair, a boy out of whose cheerful face intelligence beamed), "him listed sore, e'en unto pining and welking, the dragon for to seen, and he redd me with goode persuacioun, so we brak like boares thorough the busk to left and right in the forest, albeit nought stirred. Howsomever did alle thinges prosper for us in the ende... ."

So he went on in his broad and homey style, while "ay-lasting" the young squire would hop quick and true to his lord's right side, to a small table where vessel and goblet stood, and refill the cup.

The Fronauer had come within an inch of faring badly on this journey. Near the same place where Sir Ruy had met him, the dragon placed himself on the road in front of Sir Gamuret, but this time the monster seemed less sleepy; he seemed downright frisky and in the mood for an appalling game, if also still without appetite for men of iron and leather. Sir Gamuret, who like Ruy had left his squire and carls with the horses, fear-crazed and thus useless in action, saw himself surrounded as if by a wall, though a moving one, even in his courageous approach to the dragon, for the beast had closed its immense body in a circle and begun to romp in an awkward way. The beast suddenly seemed bent on catching the tip of its tail and paid not the slightest attention to the little man of steel and silver, who was standing in the wide circle and watching the high-rising and then sinking shapes on the monstrous back pass by him like a running chain of hills. The Fronauer's large hunting dogs, four of which he had with him, were trying to bite the dragon, a couple from inside and the others from outside the circle. That armor-plated hide made the dogs' efforts entirely wasted, however. Indeed, with their frantic yelping and leaping, they seemed to heighten the dragon's pleasure in its dance and to cause it to forget all about the trapped knight. Meanwhile, the forest to the left and right of the road was toppling down

with trunks and branches, with snapping and splintering. This strange confinement of Sir Gamuret lasted only a short while, though, and he didn't have much time to think during it, for just as he was about to leap at the dragon from the side with his sword, there came unexpectedly running through the stirred-up forest—and no doubt to Sir Gamuret's good fortune—a huge herd of red deer, which seemed to interest the dragon far more than dogs and little silver men. He opened the circle and shot off and away, to the untold devastation of the forest, in pursuit of the fleeing prey.

Sir Gamuret had had trouble calling off the frantic dogs. He had his lads lead one of them into the hall now, opened its muzzle, and pushing back its chops, he showed the duchess how the dog had broken off two teeth on the dragon's armor.

"Methought I were fallen into an hellish abyss"—this was Sir Gamuret's way of describing his state inside the terrible ring—"and the boy without and my carles with the rouncies befell not lesse a sweat from fear than mine own selfe."

"All the same, you cut this ornament away from the dragon's head before he could run off," said Lidoine, pointing to the violet-colored horn, which had been brought in on a silken cushion and laid at the feet of her state chair. "Your bravery is worthy of all honor." While saying this, she looked past Gamuret and over to Ruy.

"With alle reverence," said Sir Gamuret, who seemed somewhat perplexed, "but here can be no talk of bravery, for what man mought be brave when a mountaine cometh a-running toward him? As what concerneth the horn, I cut it not down, but rather found it after and some ways distant from the place where me met the worm."

"And how did you find it?" asked the duchess, bending forward a little. "Was it lying on the road or in the forest?"

"Righte of the road in the busk we founden it, or justly were it hight not we, but the houndes, which alle along our way did hie them mightily and course thither in a pack, barking and scratting. Certes did we goe and look after, nor be it a wonder, for the thing is stronge odorous and, methinks, noble and sweet."

"Oh, is that what it is?" cried Lidoine. "The whole time you've been sitting here in the hall and speaking, Sir Gamuret, I've been thinking about the curious aroma and imagining that you must use very costly essences."

"Ne'er in alle my dayes have I used the like," said the Fronauer in some confusion; perhaps, too, he was growing suspicious and inclining to think he was being made fun of. A small wrinkle appeared over his short, straight nose.

"Tell me, Sir Ruy, what does it smell like?" cried the duchess with a smile. She signaled to a page to carry the horn over to the Spaniard.

Ruy bent over the strange prize he'd removed from the dragon in mortal fear. He half closed his eyes and inhaled the aroma. His face was altogether solemn. Not for a good while did he look up, and then past Lidoine. He said slowly, "It must smell like this in lush green valleys watered by tranquil rivers where the green

on the banks darkens and deepens in its reflection. It may well be that such flowers grow there, piercing but delicate in their odor like this dragon-horn." "You have spoken well," said Lidoine and fell silent.

Sir Gauvain's demeanor, which had noticeably clouded over just after the Fronauer's arrival, began growing somewhat lively again. Yet a considerable unrest was still dominating the youth, and this feeling led him anew into the intertwining gardens lying before his former lord's chambers.

Ruy lay stretched out on his couch. Behind him, his squire had dozed off with his small head lying on the arm rest of a well-padded easy chair. Wine pitcher and chess board were not missing from the low table by the couch, but some of the pieces had fallen over on the board, while others had been carelessly pushed together.

Gauvain remained standing in the corner of the small gallery and leaned lightly against the wall, on which single colored tiles were gleaming. Blossoms in thick clusters were climbing up the small pillars. The warm summer sky dropped down here from every direction in deep, large pieces and arched freely up and away, over the horizon.

Here was peace. Here the world—at any other time largely unregistered because of the heart's harassments and fears, restlessly passed over even by Gauvain himself—entered in from all sides, as into a house with many doors. A butterfly was also frolicking here, and it, too, with its light and random movements, was contained within this vessel of repose and could be examined in it.

Both Ruy and the boy were apparently asleep.

Gauvain watched the butterfly. It was violet-colored, somewhat like the dragon's horn, and the blossoms it visited were a deep yellow-brown.

After a while Gauvain withdrew quickly.

Afterwards, as he was walking through one of the inner gardens, he ran into the duchess's marshal, the man who had dubbed him knight with Ruy's sword not very long before. Gauvain saw the white-haired man approaching, in his mantle of silk with fur trim, down a long arcade of short lime trees with their crowns all interwoven like the vault of an arch. At its farther end the old field commander and courtier had just come through a low door surrounded by ivy, so that he could take his desired stroll.

Only for a second did Gauvain stop his foot in its forward movement, but then courtly breeding triumphed and led the young knight directly toward the aged man, who was walking slowly, step by step. The youth was suddenly overcome by a strange, uncanny feeling; he even had to struggle inside for self-control, as if some decision were now going to confront him—him, veering as he was between a chasm of despair and a blue sky full of hopes.

Now it had come time to salute the marshal with deference. His greeting was returned with such kindness that all his apprehension abated.

"Ah, here is my godchild of the sword," said the old gentleman. "Would you like to bear an old man company for a while, my boy?"

Gauvain bowed, not deeply, but rather, as the custom of that time had it, lightly and turned very slightly to the side from the hips.

The sun stood among the leaves with many white-gleaming arrows of light.

So they walked side by side, Sir Gauvain holding back his pace, as the slowness of the old man and the youth's respect for him required. However, just as any youth, if only he is genuine and good, knows before the eyes of great age nothing of that reserve and taciturnity which at all other times encircle his heart like an iron ring, so Gauvain felt it to be a great comfort, much as if he were being relieved of his armor after a long ride, that the marshal went straight to the core of the problems that had been so deeply and so painfully disturbing this young knight.

"I've been seeing you downcast during these past days, Sir Gauvain. To wit, since the arrival of the lord from Fronau. That ought not make you feel quite as you seem to."

"How else should I feel, then?" Gauvain asked simply and in a soft voice.

"Believe me, my dear young sir, it often happens that a man does not wish to look beyond some distress of his heart and out into the world, even though a single glance could show a way out. Such distress, however, often wills and loves its own blindness only too much."

"I believe, though, that I see my unhappiness quite clearly."

"Yes, but only it, and you are moving in it while captive in it, like a man in a deep forest. Do not flinch from the ax of intelligence, which might be able to hew a way clear for you. You might even see yourself, perhaps, moving out into open country and sunlight such as you never dreamed of."

"I haven't dared to allow myself any hope, or if so, I suppressed it very soon."

"My dear friend, we are not dealing here with hope or fear. Let me commend to you the conquest of both for the time being. But no matter what the situation into which life has placed us, we must simply see it through. We must see what can be done. This is how we sharpen to a point the arrow already launched in flight through the will of God, in which peculiar sleight of hand, it seems to me, man's dignity and value truly show themselves. Nothing is needed for this other than clear sight and a calm hand under the eye's control. If a statesman, a general, an artist draw on this virtue—to name some whose great concerns, once glimpsed and recognized, impart strength and humility to them in all the small matters that will constantly have to be carried out as well—then I do not see why a lover, too, should not be able to draw on it in his concern, one which I today, as an old man, very well know is not trifling."

He fell silent, stopped walking, and looked at the white-gleaming patches of sun in the branches, while his face seemed illuminated for some moments, as though a storm from years past had risen again, briefly, in his soul.

At the word "lover," Gauvain had bored with his eyes deep down among the pebbles on the path, and he could see them very clearly. A hot red wave had surged up from his neck, making the silk of his mantle feel cool all around.

"I just don't know what should be done now," he said finally, his eyes still on the ground.

"You need to listen carefully, young lord, and look matters clearly in the eye. The rest will come of itself."

The marshal spoke these last words with great distinctness and some sharpness. Not until now did he seem to have arrived at a point toward which he'd probably been moving since the start of this conversation; and out of the vessel of a merely receptive sympathy, proffered with good will, there now leapt a bright ray of purpose being pursued.

Gauvain felt it. He felt at the same time that something new was coming into play, something unfamiliar was grazing up against him, and he wanted to retreat from it, back into the confused and tangled forest of desire, torment, hope, and despair growing inside him, because his captivity there struck him as better than any keen view from outside, but it was his suddenly kindled hope that opened his hearing in the end.

"I shall listen to you with the greatest of pleasure, honored lord, and shall note each of your words carefully and follow your advice in any way I can!" he cried ardently.

"That is as it should be," said the marshal, over whose refined features a smile seemed to flit. "One question first and foremost: do you believe that your former lord is still thinking of paying court to the duchess? For, strictly speaking, it cannot be said that the time for such has elapsed. It may be, in fact, that certain individuals here at court—quite by contrast with the majority—even imagine themselves to be perceiving a special emphasis on seemliness in this hesitancy. Has the free lord of Fanez never spoken to you about the matter?"

Gauvain noticed clearly that the marshal was eager to find out information on this score. At the moment he also believed that it would be in the best interest of his own problem, as well as of the more general one under discussion, to tell in the most accurate way what he knew from Ruy. However, he was not capable, at least not on the spot, of extracting from the context of an unforgettable hour spent with his former lord an isolated piece of information, the more so as it hadn't even been tendered as such. It seemed far more to him as though Sir Ruy had spoken of things that could be immeasurably more significant for him than any intention to pay court or not to pay court. It was in this spirit, after all, that Ruy had merely mentioned in passing his decision for the latter as part of an exchange that was, in its way, unequalled for Gauvain. The youth didn't consider himself duty-bound to keep silent now about this particular, stipulated point, but bound indeed to make absolutely no use of that strange hour of confidences—during which the sun had sunk behind the spires and battlements of the city on the horizon—as the instrument for reaching any goal whatever, no matter what it

might be. Even the approach of any such idea in his mind made Gauvain feel deeply ashamed.

"I never heard him speak about it," he said.

"That is regrettable for your sake," said the marshal. "The arrival of the free lord of Fanez renders any precipitate action by Sir Ruy quite impossible, of course, since it would ill befit him to demonstrate haste now all of a sudden. As for Sir Gamuret, however, he seems to me the very picture of precipitate action and free of any scrupulous niceties about brushing aside courtly manners when he imagines his hour has come. I would be glad, though, to signify to him in some decorous way that he is mistaken in this matter."

"How do you propose to do that? And in what matter is Sir Gamuret mistaken?"

"In the matter of the duchess. I have spoken with her and succeeded in making clear that Sir Gamuret would not be the right man, does not have that which would make a Duke of Montefal, whatever other knightly virtues he may possess, which far be it from me to impugn or even call into the faintest doubt."

"You mean you succeeded..." said Gauvain, astonished that his lips were speaking at all. His heart was standing suddenly alone in an empty space and yearning for the warmth and the feel of all the rest of his body.

"Yes, I succeeded. What is more, as unanimous as the Privy Council would have been in endorsing a union with Sir Ruy, its views and its votes remain divided on the subject of this German lord. While some think they see in him a prospectively strong ruler, one to be heralded, those on the other side are inclined to take a rather dubious view of the foreignness of both his blood and his manner, in which connection some even maintain that he could well plunge this land into senseless military adventures or show a capricious and brutal hand in domestic affairs. Moreover, it would be difficult to advise him, since in the face of his indisputably rather coarse and headstrong nature the Privy Council would soon of necessity lose that influence which it has hitherto decidedly rejoiced in, much to the weal of the land. I am among those who are of that view."

Only in the same way that one picks out a point far off in the distance, and then only with the most superficial and shallow stratum of one's consciousness, so Gauvain began gradually to perceive that someone was in the process, inconceivable as it was, of siding with him.

"If we now," continued the marshal, "could arrive at some certainty regarding the intentions of the free lord of Fanez—that is, if it were known to us with any assuredness that the initiation of a courtship on his part were no longer to be anticipated—then there would open up one possibility which I, together with the preponderant part of the Privy Council, consider to be best of all. Therefore, Sir Gauvain, do find out what your erstwhile liege is thinking of doing or not doing. Surely that should not be difficult for you."

"No, of course not," said Gauvain's mouth, speaking in front of the face it belonged to, as if broken away, so that its owner could watch his own lips moving.

"Now then! There is a second point concerning Sir Gamuret. Someone should let him know in a friendly and seemly manner that his courtship would not have much of a chance and would therefore be better left uncommenced. No one could be as well suited for that undertaking as Sir Ruy de Fanez, if he plays no other part in the matter, which would of course render it impossible for him to give any such advice to the lord of Fronau."

"But tell me, honored lord," said Gauvain, suddenly and to his own horror risking an attack, "suppose my former lord were to do this, and successfully so..."

"Then you would pay court to the duchess, and successfully so," answered the marshal with complete calm.

So it was, then, that Gauvain, through his attack, had come out upon a gushing stream of life's water, through to which he himself, in a sudden burst of daring, had drilled like a miner. And already the surging flood was mounting in all the tunnels and passages inside him, while his head was ringing from those few terse words of the marshal, like a tower in which the bells are being rung and the sound holes reverberating. Once he was set in motion, once he relaxed the rigidity with which up to now he'd been standing his ground against his misery, it grew extremely hard for him to contain himself. Blood mounted up to his head, his heart was shouting in his breast, every one of the sun's arrows of light flashing through the leafage was fired at him and was agitating him, and the pebbles before his feet were growing upward toward him, as if he were walking, bent down or hunched over, scarcely two feet above the ground, which at the same time lay as though under running water. Never before had a spell comparable to this one befallen him. Those moments back then in the forest—bewildered by the wild beating of his heart as he struggled with the frenzied horses, while his lord, shining sword in hand, had run to confront a brown mountain moving onto the smooth pine-needle path like something from another world—those moments then, compared to these moments now, outwardly calm as they were with their walking and standing in the lime-tree arcade, could sooner be called collected than wildly excited.

"Your simple knightly birth," continued the old gentleman meanwhile, speaking in the tone of an informational report, "does not constitute an impediment, for even in the case of the two free lords, the Privy Council would likewise have had to deliberate over the comparatively lower rank of the chosen consort, to wit over his elevation to the rank of duke. Our sovereign lady, after all, when she made her curious decision after becoming a widow for the second time, could not precisely have expected that a prince regnant would be willing to undergo the adventure in the forest of Montefal so as to win her hand. Personages of princely rank are mostly in the habit, you will allow, of concerning themselves

with other problems than dragons. But enough of that! You were born of the knightly class and have in your own person been dubbed knight. I can tell you now, in retrospect, that I expedited this last matter as much as it could be done, for very early, young sir, my eye had come to rest on you. Now then, you have ridden through the forest and thus adequately fulfilled the condition set down by our sovereign. It is also my opinion that the nuptials ought to be soon, for although a curious coincidence did indeed bring, after years of waiting, three gentlemen out of the forest—of whom, whoever, one does not wish to pay court and another ought not to pay court—the third, on the other hand, and you are he, seems very much to the duchess's liking. Why, then, should we protract the waiting period to an indefinite date? Her grace is longing for a young consort and is meanwhile, if I may be permitted to say so, not growing younger with the passage of time. You are well set up, decent, and bright, Sir Gauvain. You will not be willful and will not believe you know more about affairs of state than do seasoned and experienced men who have concerned themselves with nothing else for decades. I think I may expect that you will allow yourself to be guided and advised. So get going! Under these conditions I would be all yours, and I could make things go your way; speaking confidentially, it would be easy for me, in fact. Go today, forthwith, to your quondam lord and confer with him about the points on which everything depends, and further about the lord of Fronau. Afterwards you can let me know."

And before Gauvain's eyes there appeared, stippled with patches of sun, fate itself in the form of a smooth white hand emerging from the fur trim on a brocade sleeve and holding itself out to him. And this form seemed to him larger and more formidable than had the dragon's head when it had moved out of the depths of the forest and onto the needle-brown path.

"Everything, gracious lord, I promise you everything," said Gauvain with the last bit of voice he was able to muster, as he grasped the marshal's hand, bent over it, and kissed it.

How Gauvain made his way of the lime-tree arcade after being dismissed by the marshal, he didn't know himself, since he was struggling for nothing short of his physical balance, so as not to totter when he walked. He couldn't manage, though, finally to stand or to sit still, even though many a round marble bench here in the gardens invited him to do so. So he kept on walking and walking, feeling as if his body were a door that had come off its hinges and were merely leaning lightly against the frame. Uncertainly he made his way out into the fullness of the sun, into the blue, into the blazing colors of the flower garlands cascading down the white walls, his glance wandering over the glimmering mirrors of ponds and seeing behind them the blue shadows of the castle cathedral towering over the blossoms. As he passed them, he saluted a group of court ladies playing ball, but he did so with faraway eyes and with limbs that he felt only at the outermost surface to be his own and submissive to him. A tall,

reddish-blond lady looked at him in surprise, but then she turned back and threw the ball powerfully.

Strangely enough, the marshal's commission was weighing like a stone on Gauvain's heart, which was now inclined to anything and everything but pursuing this one aim. But that that was precisely what led him to Sir Ruy.

Only when he began pondering how he should address his former lord and what he was supposed to say did he finally and suddenly interrupt his rapid walking, and a bench was now a welcome sight. It, together with the distant, hazy horizon beyond the terraces and gardens, allowed him to catch his breath for the first time, and soon, like a soft summer wind, there wafted to him the idea of simply lingering there, of remaining and letting all matters in general take their course and the marshal's commission just pass by like the clouds above, which were appearing singly and infrequently at the horizon, lying still for a short while, and then passing away like the days, like the weeks at Montefal. Gauvain grew calm. Across the way, someone jumped down from a high marble step onto the gravel, ran toward him, and stood there after a courteous greeting. It was his page, whom he'd completely forgotten, but whom he'd ordered hours before, feeling the need to be alone, to wait for him at this place.

"Go to the free lord of Fanez and announce to him my coming," he said to the boy.

At the moment when Gauvain had unexpectedly seen the marshal coming toward him under the entwined lime trees, Sir Ruy was still asleep; and if it wasn't quite the sleep of unqualified justice (for a knight errant hardly cuts quite that figure), at least it was the sleep of a man who has gained sufficient distance from the things of this world to find rest in their midst.

Little change had taken place in the sky; the sun was still standing directly above. Green shadows of leaves covered the couch and the heavy padded chair, leaning against one arm of which Patrick, the young English lord, was sleeping, fair, fresh, and ruddy, as if someone had stood a sheaf of wheat with wildflowers on the seat of the chair.

Into the silence a flax-blond boy, dressed in two colors, came suddenly bolting out of the gallery. He cast a quick glance at the sleeping Sir Ruy and then fetched Patrick a powerful jab in the ribs, at which the little Englishman, coming right out of a sound sleep, kicked the intruder in the stomach with a very well-aimed and lightning-fast motion of his slender leg. PRIVATE □

"Wake up, Patrick," whispered the newcomer (as if a kick like that hadn't amply proven his being awake already), "somebody's coming to your master."

"What is it?" Ruy now called from the couch. The little by-play had roused him. The blond messenger immediately walked away from Patrick and over to the couch, where he turned a bow from the hips that could have passed inspection before any master of court ceremonies. Stepping back, he then intoned the following in a bright, pleasant-sounding voice: "Gracious lord! Gamuret, free

lord of Fronau, Protector of Orth, and Lord of Weiteneck, sends me to you to ask if Your Grace would receive him."

"Go," said Ruy, "and take my best compliments to your dear and noble lord. It would be a special pleasure for me to see him here."

Soon afterwards the Fronauer came up through the arcades and hanging gardens, preceded by his squire, and he was now standing above Sir Ruy's couch at the top of a small flight of stairs, outlined by the blue sky. The sun shone through his corn-yellow hair, which looked altogether light and bright, like the gold of the sun itself.

Sir Ruy hastened toward his guest with outstretched hands.

"I am come to speke in confiance with you and parley in frank wordes," said the Fronauer as he came down the stairs. He was wearing a wide doublet of blue silk, around which the deerskin belt was tied. At his throat and shoulders was white fur.

The pages brought fresh wine, pastry, fruit.

"Speak, then," said Ruy. "In me you can be certain of a brotherly heart."

"I would fain ask you," said the Fronauer straight out, as he took a seat in the heavy armchair in which Patrick had been sleeping, "if ye be minded to pay court."

"No, Sir Gamuret," answered Ruy in the same way. "I do not intend to."

"Then methinks I ought."

"It doesn't sound as if your whole heart were in it."

"Nay. ēTwould be a lie were I to say so."

"Yet no one is forcing you into a courtship, Sir Gamuret."

"True. Yet shal alle this harde journey go y-ridden for nought, the feares withstooden for nought, the weekes of tracking thorough wood and ever wood, as were a man riding on the bottom of the sea? Ye ken it yourself, being experient. My head cannot rime that I go hence and not take the prize."

"But it doesn't appear to be a prize at all for you," said Ruy smiling.

"Withal, the matter mought gain sense with this duchy. Ah, I feele me alien here, as were I amongst the Turkes. And say, Sir Ruy—ye, for your part, will erre away and leave this?"

"That's why I'm called a knight errant, I suppose," answered Ruy with a laugh.

"No, I just don't care for our most estimable lady, and that's all there is to it. Why should I bite into an apple just because it's called an apple? I would like to preserve my freedom against actions like that. Understand me well, though—if she pleased me, I would have bitten long ago. There surely has been no lack of opportunity."

The Fronauer lifted his head and looked long at Ruy out of his light eyes.

"Ye be right in that," he said then. This clear insight, however, which rested in his features for some moments, decayed again under the shadows of doubt that now flitted across his face. It could be read in this face that changes of light like

this must have been frequent over the past few days, even to being a wearisome tossing back and forth. Sir Gamuret's face looked a bit pale and fatigued with worry. He bent forward now, placed his broad hand on the edge of the small table that stood between him and Ruy, and looking his interlocutor directly in the eye, said, with a helplessness that revealed itself all at once, "Will ye given me conseil?"

"Do you really want me to?" answered Ruy, looking more earnest, perhaps, than he wanted the other man to see.

"Yea, certes, I pray you therefor."

With a lively and graceful motion the Spaniard now rose from his couch, on which he'd been sitting upright, and took a few steps under the shadows of the leaves, over to where the sun was already lying on the gravel and flagstones and the gardens above and below were melting into it. Ruy stood here under the cover of leaves and right in front of the open blue sky while he spoke.

"Do not try to hang your heart where it is not hanging, Sir Gamuret. The only thing that counsels us to do so is the residue of all the old men in our blood, men who are our forebears, men who were still young when they begot their children, to be sure, but who nonetheless grew older along with their descendants, so that out of a young man there already speaks a whole chorus of ancient ones, all desiring nothing but to rob him of his blooming youth and to make a grave out of his life so long as it lasts. It is this residue to which we must always show a purpose in whatever we do; otherwise it swirls up like the dregs in a glass and clouds the wine. We need to dash out the glass, though, and pour a new one. Out there, Sir Gamuret, is where your knighthood lies. To it above all else the hard journey you made is of use. An unloved woman would be, in my opinion, a paltry prize. Thus it is my advice to go on stretching your limbs here as long as it suits you, just as I have done, but then outwit the old men and ride away."

"Yea, so it is!" cried the Fronauer from where he was seated. "Ye give me, Sir Ruy, the goade for the which I strove in vaine." Now he stood up too and came forward, under the arcades of leaves and hanging flowers, next to the Spaniard.

"Look and see how lovely it is," said Ruy smiling and pointing outward, "castles and villages, and the dusty bands of the roads... ." He broke off, and his face darkened for the length of a thought.

"Yes, it is lovely," Sir Gamuret said slowly after him. He raised his head, let his eye range out in the distance as his left hand played with his sword belt. As tall and broad as he stood here—and the cut of his clothes added to the impression—this was the face of a child heaving a sigh of relief. Sir Ruy noticed it.

"You see," he said, after they'd gone back to their wine, "it seemed to me on the very first day, when you told the duchess about your journey as you sat in the hall of white and silver, that she was foreign to your nature and therefore not worthy. She put you to a test then, and you passed it well, but it angered me. And I think it could reasonably be asked quite bluntly whether she herself is

worth all the prodigious tests she's set us, only to come later and make mock in a way that might be appropriate for court flunkeys, but not for a free lord."

"What mock?" asked the Fronauer.

"You may remember," continued Sir Ruy, "that the duchess seemed to assume without further question that you had struck from the dragon's head the violet-colored horn you brought, and she went so far as to put those words into your mouth, whereupon you demurred and told her you'd found the strange object on the path."

"And so it was."

"But she already knew that; that is, she had found out long before that a horn like that was lying on the path in the deep forest and could be had without a fight."

"How is that?" cried the Fronauer, astonished.

"She knew it from me," answered Ruy. "I am the person who struck off the horn you brought with you. I left it lying in the bushes, however, where it had flown from the blow, forgetting the prize altogether in the excitement and exhaustion following the deadly fear I'd been through. I told all that to the duchess, sitting in the same room, even in the same chair as you. 'Where are you keeping that violet-colored horn?' she asked me at the time. 'It's probably still lying in the bushes to the side of the road,' I answered her. Now you can most likely recollect, Sir Gamuret, that you were particularly questioned about where you discovered the horn."

"Yes, I made couth of how the houndes ferreted it."

"So that proved I wasn't just making up stories. But still she would have been happy to get you to make up a story of your own, so she slid the idea right within your grasp that you might have carried off the horn from the dragon yourself. Now understand me well—not a man in the world could be blamed if, wooing a woman, he were to yield to a small weakness like that, especially when it wouldn't have been necessary for him to open his mouth boastfully, but just not to contradict, which, as the ancients observed, signifies agreement. Understand me well, Sir Gamuret—I do not wish to let vain flattery speak here, but still, after such a hard journey it would have taken no guile at all to coax that small and easy weakness out of someone. She might have succeeded with the best of men, but she didn't succeed with you. Believe you me, though, if she had brought it off, she would have shown you no mercy."

"In sooth," said the Fronauer slowly and pensively, "such felt I too to be the way of our curteis lady, and straight from the start, if ne so plainly. Nay, beneath these shadowes would I not lay my head to rest. A man must needs have the way of a boy were he longe to find an honorable pleasance in the like kind."

"You put that very aptly," said Ruy.

"In one thing have I now a better understanding," continued Sir Gamuret, beginning to laugh, "that showed itself to me as we endited verses. Ye recall how, in my first dayes here, we almost geday did make them. 'Twas no true

making of poesy, as we are wont in knightly custom in mine own land and the which it seemeth ye, Sir Ruy, have so full wit of, as I have y-marked; nay, the aldermost of these versets and little songes, withouten neare no exception, were main mockery and haughty overwisdom, which me do liken not in my heart. Now there was one line by the duchess, sung in a blason, as the like songes are clept in French. She sang to the lute, in whose accordes Sir Gauvain taught her. That line was hight,
ëWiser than his own face, and thus not vain..'

or some such near alike. She smiled on me and pursed her lippes. Today for the first time do I see how that signified an arrow at me shot, how she fancied I had understood her test and was on my guard, so ëthus not vain.' Meseemeth now, though, I was much moe dull in my wit than my face."

"And perhaps she thought you'd spoken with me about these matters in the meantime," Ruy interjected.

"Mayhap," said the Fronauer, "and be it as it mought. I let that bundle stay bound, as they say in my land."

"Now then, Sir Gamuret," said Ruy, after the squires had refilled the goblets, "there is something else I wanted to talk over with you in trust and confidence."

"Speak openly; ye shall not find me lacking," cried the Fronauer and set his goblet down.

"There is one heart suffering the deepest anguish over our most estimable lady, which I admit probably neither of us can understand very well—but there it is. If you stand aside, there is help yet."

"And Lidoine?"

"In the case of your courting her, she would understandably—more than understandably—have turned toward the more manly appearance, the higher rank, the more mature age. But it would have been with only half her heart, somewhat like yourself. Our most estimable lady, it seems to me, though, knows how to govern her half a heart with outstanding skill. I would have no desire for such a thing. But if another truly wants to stake his life and death on her, I will gladly help if I can."

"In sundry shires," the Fronauer said slowly and pensively, "did many men whilom believe, good fortune dwelt best in a new house if a living man were walled into the foundation when it was a-building, wherefor some poor caitiff would be used. I would not, though, wish to dwell over a heart buried alive. Say, then, who it is."

"Sir Gauvain."

"Sir Gauvain!" cried the Fronauer, and it wasn't difficult to see his emotion.

"Nay, in sooth have I noted nought thereof. The yonge man must have grit his teeth fast, or else Gamuret is in deede moe dull in his wit than he looketh."

"He has kept himself under control. It merits all honor, for it hasn't been easy."

"Well can I ween it so. Tell me, Sir Ruy, how standen the matters now?"

"It seems to me as though the right moment has come to pay court. Since we are both standing still, she will agree."

"And so an whole heart doth gain a half besides."

They were silent for a time. The Fronauer stood up and went stepping again under the arcades of leaves and flowers, before the blue of the sky, where both had been standing earlier.

"And now a request, Sir Ruy," he then said.

"Granted in advance," answered Ruy, who remained sitting on the couch, as courtly practice dictated.

"Would ye be minded to undertake together with me the wooing of our most estimable lady for this yonge man? Ye wit that twain are needful in the businesse. And shall we do it soon, thereby at last putting all out of doubt and into a goodly ordre here at the court of Montefal?"

"I call that a very good idea," cried Ruy, leaping up and clasping the Fronauer's extended right hand. "Yes, soon! Why not tomorrow?"

"Why not tomorrow?" repeated Gamuret laughing. "Now to Sir Gauvain. Where keepeth he?"

"Here he comes now!" said Ruy and pointed to the path leading along the small stairways and galleries, "or at least his page is coming just now. Run to meet him, Patrick, and announce that Sir Gamuret and I are awaiting Sir Gauvain here on important business."

The little English boy flew along the gravel walk with as much speed as grace.

"He waxeth excellently," remarked the Fronauer, pointing to the running boy.

"That is good and noble blood."

"I shall take him with me when I ride away," said Ruy.

Gauvain stood before the two men, and the composure he'd gained on that bench in the park lay like a smooth, transparent layer over the deep emotion his face was yet revealing underneath. Sir Gamuret at once gave him a friendly handclasp and addressed him.

"Sir Gauvain," he said, "we wyllen here ask ye a boon. 'Tis matter no smaller than that ye mought chosen us twain, Sir Ruy and mine own selfe, in the case ye stooden needful of two suitors for the duchess. Suchlike we hope from you and that by wooing ye will at last give back to the court of Montefal the peace of the which it sore needeth. Nay the one, nay the other of us can do this, and our liking is no least whit thereby. But if ye can do it, then do it, and be assured of our persons in the businesse and our readiness to serve."

"Gentlemen..." stammered Gauvain, comprehending at once. He shook the Fronauer's right hand and then took both his former lord's hands into his own.

"Let's do it tomorrow," said Ruy.

"How will I ever be able to thank you both?" replied Gauvain, making no attempt to hide his heart from all this joy. He took a deep breath. Meantime, they went back outside, where the sun was already beginning to drop lower, causing

more and more of the gardens and battlements to sink down into its flowing, molten gold.

Noise, bright laughter—from women, too—and hurried, running footsteps could now be heard up here from across the terraces. A page came skipping up to them, bowed, and said that the duchess was going to be passing through the gardens just below when she played ball and desired that the three gentlemen, who had been observed up here, should come and take part.

They went down.

The duchess had called a pause in the game and was sitting now on an elevated, semi-circular garden bench made of stone and half overgrown with blue sweet peas. The ladies and gentlemen of the court were standing to her side, at a spot covered with yellow gravel. Colored balls were lying around everywhere, red, blue, and yellow, and the courtiers were holding small baskets partly filled with these balls. The object of the game was to throw them into the baskets, and each of the teams had its own color, which was supposed to be kept unmixed. So the players would all try to catch the balls of their own color and avoid the others, while their opponents would use clever tricks to toss the wrong colors into their baskets.

"Here come the Knights of the Order of the Dragon-Slayer," said Lidoine, as Ruy, Gamuret, and Gauvain, each with his page behind him, stepped before her one at a time and turned an elegant bow from the hips.

This remark gave rise among all present to a merriment they made hardly any effort to conceal; it ran like a small wave through the whole gathering. Lidoine smiled down upon the Fronauer's powerful shoulders as he bent over her hand, and then she examined his squire with sudden attentiveness.

"How dearly," she said, "I would like to have had you dubbed knight, Eric. After all, you manfully endured exactly the same trials as Sir Gauvain. But at fourteen you're still too young for the white sash, I'm afraid. Never mind, though, it will happen some day. Perhaps you will succeed in penetrating the secrets of the Order of the Dragon-Slayer, should you come to enjoy the privilege of being allowed to attend the assemblies of this chapter."

Nobody went so far as to burst out laughing, but the amusement of all the ladies and gentlemen was almost palpable from the rustling of their clothes.

"With alle reverence," said the Fronauer, perhaps a little brusquely, "but of us here, ne'er a one hath slain e'er a dragon."

"Our most estimable lady thinks of us as more austere and solemn than we really are," Sir Ruy interjected with an easy smile. "We have done nothing even remotely like founding an order. We're just a cheerful group of friends who enjoy being together."

"That last part certainly seems correct to me," the duchess remarked. She leaned back on the stone bench for some moments, supporting herself by the palms of her hands and arching the small of her back, while observing the three men, who

were standing next to one another in front of her, as if in closed formation. "It makes me truly happy to see what good terms you're on, gentlemen," she added; and then, "Still, I'd be only too glad to find out your secret."

"What secret does Your Grace mean?" Sir Gauvain asked. He'd leaned forward a little and was looking almost frightened.

"The secret of how you put dragons to flight so reliably, even though you may not kill them."

At this point, the prudent Sir Ruy did not get to speak at the right moment. The Fronauer cut it at once and said, "With reverence, but me weeneth sheer, these beasties have no liking for to eaten men of irone and leather. That be not to their taste."

"Nor to mine," said Lidoine, looking the Fronauer up and down with a brief glance, "even if I'm not a dragon."

Now all the men and women felt permitted to laugh, which they did with something close to relief.

"Back to the game!" cried Lidoine and jumped up. "Sir Gauvain, here's a basket. Take yellow; that's my team."

Innumerable balls now began flying through the air, one after another, like a fountain in colors. No one picked them up. The ones that missed the baskets were left lying where they were, for the servants following behind were carrying an ample supply of replacements. With laughter, running, jumping, frolicking, and general uproar, the game first proceeded along the outer gardens, where the players could hardly see their own tosses any more, as everything was dissolving in the evening sun. Then it made its way inward, down a long echoing arcade with inlaid work of different-colored bricks. The game spilled out over the lawns. The running grew yet faster, the tosses went farther, and the laughter became ever more distant, as if coming from doves here and there among the shrubbery, though it was from the ladies. While it was growing dusk, they took their places at tables; beneath countless lights, mirrors of wine were gleaming dark in shallow goblets, mountains of fruit were glistening with moisture, and bowls were heaped with crabs, red and salty. By the time the moon, greater and stronger than all this noise, touched the lawns and the leafage surrounding the feast, lighted the ponds, opened the gardens' deep eye in a new and different way, the large gathering had already scattered itself about. In the milling crowd, Gauvain felt the duchess take him by the hand, which she held by her burning fingers only and pressed ever tighter for a few moments; his arm grew cold all the way up to the shoulder, into which his heart leapt. Not long afterwards, Ruy brushed past him in the moonlight near a hedge. "I'll see you later, Gauvain," he whispered. "Tomorrow we'll go and pay court. And take a look over there, just so you won't think anyone's making sacrifices for you." With a quick movement of his head he pointed toward the exit of the same lime-tree arcade where Gauvain, so many hours before, had been hesitantly walking beside the marshal, tortured by hope and fear. Now the Fronauer was standing

there, almost totally in darkness, and was kissing a woman with all his heart. The tall, reddish-blond lady he was holding in his arms was to all appearances eager in returning his caresses.

4.

The very next day after the game of ball, Sir Ruy and Sir Gamuret were standing before the duchess's throne in the sparsely furnished hall of white and silver, each with his squire in the colors of his house behind him. The Spanish knight was the spokesman. The customary phrases came out of his mouth, fluent and well turned. The Fronauer, handsome in the style of a northern Apollo, looked as melancholy and as perplexedly solemn as farmers do at a child's funeral.

While Ruy was speaking in front of the state chair into the empty hall—Lidoine kept her eyes lowered on her footstool—he felt the sun shining on him with a strange brightness. It was coming from his right, where window after window opened a high and wide view into the far distance. As he spoke, some new taste came onto his tongue. His eye wandered constantly to a pair of inlaid semi-circles on the marble floor, red stone in gray. As he continued speaking, he looked outside and realized that from these windows one could see all the way out to the forest of Montefal, where he had come from. A brown-green strip in the distance remained in the corner of his eye when he made his glance come back and follow the pattern in the stone floor.

The duchess uttered the usual formulas in reply, all to the effect that Sir Gauvain should be of good cheer. According to the customs of this late courtly period, the sort of words the duchess had just spoken actually amounted to an expression of assent and agreement. While he was at it, Sir Ruy advanced a request for permission to depart, since the other suitor, Sir Gamuret of Fronau, had declared his willingness to remain for the wedding ceremony. It was essential that he do so, in fact, because one of the two lords carrying the courtship forward then had to act as best man.

The duchess cast a brief, blank look over to the free lord of Fronau and thanked him.

The marshal was waiting in the anterooms, along with several members of the Privy Council, and they now congratulated the suitors, who were just coming out of the throne room. Most of them, the Fronauer included, went over to the new fiancé. Only Sir Ruy left, followed by Patrick, to go back to his quarters and to his couch under the roof of leaves.

Here was peace. Blossoms in thick clusters were climbing up the pillars. The warm sky dropped down here from every direction in deep, large pieces and arched freely up and away, beyond the horizon.

Sir Ruy stretched out and closed his eyes. That taste came back onto his tongue as it had done in the throne room. It was bitter and sharp, a taste like herbs that would grow in lush green valleys watered by rivers. At the same time he was feeling under his closed eyelids a change in all the light around him, as though it were thinner but purer and more sparkling. Montefal grew very small in this

light that came shining down on it from outside. The place just lay there, like no more than a stone on a path one is leaving.

It wasn't very long after Sir Ruy had dozed off on his couch and Patrick in his large chair that one of Lidoine's chamberlains came in and reported to Sir Ruy that the duchess particularly wished to give him a farewell greeting before he rode away. So there he was, once more in the hall of white and silver, this time in an embrasure, and opposite him the woman who was at one time supposed to have been the goal of a great adventure, except that it could never have come about, since there were no goals any more to point the way past this one adventure. While she was speaking—saying all that she had to say for no other reason than to keep from giving voice to all that she couldn't dare to say—while she was speaking about how her chancellor had been charged to draw up a document for Sir Ruy which would secure for him all the help he could even imagine from any of her subjects, commoner and noble alike, throughout the length and breadth of her realm, however far his way might lead him through it—while she was speaking, Sir Ruy had his glance turned outward to the forest. It lay against the edge of the sky, first the gray-green foam of the leaf crowns with a warm brown gleam in places here and there, and farther back, somewhat higher up, the dark strip of the evergreens.

"And where will the road take you?" asked Lidoine, looking outside. It sounded more like a bemused uttering of her own pensiveness than a question being asked of another.

Nor did Sir Ruy answer right away. He looked out to the forest again, and beyond it there seemed to him to be a fixed point somewhere, one from which a dark green glow was beaming, though only for a moment. Above the horizon of woodland waves the sky was spread out like blue silk. The air seemed altogether still, everything poured into it as into glass.

"I simply don't know," he said tersely.

Autumn was coming, that was it, and now he knew it all of a sudden. For the past few days he'd been noticing this coming on of autumn—or at least as far as a change of season could be distinctly sensed in a land like southerly gardens. But though the clusters and bunches of bright flowers in the gardens might remain the same, the light and the air around them were changing anyway, gently and as if discreetly.

Two pages entered, carrying between them a long, slender sword on a cushion.

"This is for you, Sir Ruy," said Lidoine. "Bear it with all your dignity, which has proven so true, and with all your courage. And when your eye is resting on the hilt, then you can recall the adventure that brought you hither."

She nodded to him, a barely perceptible tremor passed across her thin face, she held out her hand, and even before he'd been able to straighten back up from his bow, she turned away from him and left through the hall.

Ruy stayed where he was in the embrasure. He took the sword up from the cushion, which the pages were presenting, and drew the blade out of the

scabbard. It was of Arabian work and by far the finest he'd ever held in his hands. Now he noticed that there had been set into the cross-handle at the base of the hilt a piece of the violet-colored horn he'd struck from the dragon's head. And this small part of the dragon's horn was nearly transparent, strange to say, having been worked as it was here, polished into an oval shape like a pearl. Sir Ruy held the hilt up to the window and the autumn sunlight. Down in the deepest midpoint of the polished horn, which now resembled a pale moonstone, there was a dark green glimmering for a moment.

The next morning, his friends Sir Gamuret and Sir Gauvain were waiting for him in the outer courtyard, by the drawbridge, to say goodbye. The carls were already walking the mounts and the pack animals back and forth, and Patrick was inspecting everything in detail one more time and looking very serious about it—the horses' hoofs, the bridles, the riding saddles, and the pack saddles. Sir Ruy came across the courtyard.

It was a warm, clear day. The drawbridge had already been lowered. Outside, past the massive arch in the gate tower made of yellow masonry, a winding white piece of the road's narrow band could be seen, the green countryside beyond it, then finally the horizon, and above it, far off in the distance, a haze on which the contours of a rather large city seemed to etch themselves.

The friends embraced. Gamuret ran his hand through Patrick's red hair and said, "Doe thou the right, my boy, and serve wele thy lord."

The horses were moving around as the riders swung themselves up into the saddles. Patrick held the stirrup for Ruy and then climbed up quickly onto Beaujeu, a present to him from Sir Gauvain.

One last handclasp, bending down from the restive saddle, one last shout from friend to friend, then the arch in the gateway tower echoed with the sound of hoofbeats. Sir Gauvain and Sir Gamuret drew their swords and clashed the blades together over their heads, their arms lifted high. That was their farewell salute. When the riders had galloped out past the gateway and beyond the drawbridge, there burst out high above them, from all the forward battlements, a virtual storm of trumpets, thundering breathlessly, ceaselessly, like a cataract into the ears of those remaining behind in the courtyard. It was the fanfarfe of the free lords of Fanez, which had once rung out for that family's more uncouth forebears at many a rollicking hunting party. This was the last gesture of the duchess; it was she who'd commanded it.

From a good distance away now, out where the flat windings of the road stretched into the countryside, came an answer from the lads' silver horns. They were taking up the old melody.

The road lay in front of the horses' heads. Its ribbon cut into the green and brown. Beyond it, spread out like silk, the sky formed a vault, and into it cut the red line of the lance, supported by Ruy's right stirrup, once again swinging to and fro in a regular motion, whether slowly at a walk or quickly at a trot.

Brushwood began appearing on the left, where it was level, then pasture land, hedgerows, a gabled roof, a house, a village.

They came to a rather large city and decided to take lodging there. At the town hall, where a dance was just in progress, everyone extended a heartfelt and respectful welcome to Sir Ruy and his squire when they stepped into the assembly room. The mayor himself brought Ruy a drink for a welcoming toast, carrying a silver goblet so generous in size that it looked almost like a small cask. And because he couldn't master it all himself, Ruy passed the drink to Patrick, who was standing behind him to the left in a ceremonial doublet that bore Ruy's colors. The little Englishman used both hands to raise the goblet, in which his whole grave-looking face disappeared. The women and girls of the city, who up to now had been directing surreptitious glances toward Sir Ruy, were all touched when they looked over at the squire, and all praised the highly aristocratic bearing this future knight was able to maintain in spite of the silver cask he now had to be holding up to his pale face. It seemed as though they'd all fallen in love with him on the spot. Everybody then learned from Sir Ruy that Patrick would one day govern a whole county back home in England, an area that encompassed more than a few towns like the one they were in here.

The trumpets rang out in the brown assembly room, now filled with red and gold, and Sir Ruy trod a measure with the girls, while Patrick paid his respects to the attractive townswomen. Before it was all over he'd been hugged and even kissed more than once. He remained full of gravity and proper conduct, however, and sought his lord with his eyes the whole time.

Then the white road lay once more in front of the horses' heads, and once more, swinging to and fro, the red lance thrust up into the blue sky, which swelled out its white cloud-banners high above. A village stood by the side of the winding road; a castle sat in the hills.

Whenever they came to a crossroads, Sir Ruy would choose the path on the left, and Patrick took notice that by going this way, after initially diverging through the city, they were now drawing closer and closer to the region of the large forests.

They were riding over a level meadowland with mossy patches and single trees when Sir Ruy broke a long silence by saying, "Do you know how to handle a bow and arrow, Patrick?"

"I do, sir. All of us at home can do that."

"Take a look at that slender tree over there!" said Ruy, and turning backwards to the lads, "You there, bow and arrows for the young lord. Sharp arrows."

Patrick reached for the bow, already tightened, and for the string. Then he aimed briefly, for no longer than it took him to draw the string. The arrow went whizzing away and hit the tree with an echoing sound. One of the carls dismounted, went over, and eased the arrow out of the trunk with the help of his dagger. He checked the tip, and finding it whole and unbent, he tossed the arrow

in among the rest, into the quiver hanging from the saddle, and loosened the bow.

"You're a good marksman," Ruy said thoughtfully. "You'll have to shoot some birds for us."

"What great fun that'll be!" cried Patrick. "Back home we have a different kind of bow from the one I was just using."

"Well, what do yours look like?" asked Ruy.

"They're six feet long, and on the ends they're not curved, but straight. Each end is horned, larger at the top and smaller at the bottom."

"But that way you wouldn't be able to shoot from the saddle."

"No," said Patrick. "And in fact our bowmen fight on foot. Not long ago they even defeated the French king's knights in a great battle."

"Yes," Ruy said pensively, "that was on the day of CrÉcy. In that battle there was a knight who fought very bravely on the side of the French lords, even though he was blind. He lost his life. That knight was a king."

"A king!" cried Patrick. "Of what country?"

"Of Bohemia," said Ruy.

"That's far from here."

"Yes. His name was King John. Today his son wears the imperial crown."

Patrick seemed dumbstruck with amazement.

"The world's a big place!" he said softly after a while.

"Yes, it's a big place," answered Ruy with a smile, and he looked along the ribbon of road, which drew onward in front of the horses' heads.

It began to feel to Patrick after just a few days as if he'd never done anything his whole life except ride into an open distance and as if he were going to have to continue riding forever. The horse's nodding head, the bright path, the blue horizon with all the shapes of the countryside changing before it—placing in turn before his sight hill upon hill, mountain, and open meadow, all coming at him on the left and the right—all this had become to him a familiar bed in which he could now and then fall asleep and still have his eyes open. A certain turmoil he'd often felt, in keeping with his age, seemed banished, simply because he found himself in constant motion now.

It was a peaceful journey. Sir Ruy rode like one—and was conscious of feeling like one—who has left everything in good order behind him. All the rest were sitting back there at Montefal over their own affairs, like persons at a table eating from their plates.

He was the only one who'd risen from the table.

The wind came swooping down from the blue, sunny sky, down from among the bell-shaped white banners of cloud all ruffled and tumbled about, swept over the bushes on the side of the hill, and caught hold lightly, slackening now, in the tops of some of those single trees standing free up here.

They stopped. Ruy bent forward in his saddle. Out beyond him was something like a darker wall, running along far, bordering the meadowland.

"The forest," said Patrick. His eyes had grown shiny and were showing a deep-steel-blue sparkle. He sat up so straight in the saddle that the small of his back was hollow.

"The forest of Montefal," answered Ruy.

The wind sprang up anew and made the triangular pennon at the top of his lance flutter.

That same night they made their camp by a stream. It flowed among the first of the gnarled old border trees, whose branches reached far out across the meadow. The fire was lighted as the sun, exactly opposite them, was setting obliquely over the land and weaving everything into its radiance so that any distant view disappeared.

"We'll have it in front of us when morning breaks," said Ruy, "and then directly behind us in the evening. This gives us a sure direction, one that can lead us back out of the forest any time we want."

The lads, who were tending to the fire and unsaddling the horses, cast long shadows. Single paths of light, glowing deep red, thrust themselves down among the forest trees. The sun sat on the edge of the sky, above the hills, and the horizon, consumed in fire, stood clear and pure as lacquer.

"Sir," said Patrick after some hesitation, walking under the trees with Ruy, "don't you think it's possible that someone might stand a good chance of killing the monster dwelling in the woods here by a well-aimed shot with an arrow that would hit it right in the eye?"

Ruy's face closed over, as if an invisible visor had dropped down before it.

"No," he said sternly. "What you're saying is foolish, and you'd better watch out that you don't try any such thing. I forbid you to, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I understand," said Patrick timidly.

"Fire off a shot here," cried Ruy after a time. "Show that you can hit a target even when it's growing dark."

He pointed to a wide branch that was jutting out from the woods into the setting sun. Three plump white birds were sitting side by side, motionless. Patrick went quickly for his bow. Two arrows hit the mark. Only the third try missed. After it, the last bird set off and flew away slowly into the forest.

"Good work. And there's our evening meal!" laughed Sir Ruy, clapping Patrick on the back.

They broke camp early in the morning and rode into the forest along the stream. The way was easy and their progress good. Whenever they stopped it would always be by the stream, which kept to the same direction the whole time with no change, always flowing straight towards them from out of the forest. Soon the bright pillared halls had once more closed in all around the riders. As far as they could see there were tree trunks and greenery and some brushwood in

places. Patrick looked around a great deal during the first hours of the ride—right, left, ahead, and back. But the forest just kept pressing into his eyes, everywhere exactly the same and completely unmoving. Soon his eyes grew accustomed to the bright trees passing by him, and they found restful sleeping places there, as they'd earlier done out in the open areas.

The journey went on at a leisurely pace. The stream widened and collected here and there. Ponds twinkled up to the warm blue sky between the round openings in the treetops. The riders liked choosing spots like this for their campsites, and the carls would ride the unsaddled horses into the water, splashing away as they washed and drank. The load on the pack animals was growing hardly any lighter. As usual, they were carrying sacks of oats, which they'd recently traded for, but grazing was excellent everywhere in these parts.

Somewhere around the ninth day Sir Ruy gave orders to set up camp more comfortably. They pitched a tent, and the lads even made a table, benches, and couches out of the trunks of some young birches that set their white lines down into the mirror of water here.

All the while, Sir Ruy went roaming with the boy through the forest, mostly in his light hunting coat, reconnoitering on horseback and on foot as well. Farther upstream they soon found the forest rising somewhat, with here and there a spruce tree or a red fir in among the leaf-bearing trees.

After a time, when the campsite was offering a good many comforts, Sir Ruy stopped his roaming around, just staying put and watching the carls. Near the tent, which now looked more like a good-sized cabin, they'd built a kind of baking oven out of stones from the stream and the pond, so that the sack of flour which one of the pack animals had been carrying on its back could now be transformed little by little into something edible, into a comestible to which the name "flatbread" would roughly correspond, but then only if one eye were kept closed. Patrick shot more of those birds, and there were berries, too, some of them even growing exceptionally large here, in fact, and in addition there were hazelnuts and mushrooms. The huge wine-skin, along with more of the oats, was being carried by the destrier this time. Sir Ruy had taken a great deal of trouble in preparing this journey.

Now, however, trouble was what he apparently had none of. He lay on his back, and a heavy chair stood next to his couch, just as at Montefal, except now made out of birch logs covered with blankets and cushions. Patrick's habit was to drop off to sleep in this chair after a game of chess, and when he did so his small, reddish-blond head would sink down onto one of the arms. Often it was so quiet that he would sleep for a long time and not wake up until he heard splashing and paddling coming from the pond, into which his lord had jumped to take a swim, or else a sudden snorting from the grazing horses.

"Aren't you concerned at all about the dragon?" he asked his lord one day.

"No," said Ruy. "Its tracks are nowhere to be found in this part of the forest, with all its leafy trees. That's why I've been going on reconnaissance all around this area, and I found out what I already knew from the first journey. The dragon's realm is the mountainous middle of the forest."

Above the trees the sky's expanse was spread out, hot and blue, more open above the surface of the pond, set swaying by the gently moving treetops. Deer came and went through the forest only a short way off, as noiseless as the slant-falling sun rays when they would reach sideways in between the trees as day was drawing to an end.

What their lord had in mind by staying on here neither Patrick knew nor could the carls guess. The banier seemed abstracted and distant. He said almost nothing. Over the chess board he would spend long periods brooding until his next move, which would then clearly prove that his thoughts hadn't been on the squares and the pieces. Sir Ruy would often lie on his back for hours at a time with his eyes wide open.

One morning, though, he darted straight up from one of those restful spells and ordered his horse and his weapons. The carls went scurrying, and Patrick started to saddle up Beaujeu.

"You wait back here at camp with the others. If it grows dark, have them blow the horns from time to time," said Ruy.

The boy obeyed in silence, the steel blue in his eyes flickered out, and it was as though he were bent over in pain while he held the stirrup for his lord. Ruy now mounted the destrier. Some meat and bread had been packed in the saddlebag, and the gourd bottle with wine was hanging from it. Sir Ruy also had his helmet buckled onto the saddle, and then he rode off, his head with its thick black hair uncovered, his light chain mail opened down to below his chest, and his lance resting on his right stirrup, the way he always had it. For a good while they could see the red line wandering upstream among the tree trunks and hear the horse's hoofbeats. But then it grew completely still. Patrick put his hand up to his eyes.

The leafy forest was still the same after an hour of riding, but the kind of tree began to change as Ruy drew close to a broad clearing that stretched along-side the stream like a pasture. Ruy had already reached this far earlier, with the boy. A brown-russet glow was standing in front of the sky. The birch trees were the first to show that it was autumn. Their smooth white pillars grew dominant for some distance here, a silver harp for the rays of the sun falling through them. Here and there a leaf swayed in the air, and one came to rest in front of Sir Ruy, in the horse's black mane.

The fact was that the banier was riding here through the forest with no goal at all, and the fears that had filled Patrick with such misgiving when they parted weren't even in his mind. His sudden upsurge, his exchanging the quietude of lying still for the activity of riding actually represented two different sides of an

unvarying dreamlike state that had him enveloped here in the saddle just as much as back there on his couch made of birch logs. He sat comfortably, and the strong, heavy horse, stocky in the neck and feeling this trim rider to be practically no burden at all, made its way briskly among the tree trunks.

The ground here was exhaling a powerful, sweet aroma that seemed like the odor of ripening fruit; here and there was already scattered a streak of yellow leaves, which the horse would tread into the earth with its wide hoof.

Ruy wasn't even looking at the path; it was picked out by the sure-footed destrier alone. His gaze was always far ahead, raised up high into the treetops, now so full of color. Whoever could have seen him as he went riding through the forest suffused with light would perhaps have thought that his face was rapt with devotion. It was merely smoothed out and at rest, though, because it had been abandoned by the energies that had once molded its features and guided them in one direction. Any direction now was being provided by the stream, by the horse, whose nature was to stay close to water, by the open spaces of the forest, by the negotiable path, and by the sun dropping down toward him, its warm rays grazing trunks and leaves and branches as well as the wandering red line of the lance on the stirrup and the rider's face, its relaxed features radiant in the light.

Pine trees began appearing on level ground, and the path grew clearer. The white and gold-brown glow of the birches waned away at the rider's back. Among the enormous tree trunks the ground extended like the smooth-polished marble floor of a large hall. Separate bushes stood here and there, gleaming as though from within by the rays of the sun reaching down here. The green glowed from a depth. The stream kept on flowing alongside Ruy, its gurgling and murmuring now clearly audible. The rise of the ground grew steeper.

Ruy stopped, dismounted, and undid the saddle girth. At a level place the stream collected into a pool; in it the horse was now standing with its forehoofs and drinking, while Ruy untied the feed bag from the saddle and took it down. Horse and rider enjoyed their meal in complete calm. All this while, Sir Ruy was feeling his own state of abstractedness to be soothing, like a bath. He patted the horse's neck, stout and shiny, and looked up at the tree trunks, high as towers, between the radiating, interwoven boughs, then out past them into the blue sky so high above him, the topmost small tips of the fir branches standing out dark against it at a dizzying height. The thought of the dragon, into whose territory he must surely have ridden by this point, left him calmer than he himself could understand; such a feeling of safety had to be arising from something more than just the accurate realization that the tremendous noise the beast made when it was on the move, audible from so far away, would in itself be enough to eliminate almost all danger. Beyond that, however, Sir Ruy found himself totally impervious to any conception of menace here—no matter what kind it might be—and more safe and secure in this place than he'd ever felt at Montefal.

As he sat eating and drinking, it occurred to him that the day must be far along by now, and he tried again to find the sun's position. While he had his head tilted back to do so, he smiled all of a sudden. He remembered ordering that the horns should be blown back in camp when darkness came on. That kind of darkness was not to be expected, though, because the moon was at its fullest. That had apparently escaped his notice during the last few nights, but then again it hadn't, for he knew it now after all. He stood up and moved the almost empty feed bag a little closer up to the horse's mouth, absently looking past the animal's head and over to the small mirror of water, seized by the truly remarkable notion that the moon must somehow have shone right past him for him to have overlooked it to such an extent. These days in the forest camp suddenly struck him as very strange.

Single mosquitoes or gnats were humming among the tangled lower boughs of the trees. The stream, turning to the right here into a broad depression, had caused a great deal of greenery to sprout up at the turning, which now, touched by a sun ray piercing through the branches, glowed with light like an emerald held up to a flame.

Sir Ruy carefully tightened the saddle girth, mounted again, and drew out of its scabbard the sword with the piece of the dragon's horn in the pommel. Because he was now diverging from the stream, he used the blade to cut away a patch of bark as he went from tree to tree, marking out a trail that would lead him back to the bend of the stream and from there to his campsite. Before he'd made his mark on even a few dozen trees, however, the forest surprisingly opened out to one of those large round hills all covered with pasture grass. Sir Ruy removed a wider strip of bark from a tree standing to the front at the edge. The bare wood shone out clearly from far off. On the way back he would know to ride between the trees here.

He dropped the sword back into the scabbard. A slight shifting in the shanks, and the horse went in a single motion from a standstill into a smooth gallop, up the gentle slope to the round hilltop.

Ruy stopped in the sunlight, below the triangular pennon, which was fluttering lightly on the lance above him. While he turned his glance this way and that to look over the rising and falling of the hills, covered with trees, grass, or jagged rock, and going off as far as the horizon—while he was looking out into this distance, which had opened up so suddenly before him, it was once again something small that absorbed his attention. This time, it was that the pennon was flying above him on the lance. He'd forgotten to have it put away at the beginning of this journey through the forest. Sir Ruy was just noticing it now, and he was amazed by it. For the second time in one day the simplest things in life had found their way to him as though in a whole new language.

He cast one more glance over the almost familiar landscape and then rode down the other side of the hill toward the forest, which dipped here to form a narrow valley running straight ahead and continuing along in the exact direction from

which Sir Ruy had come. The way back could not possibly be missed. Everywhere here the forest had denser brushwood and more low-lying undergrowth than on the other side. In among the mixture of leaf trees and evergreens that stood here, the rowans were gleaming in their autumn red, barberries were hanging on the bush, and here and there, wherever there was moss in brown-green patches, the broad tops of toadstools peered out. Sir Ruy broke through the underbrush, bushes rustling against his stirrups, and then he was riding along in the valley among trees standing far apart here, the stocky neck of the horse in front of him, above him the pennon on the lance, moving at an unhurried pace, his gaze once more lifted up and lost in the brighter and darker treetops.

The trees receded now. A forest meadow opened, running along the valley floor. Sir Ruy stopped. As far as the rich greenery went, it was dotted with autumn crocuses. Here the coming of another season was again fully revealed. Out at a far distance, probably past the end of the valley, a mountain rose, its jagged crests and projections of rock standing out against the blue silken sky.

Ruy opened and closed his eyes twice. Then he narrowed his eyelids to see more clearly, but he wouldn't have needed to. For this knight, with his experience, there could be no mistaking the movement on the ridge as he stood there against the blue of the sky. It shifted slowly, making its way over the rock and disappearing behind it into the distance, crest by crest.

Sir Ruy took a deep breath. As if a man returning home were stirred by the sight of a familiar rise in the hills, so Ruy was stirred by what he saw moving over the rocky ridge there. He spread his arms as far as bridle and lance allowed, and the pennon dipped far down on the right. He opened his lips, and then something happened that Sir Gamuret had remarked on with such astuteness at the court of Montefal—the free lord of Fanez could sometimes make up verses. But whereas most men of his rank tended to devote this art to a beautiful woman, the object of the poetizing this time was a strangely different one, none other than a monster vanishing in the distance. Talking to himself, and as though out of a dream, he said:

*Abroad once more, you creep like fate itself
Through forests, but yet as if in depths of ocean,
Slow, stolid, silent. By your heavy motion
The dreamer learns through turbulent emotion,
And he who chases vanity.*

*But you give those who chance on you unheeding,
Not burning in the fire of vain endeavor,
A rapt look into depths that lead forever
Down into brown forest eyes, to a life-breeding
Chasm, to their own true center...*

From behind him a new voice chimed in:

*What joy to meet a lord hard at the craft
Of making verses, good old knightly custom.
Two compose better than one, though. Hear this song:*

Ruy turned around, but without taking fright in the least. It was the troubadour. He was sitting on a light bay, his quiver with its many pictures and his bow on the saddle, and was looking affably at Sir Ruy out of his somewhat slanted eyes while his right hand strummed the large double lute he had cradled in his arms. Now came a mighty upsurge of music, filling the forest like an organ, and he sang:

*The distance beckons,
The near ground's aglow,
The forest floor gleams now like high-shining jade.*

*Light sits the sword-blade,
The ringing one; life, begin singing
Your soft song to me. Oh, great secret,
Kiss my mouth now in the deep forest's shade.*

*Delighting in distances, harder at harvest-time,
Ways leading onward, a man's evil star;
To ride through the land by the road's narrow band,
The castles, the villages far.*

The song was still resounding, and the lute strings were humming powerfully. The singer had vanished, though. The last stanza rang out, moving away in the distance, as though from over at the edge of the forest:

*And journeys and fighting,
A tense wait, exciting, for bright-sounding trumpets
At first break of day;
How deftly the hand moves, in effortless play.
To ride through the land by the road's narrow band,
The hillsides, the deep forests far.*

Then it seemed to Sir Ruy that he could see the singer again for a few moments, riding along the left-hand edge of the clearing in the shadow of the trees. But now it was as if the rider over there were no longer playing the lute. Rather, he

seemed to be bowing a fiddle, its piercingly sweet sound rising up with joy and dying away. He was sitting turned around in his saddle and looking over to Sir Ruy. Doing so, his own eye could not be seen, owing to the brilliance of the now slanting sunbeams on the clearing and to the wooded darkness out of which he was looking, so that for just a second Sir Ruy could make out only two empty sockets turned upon him.

Then it grew still.

As if an artist taken by an odd humor had whimsically set himself the task of erecting here, in this isolated place, a monument to the last man ever capable of sighting an actual living dragon deep in the forest—that was how motionless Sir Ruy sat on the motionless horse at the edge of the forest meadow.

It was a handsome statue, topped by the red line of the lance—now vertical again—with the pennon at its tip. The facial features were gentle, smooth, and serene, and the glance was slightly raised, up to where single trees were standing on the mountain ridge beyond the clearing, climbing up, one higher than the last, toward the bare rocks, and silhouetted, no matter the distance, in all the delicate tracery of their branches against the sky in the background.

The rider at the edge of the forest meadow seemed to be carrying himself proudly. He sat bolt upright in the saddle, somewhat stiff and rigid, and that posture went very well with the ample curves of the strong horse's neck. Behind this neck Ruy's breastplate glinted in dull silver. If horse and rider already looked rather solemn anyway, suffused in this complete silence by the slant rays of the sun weaving up in the treetops, the air of strict majesty about them was heightened by the shining light from the purple bridle and the reins resting still in Ruy's richly gloved hand, and yet more by the green-gold luster of the saddle blanket with its pointed ends hanging far down.

The deep silence in this forest, where even birdcalls could be heard only rarely, brought out its own true voice, in from among the trunks and the expanse of air, now more and more gold-burnished in the evening sun, above this enclosed meadow with its violet-colored dots of autumn crocuses, down from under the crags of rock that rose up ever higher to the rear above the forest and that were now reflecting out to untracked distances the glowing sunlight of evening at rest on them—it was the forest's own real voice, with no swaying or falling leaf, no rustling in the underbrush, no quick, dainty scurrying of a squirrel on a tree trunk. No, it was more that the ground itself was alive and breathing, or that the constant seeping down of light from the sky into the treetops had grown audible; beyond that, it was at the very most the whispering of strange little creatures, delicate and scarcely visible, who were sitting at their ease under a toadstool, in its lengthening shadow, with their tiny little hands folded over their stomachs.

These little creatures were the only ones whose glances, fragile as glass and coming from everywhere, were resting on the solitary statue in the woodland clearing. They also saw a gentle smile, the one motion that had played across the

smooth features of the face during the past half hour. This smile was for a man bonded to him in truest friendship, for Gamuret, free lord of Fronau, Protector of Orth and Lord of Weiteneck, and for his question about how a hard journey was supposed to gain sense at its end if the knight errant didn't take the prize.

That was all that had occurred and moved throughout this whole time, except for a gradual shift of the light into the redder blaze of evening, now level with the ground, shining in broad ribbons among the tree trunks, turning the insides of bushes into green-glowing grottoes, and, somewhat higher up, making a cluster of autumn berries gleam out brilliant red on a rowan tree.

The destrier raised its right forehoof, stamped once with a muffled thud, and pawed the ground. When it had done this a second time and its master paid no attention, the big horse turned around to face the direction from which they'd come, and strode off. Sir Ruy's hands remained unmoving.

The horse went slowly through the twilight coming on in the valley, breaking at its end through the underbrush, which rustled against the stirrups, and began climbing the level, even hill all covered with pasture grass, leaving the edge of the forest behind him. They were now riding straight into the setting sun, and the horizon, consumed with fire, cast the woods into the deepest dusk. At the opposite end of the sky from the blaze of sunset the moon had risen, however, and was swimming aloft in the distance behind them, its opulent light, like the luster of a glaze, dropping down everywhere into the valleys and making every dip in the ground stand out as a shadow.

As though he were riding at the head of a solemn funeral cortege lining up behind him in the twofold light of the vanishing and the rising orbs, Sir Ruy made his way slowly over the hill, whose grass shone like fine hair in the moonbeams. This cortege behind him was a rich and highly varied one. The silver shimmer of armor flowed molten in the moonlight over the rich gleam of brocade, the reticent sheen of silk. All of them with their pennons on lances. All of them with their ladies, whose loveliness was enhanced by the moon. Even some of the motley, tawny soldiers of the enemy from the Holy Land were riding along in this procession, with their turbans and their weapons, and they bore some resemblance to the troubadour. But there were troubadours enough in the cortege as it was, so that here and there a song would be struck up, ladies would laugh, and lords would applaud. Yet with each welling up of a song it was as if—being shown forth one more time here, being remembered and understood by all—it was never to be again. Blue-black or blond hair lay against many a white neck under a coif of lace and gold, and the handsome palfreys showed by their gingerly gait how painstakingly they had once been broken in for these ladies from days gone by.

There were even kings in this procession, one of them blind, and because he was another king's guest just when a war broke out, this blind knight rode out with his friend's army, not pursuing any goal of the expedition, but rather the shining,

resplendent star of honor, which appeared to have risen with overpowering brilliance inside his darkened eyes.

Sir Ruy and the front of the cortege had long since moved back down into the forest on the other side (he'd taken no notice at all of his own sword marks on the trees; the destrier had found the way instead) as the colorful and varied middle of the entourage was just slowly crossing the hill in the moonlight. The middle part of the procession was made up of chimeras. Their appearing always portends a change of epochs, and so they had now returned, strange beings fashioned as a combination of goat, wolf, lion, and bat. They marched along, silent and not without dignity, claws lustrous, wings arched, ears pointed, necks tall. And in this same way they walked down the other side of the hill and disappeared in the forest, while above in the moonlight at the top there were still abundant streams and waves, everyone acting with the measured bearing proper to so great an occasion. Even so, this or that comical remark about the monstrosity of the chimeras would be dropped among the ladies and lords riding behind them, and still these beasts remained unmoved, going their way in all the unbending state of their seldom-seen grandeur.

All the woodland wildlife stopped and looked in perplexity, their eyes staring out of their heads like large black heartcherries, since animals of the forest can see everything from the spirit world in the flesh. The passing procession was being followed as well by many an alert, knowing glance from tiny creatures, their sharp little faces peeping out from between the roots of trees or down from the boughs, where they nonchalantly sat in a moonbeam, swinging their little legs.

The silver sound of horns rose up softly to accompany the long funeral procession as it entered the birch woods and the pastureland. Up ahead, the wet fallen leaves were glistening under the hoofs of the destrier like metal shavings. Sir Ruy sat upright in the saddle, his posture proud and forbidding. This was the way he came riding an hour later, just as the horns were blowing again, into the soft yellow flicker of flames between the tall trees, and stopped three paces in front of the fire, as motionless back at the campsite as he had earlier been in the forest. His glance passed over Patrick, over the lads, and ranged up into the treetops. The flickering light played on the horse's shining neck, on Ruy's armor, and on the top of the lance overhead.

Even Patrick, released as he was from genuine agonies of worry by his lord's safe return, just stood there for the time being as though frozen, so strangely did the sight affect him. Then he jumped right to work, along with the carls, helping Sir Ruy out of the saddle and relieving him of his armor. His lord drank two cups full of wine straight down, one of the carls made up his couch in a hurry, and he lay right down and slept until late the next morning.

They struck camp then, making ready to leave the forest, and they began traveling quickly. Always keeping in a downstream direction, the sun opposite them in the evening and glowing through leaves and branches, they arrived after

scarcely a week back at their earlier campsite where the stream flowed out of the forest. The fire flickered in the same spot as before, still charred, near the gnarled border trees.

The journey took them from there on a left turn into open country, riding hither and thither. It was as warm as summer, and the warmth seemed to be growing yet brighter and milder in the lush valleys into which they had now come. There was almost no trace of autumn here. Grass high and thick stretched away, glowing dark green, underneath the trees, and there came to them the piercing but delicate odor of some herb growing everywhere along the slow streams that hereabouts watered the land so profusely; in their reflection the green on the banks darkened and deepened a tone closer to the black and brown at the bottom of the river, picked out by the sun. They rode now at a leisurely pace. Sir Ruy kept silent and often looked away from their path over to the easy, meandering flow of the water.

One morning they came to a windmill, doubtless belonging to the district whose village was nearby. But when they reached the millhouse by the dusty road, the windows and doors were gutted and black, the millworks in ruins, and the stable demolished. The smell of charred wood still hung in the air from the fire, though cut short and put out, probably by rain that had fallen not long before.

The inside of the mill gaped black.

Far off at the horizon there was smoke.

Sir Ruy stayed in the saddle and looked into the ruined house.

"Patrick," he said then, "you ride back with the lads to where we camped yesterday, by the last village. Wait for me there."

The boy, uneasy, couldn't hide the effort it was costing him to keep control. His wide-open eyes were on the horizon and on the cloud of smoke rising there.

Ruy drew his horse up close to Patrick's and clasped the boy's head to his shoulder for a moment.

"Don't worry, Patrick," he said, "I'll scout around carefully and come back soon. The four of us would just be too many." Then he had them get the destrier ready and took up his weapon, helmet, and shield.

For a few minutes they stayed there together in front of the mill, the horses moving around restively. When Ruy shook hands, with Patrick first and then with the carls, there was pure fear in all three pairs of eyes.

The powerful trot of the destrier started down the road, raising dust.

Sir Ruy didn't look left or right. All the same, he couldn't help noticing that the village he came to now appeared empty and burned out. Household goods had been smashed up and thrown out onto the street. In front of some stone steps leading up to a house entrance, a dead man was lying in the sun, by his rustic clothing probably from here and in all likelihood killed right outside his own door. At every turn could be seen those marks of rampage and violence that packs of robbers generally leave behind. The destrier stepped over the broken pieces of a spinning wheel in the middle of the road.

Sir Ruy rode along fast in his full weapons, galloping toward the cloud of smoke. From the entrance to the village he could already see the robbers with their horses on the town square wreaking violence, some knocking the farmers down and beating them, while others threw wardrobes and chests out of the windows and went on rummaging through their spilled-out contents.

But now they must have seen the man in armor on the heavy horse, because they all went flying for their saddles at once. Sir Ruy placed his lance into the crook of his arm and raised his shield high. "Montefal! Montefal!" rang out his battle cry. When he attacked, it was as though he were riding through a field of brilliant white banners, torn and crackling in the wind. These banners lashed about to the right and left above him like banderols, and each bore a phrase from the oath he had once sworn:

To help the afflicted...

To protect widows and orphans...

He could hardly understand the meaning; these were only words, words in golden letters which pure need made him recognize.

The sharply spurred destrier broke in among the enemy with a lunge. Two horses fell, and then a third saddle was empty, but the fourth man was able to wrest the lance out of the knight's grasp. As if all the power of youth were boiling up in Sir Ruy one more time only to subside to dust forever, so this fight carried him along as the sword of the duchess of Montefal with its piece of the dragon's horn flew out of its scabbard after the red lance was broken. They wrestled hard back and forth, with sword blades locked, as though each wanted to wrench his opponent's arm out of the shoulder. By now, though, the farmers had plucked up their courage and began banding together, perhaps thinking that more help would be coming, and with that the whole robber horde suddenly galloped away, fleeing the village by the other end. Sir Ruy wanted to go in pursuit. To his own astonishment, however, he fell off his horse, quickly and smoothly, on the right side. Then he felt someone raising his head and cooling his lips with a drink of water, but he could now see no more than a darkly glimmering green, as strong as the sun, on the brown bed of a last gentle waning.

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