

The Two Lovers

Marie de France

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In Normandy, of old, there fell an adventure oft recounted; 't is a tale of two children who loved one another, and how both through their love died. Of this the Bretons made a lay and called it "Les Dous Amanz."

Know ye that in Neustria, which we call Normandy, is a great mountain marvellous high, and on its summit lie the two lovers. Near to this mountain on one side, a king with great care and counsel built him a city; lord he was of the Pistreis, and because of his folk he called the town Pitres. Still has the name endured, and there to this day may ye see houses and city; and all that region, as is well known, men call the Vale of Pitres.

This king had a daughter, a fair damsel and a courteous; no other child had he, and much he loved and cherished her. She was sought for in marriage by many a great lord, who would gladly have taken her to wife; but the king would give her to none, for that he could not bear to part with her. No other companion had he, but kept her with him night and day, for since the death of the queen she was his only solace. Yet many a one held it ill done on his part, and even his own household blamed him for it. And when he knew that men talked thereof, much it grieved and troubled him; and he began to bethink him how he might so contrive that none would willingly seek his daughter. And he let it be known far and wide, that whosoever would have the maiden, must know one thing of a sooth: it was decreed and appointed that her suitor should carry her in his arms, with no stop for rest upon the way, to the summit of the mountain without the city. When the news thereof were made known and spread abroad through the land, many a one assayed the feat but none might achieve it. Some there were who with much striving carried her midway up the mountain; then they could go no farther but must needs let be. So for a long space the damsel remained unwedded, and no man would ask her in marriage.

In that same land was a damoiseau, son to a count he was, and full fresh and fair; and much he strove in well doing that he might have praise above all others. He frequented the king's court and often sojourned there; and he grew to love the king's daughter, and oftentimes besought her that she would grant him her favour, and love him with all her love. And in that he was brave and courteous, and much praised of the king, she granted him her grace, and in all humility he rendered her thanks therefor.

Often they held speech together, and loyally each loved the other, yet they concealed it as best they might, that none should know thereof.

Grievous was this time to them, but the youth bethought him that it was better to endure this evil than to make haste over much only to fail; yet was he brought to sore anguish through love. And it fell on a time that the damoiseau who was so fair and valiant came unto his love, and speaking, made her his plaint. Piteously he besought her that she should flee thence with him, for he could no longer endure his pain; yet he knew full well that were he to ask her of her father, he loved her so much he would give her to none who did not first bear her in his arms to the top of the mountain. Then the damsel made answer: "Dear heart, I know full well you could not carry me so far, for your strength is not great enough; yet were I to flee with you my father would suffer so great dolour and grief it were torment for him to live; and of a sooth I hold him so dear and love him so much I would not willingly bring him sorrow. Other counsel must you find, for to this I will not hearken. But in Salerno I have a kinswoman, a rich dame and a wealthy; more than thirty years has she dwelt there, and she is so practised in the art of physic that she is wise in medicines and healing. So learned is she in herbs and roots, that if you will but go to her, taking with you letters from me, and tell her all your plight, she will give you help and counsel. Such electuaries will she prepare for you, and such cordials will she give you that they will comfort you and renew your strength. When you return again to this land, seek ye my father. He will deem you but a child, and will show you the covenant whereby he will give me to no man or take thought of none, save him who shall carry me in his arms to the top of the mountain, without once resting by the way; and ye shall freely agree with him that only in such wise may ye win me."

The youth hearkened to the words and the counsel of the damsel; full glad was he thereof, and gave her his thanks. And thereafter he asked leave of her; and straightway returned into his own land, and speedily gathered together money and rich stuffs, palfreys and sumpters; and took with him such of his men as were most worthy of trust. So he goeth to Salerno, and seeketh speech with the aunt of his sweet friend, and giveth her the letter. And when she had read it from end to end, she kept him with her till he had told her all his plight. Thereafter she strengthened him with medicines, and gave him such a draught that were he ever so weary and spent and fordone,

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it would yet refresh all his body, alike his bones and his sinews, that so soon as he had drunk it, he would have his full strength again. Then, bearing the draught in a phial, he returned to his own country. joyous and glad of heart was the damoiseau when he was come again to his own land; yet he lingered not in his domain, but went straightway to the king to ask of him his daughter, and that he might take her and carry her up the mountain. The king did not deny him, yet he deemed it but folly, for the youth was young of age and many a sage and valiant man had assayed the feat, yet none might achieve it. But he named and appointed a day, and summoned all his friends and vassals, and all those whom he could assemble together, nor would he suffer any to disobey his call. So, for the sake of the king's daughter and the youth who would assay the adventure of carrying her to the top of the mountain, they came from all the country round about. The damsel on her part prepared herself, and to lighten her weight oft she fasted and forebore from meat, for she would fain help her friend.

On the appointed day, of all those that came thither the damoiseau was the first, nor did he forget his draught. Then into the meadow beside the Seine, among all the great folk there assembled, the king led forth his daughter; no garment wore she save her shift only. And so the youth took her in his arms; and in that he knew she would not betray him, he gave her the phial that contained the potion, to carry in her hand.

Yet I fear it will avail him nought, for he hath in him no measure.

With the damsel in his arms he set off at a swift pace, and climbed midway up the mountain, and for the joy that he had of her he took no thought of his draught. But she felt that he was growing weary, and said: "Dear heart, I pray you drink. I know that ye are weary; drink and renew your strength." But the youth made answer: "Sweet, I feel my heart strong within me; for no price would I stop long enough to drink, while I am yet able to go three steps. The folk would cry out to us, and their noise would confound me, and so might they hinder us. I will not stop here." But when he had gone two thirds of the way, he was near to falling. Ofttimes the maid besought him, "Dear heart, drink now the potion." But he would not heed or hearken to her, and in sore pain he yet pressed forward. Thus he came at last to the top of the mountain, but so wearied and spent was he that there he fell down and rose up no more, for his heart failed within him.

The maid as she looked on her love deemed him in a swoon; so she knelt down at his side, and sought to give him the drink. But he could speak no word to her, and so he died even as I tell you. With great outcry she lamented him, and she cast from her the vessel containing the potion that it was scattered abroad. By it the mount was well sprinkled, whereby all the land and country was much bettered, for many a precious herb hath been found there that sprang from that potion.

But now speak we again of the damsel. Never was she so woful as now in losing her love. She lieth down beside him, and taketh him in her arms and straineth him close, and many a time she kisseth him on eyes and mouth, till her grief for him pierceth her heart. There died the maid who had been so valiant, wise and fair.

Now when the king and those that were awaiting them saw that the twain came not again, they followed after and found them. And there the king fell to the ground in a swoon; and when he recovered his speech he made great lament, and so did all the stranger folk. Three days they kept the twain above earth; and caused two coffins of marble to be brought, and in them they laid the two lovers, and by the counsel of all, buried them upon the top of the mountain; and then they all went their ways.

Because of the adventure of these twain the mountain is still called by the name of Les Deux Amants. So it fell, even as I have told you, and the Bretons turned it into a lay.