

Gottfried von Strassburg



TRISTAN

Canto I, Part I



*Translated by
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There once in Parmenie prevailed a lord
Yet in th' dawn of his prime, as I have read;
Born peer of kings and landed equally;
Of ample charm, he was vowed generous,
Honest, yet mirthful, kind, and loyal;
He, a delight to all who served him
And glory of his kinsmen, was th' firm hope
Of that land. Of all the chivalry and virtue
Which a lord must possess, he had primacy,
But for one flaw: he'd demand manifest
The will of his exalting heart, and nothing
Less would he tolerate of life than this.
By that one defect he fin'ly devised
For himself, and for those he loved, dire sorrow.
So has it ever been: youth's effulgent
Ascent upon the potent sprig of fortune
Will bear, in time, the pome of hubris.
T'forbear misuse, t'pardon a fault, as all
Who attain in age renown must, issued not
In his regard; to prove power 'gainst power,
Thus evidence his own distinction,
Proceeded thus his youthful ardency.

Such a life of reprisal, levied
Moreover in coin of the realm, will never
Endure. Heaven knows what a man must learn
Of restraint, for those men who will condemn

All fault must ever offend, and thus suffer
Ruinous fortune. As a bear conveys
Each blow a blow, 'til by blows he is
O'er-laden and subsides, thus too befell
Riwalin's life. Though not malice-provoked
Was th' prompt setting of his unample years,
But the impression and the standard cast
Of that very deficiency in term;
He dispensed with his will as all yet young
E'er have and e'er will: in improvidence.
By brashly so pursuing life, it was
That very life to overwhelm and cast
His early demise. For, as life ascended
And, so like the day-star, over th' world he blithely
Surveyed, he believed life would advance
E'er-sweet and linger in joy; yet as his star
Impelled to the assurance of long bliss,
Th' evening, concealed formerly t'him, arrived,
And th' morning star of his life ceased to shine.

As to his true name, as revealed in former
Portrayals of this tale, it was Riwalin,
His surname Kanelengres. Many have
Professed this same lord a Lohnosian,
And king of Lohnois, yet Thomas, so read
In all th'tales of that land, plainly asserts
Riwalin birthed to Parmenie and, further,

A salutary lord obliged in fealty
To a Breton duke of th' name of Morgan.

Nigh to three years of knighthood fared, distinctions
Drawn by Riwalin were those of an honor
Near entire, and nigh-mastery the art
Of chivalry, with all the resources
Requisite t' warfare: land, and men, and more,
Distinguishment. Then, whether was he
Provoked t' necessity or was he
Possessed by arrogance, the tales tell not,
But lord Riwalin, as resisting
Some assailment, cast his force athwart
The duke Morgan, to make war. And he rode
Upon his foe's lands in such strength t' prevail,
And to secure divers fortifications.
Towns too he forced to yield, and t'ransome
Both lives and goods; thereby amassing
Such arms in such numbers that he his will
might further impose over all that Morgan
Could mark his claim. Yet of Riwalin too
Were losses rejoined; many men of worth
Then were passed, for Morgan primed and moved
His means and men to meet Riwalin
Time and again. So fare all men in war
And chivalry: losses attend each gain,
And each then is repaid. Thusly had Morgan

Served in accord his rival, and took him
Likewise fortifications, towns, and men.
Though but brief this availed him, for Riwalin
So pressed his gathered might upon his foe
Until no longer could Morgan withstand,
And was compelled to flee to his most
Formidable strongholds. These Riwalin
Invested with all secured battalions,
In such power that each skirmish then launched
In defense of these citadels, before
Riwalin's might broke, and were thrust through th' gates.
Moreover, he would hold before the walls
Tournies to flaunt in finest chivalry
The celebration of his triumph.
Riwalin set his idling force upon
Those lands too, t' pillage and to flame until
The devastation so compelled his rival
That parley was his only respite.
Entreaties then were offered, and the foes
Consented to a year's accord of peace,
And with oaths thusly they confirmed their truce.
Riwalin returned then t' his home content,
Endowed with the wealth such victors may claim;
And with him rode the men who labored for
His aims, graced by honor and their lord.

Though the idle pleasures of home sated not

Riwalin long; adventure had compelled so
His noble heart that its want he could not
Endure t' prolong. So set he t' journey
Once more, pursuing adventure's keen return.
Attiring himself in great elegance,
As to his station and honor belonged,
And aboard a ship had he then borne a year's
Necessities in baggage and in stores,
For oft and long accounted in his presence
Had been the tales of a renowned court,
Supreme in honor and in grace; as told,
A paradigm of chivalry, and joy
To all noble hearts: the court of Mark of Cornwall,
England's own king; therefore resolved t' sail
Riwalin there. By heritage was Mark
Lord of the court of Cornwall; as to England,
Affairs proceeded thusly: he had claimed
The throne of that realm since the Saxons
Of Gales had expelled th' Britons from the land
Of Birttany, heretofore hailed as England.
Having attained their end and seized the land,
Each Saxon lord assumed himself a king,
And rended they the holds accordingly
To petty kingdoms, thereby rousing
A broad misfortune; for each battled each,
Disputing ever over the land's bounty.
This discord finally resolved in the

Ascent of Mark, as dissolved th' petty kingdoms
In willing pledge to their new liege, whom
Thereafter they served in all things, so mighty
And feared was he. Moreover, th' annals
Of neighboring realms give account of Mark
As esteemed over all kings of that age.
It's here Riwalin longed to be; he here
Aspired t' devote a year, and with that valued
King, to acquire what virtues he may,
And further apply him to chivalry,
Gracing his manners with fresh elegance.
His noble heart believed that were he
T' acquaint himself with th' customs of lands foreign,
He may therein refine his nature.
So, with his cherished Parmenie entrusted,
People and lands, to his most loyal
Of marshals, Rual li Foitenant, Riwalin
Took sail immediately, joined by but nine
Companions.

In due time they arrived
Nigh th' coast of Cornwall, consigning dispatch
T' accounce their presence and intent at court,
Yet were informed that Mark, with choice retainers,
To Tintagel had sojourned, t' pleasure in
The heath and th' wealth of spring, for respite
From th' cares of court. Alt' ring his route to there

Be received, took to sail Riwalin
Once more, and he there met Mark in as noble
A bearing as foretold by all. The King
Received Riwalin and companions
In magnificent distinction; indeed, honors
Bestowed upon Riwalin in reception
Surpassed in grandeur all preceding
In other courts. Delighted by such grace
And courtesy as there met him, he trusted
It was God Himself who'd brought him to these people,
And to this king, who'd proved accounts of his
Virtue and majesty were each sincerely
Conveyed, so proper and so courtly
Were his ways. This he took then to pronounce
To Mark in praise, and issued th'purpose
Of his stay. Th'king in kind, attending to
The etiquette in discourse there evinced
In his guest, welcomed him with charity;
Thus commenced in joy his term at Tintagel.

Riwalin found in th'court pleasures profound,
And th'court, in turn, was replete with his praises;
Of poor and of rich, of servants and lords,
No guest was ever valued more, nor so
Esteemed by all. Moreover, such acclaims
To his honor were well deserved, for virtuous
Riwalin was ever content to serve

All in his friendship; whether of his person
Or of his wealth, he gave as he well knew how.
So he lived gladly, revered and devoted
To his daily pursuit of virtue,
Until the day arrived of th'king's great fair.

At the annual behest of Mark, across
The kingdom of England to Cornwall fared
Th'assorted knights of that land, to display
Their prowess in tourney. Accompanied
Beside arrived beves of gracious,
Alluring ladies in magnificent
Carriage in convoy. Festivities
Had been appointed to that so abrupt
Yet venerated term of May-tide's bloom;
Those four weeks in which blossom forth the florets
And shoots from th'sodden earth, and th'gentle breath
Of spring renews our hearts with its warm soothe.
In such a meadow and by such a stream
As fair as ever glimpsed in any age
Before or since, set Mark his annual fair.
Indeed, the spring had wrought its charm with care
Upon the mead; of th'caroling of wood-birds,
The budding of flower and leaf, and th'lush
Grasses in their advance, the springtide meadow
Teemed with delight. All man may wish to find
In such a time, May dutifully issued.

An awning of shade from the daylight,
The linden near the fountain, and the breeze
So leisurely cooling, contented Mark
And his companions, each according to
Its nature. May's attendant, th'greensward,
Had donned its favored vestment of the season,
As flowers gleaned in th'eyes of the mead's guests.
The fragrant lilac and viburnum too
Imbued the air to impress such affection
And arouse gratitude for th'sanctity
Of not merely that precious tide, but life.
The hymn of bird-song, dear anointer
Of both the ears and spirit t'wonderment,
Delivered in abundant phrasing
Through valley and hill; th'blessèd nightingale
Especially, whose call is th'very
Anticipation of love's bliss, e'er trilled
Of its abode in the brush flow'ring,
To elevate the noble hearts of that
So noble assembly.

In their revelry

Lodged Mark and his retinue, each according
To his whim; in abundance lodged the affluent,
In elegance th'refined; some sheltered in
Their silk pavilions, others 'neath the bloom.
Under that linden awning of leafed boughs

Had sheltered many, and no guest e'er lodged
In such delight as there. Moreover,
Profuse cuisine and wares of noblest aspect,
Such as each guest may wish, had been arranged
For the occasion. Thusly began Mark's
May fair, and all lovers of spectacle
Indeed attended to indulge themselves there:
Some to regard the many ladies,
Others attended to the dancing;
Some to remark upon the buhurt,
Others accounted the contests of jousting.
All each attendant may've desired he there
Obtained in plenty, for all of the years
Of life's so pleasurable prime there vied
For revelry at th'fair; and Mark, that good,
Munificent king, had supplied in th'ring
Of his pavilions a keen wonder
Divorced from th'stature of all other ladies:
His sister, Blanchefluer. It is said of
This maiden's beauty that no man possessing
Vitality could regard her and in
His innermost not then further esteem
Both woman and virtue. This paradigm
Of feminine grace 'pon the heath obliged
To wandering the eyes of num'rous men,
Averting much attention, and enliv'ning
The noble hearts attendant. Everywhere

Idling upon the mead were unique beauties
Beside Blanchefluer, and each brought gaiety
To the occasion merely by their presence.

When the lea was with poled and roped pavilions
Of silk and cloth devised, and when retainers
And patrons alike gathered upon th' site,
Both claimants young and tested men then met
And set to commence th' contest of buhurt.
Revered Mark too arrived t' take part, and his
Companion with, Riwalin, s' near the two
Had become. Of Riwalin's entourage
Of nine, he set them t' perform as they may,
And invite bother honor and fame t' their home
Of Parmenie. Rife were the chargers,
And richly bedecked, as the buhurt set
To begin; riding forth and duly draped
In silks and cendale of snow-white or yellow,
Of red, of green, violet, or blue; then others
In checkered or in particolored fashion;
Each too adorned of divers accent.
Th' knights in procession donned garments so cut
And pleated in prime splendor, and the season's
Bloom too adorned th' display in garlands
Woven to deck the players.

So in the fullness

Of spring commenced in Tintagel the contest,
As aligned in parallel columns combatants
In the field. Then, at once rushed all upon
Each other t'clash, recoil, and then meander
In test, to clash once more, continuing so
Until in time the battle beside Blanchefluer
Had come, where she and ladies aside gathered
To survey; for so stately th'bearing
Of these knights, so superbly did they ride,
That many in delight assayed their fray.
Whatever courage and feats there displayed,
It was Riwalin, as though ordained,
Outriv'ling all. Th'ladies, moreover,
Adduced that none had rode in s'masterful
Command of horse and chivalry as he,
And remarked they at once his every virtue,
Often reflecting upon th'graceful progress
Of his motions, th'control of shield and spear,
His elegance in dress, nobility in
Demeanor, the charm of his character,
And the good fortune of the woman
Who would by him sustain. Blanchefluer, displaying
As though upon th'field her attention
Remained, had yet marked all uttered of him,
And revealed not her thoughts; for in her reserved
Yet ardent heart, she knew that her companions
Had but freely conferred their praise, as freely

She knew such praise would then elapse; as praise,
Though silent in her, would through ardor last;
For secretly had she received him
Into the kingdom of her heart, and there,
Abruptly enthroned, had prevailed his image,
To reign o'er her with scepter and with crown.

Th'buhurt meanwhile had resolved, as dispersed
Each knight as his bliss might compel his progress.
It then befell Riwalin, as proceeding
Through the brimmed mead, came there upon the gathr'ing
'Round Blanchefluer and her retinue of maidens.
Impressed as though her eyes upon him lingered,
He spoke, "Ah, Dieu vous sauve, belle;" and "Merci,"
was her reply. Continuing ablush,
Declaimed she then, "May the grace of the Lord
Our God, of Whom our hearts are favored with pardon,
Offer such grace to you, my lord. Indeed,
I gratefully tender my thanks to you,
Dear sir, yet not neglecting now this one
Discourtesy of which we yet must speak."
"Ah, treasured lady, what offense to you
May've I committed?" inquired he then.
"A dear companion of mine, th'dearest,
In fact, that I have ever yet obtained,
Has suffered grievance by your hand, my lord,
And dear grievance it is." 'My God,' thought he,

'Who could it be that I have so agrieved
As to displease this pleasant woman?
What shame now on me may she name?' and pursuing
Further the proof of her words, he surmised
There was, perhaps, some kinsmen of her's 'pon
Whom had he once devised some harm in th'course
Of th'buhurt. But no, th'one friend named nearest her
Was her own heart, suff'ring then by Riwalin.
Yet nought of this did he wholly yet know,
And thus he spoke, "Fair woman, I would yet
Attain some grace in your regard; if truly
Have I obliged such, please do decree
As you wish; how may I atone this misdeed
And please you? Any command you have willed,
This I shall welcome." And sweetly she spoke,
"For this loss I do not fully hate you,
Yet neither fully do I love you.
As to the amends you may offer to please
My grievance, this shall we address, perhaps,
In th'course of time."

As he bowed to take leave,
Secretely spoke she from the innermost
Of her young heart, 'Dear friend, God bless you.'
From then were they immersed, ever the other
In the thoughts of the other; in Riwalin,
Blanchefluer; and in Blanchefluer, Riwalin.

