THE ORDEAL

I say quite openly that no nettle has so sharp a sting as a sour neighbour, nor is there a peril so great as a false housemate. This is what I call false: the man who shows his friend the face of a friend and is his enemy at heart. Such comradship is terrible, for all the time he has honey in his mouth, but venom on his sting! Such venomous spite puffs up ill fortune for his friend in all that he sees or hears, and one cannot keep anything safe from him. On the other hand, when a man lays his snares for his enemy openly I do not account it falseness. As long as he remains an overt foe he does not do too much harm. But when he feigns friendship for a man, let his friend be on his guard!

This is what Melot and Marjodoc did. With deceit in their hearts they often sought Tristan’s company, and, the one like the other, offered him their devoted friendship with cunning and dissembling. But Tristan had been amply warned, and he warned Isolde in turn. “Now, queen of my heart,” he said, “guard yourself and me in what you say and do. We are beset by great dangers. There are two poisonous snakes in the guise of doves who with their suave flattery never leave our sides — be on the alert for them, dear Queen! For when one’s housemates are faced like doves and tailed like the serpent-brood, one should cross oneself before the hailstorm and say a prayer against sudden death! Dearest lady, lovely Isolde, be much on your guard against Melot the Snake and Marjodoc the Cur! Indeed, that is what they were — the one a snake, the other a cur, who were always laying their traps for the two lovers, whatever they did, wherever they went, like cur and snake. Morning and night they treacherously worked upon Mark with schemes and accusations till he began to waver in his love again and suspect the lovers once more and lay traps and make trial of their intimacy.

One day, on the advice of his false counsellors, Mark had himself bled, and Tristan and Isolde, too. They had no suspicion that any sort of trouble was being prepared for them and were entirely off their guard. Thus the King’s intimate circle lay pleasurably at ease in their room.*

On the evening of the following day, when the household had dispersed and Mark had gone to bed, there was no one in the chamber but Mark, Isolde, Tristan, Melot, Brangane, and one young lady-in-waiting, as had been planned beforehand. Moreover, the light of the candles had been masked behind some tapestries to dim their brightness. When the bell for matins sounded, Mark silently dressed himself, absorbed in his thoughts as he was, and told Melot to get up and go to matins with him. When Mark had left his bed, Melot took some flour and sprinkled it on the floor so that if anyone should step to or away from the bed his coming or going could be traced. This done, they both went to church, where their observance had little concern with prayer.

Meanwhile, Brangane had at once seen the stratagem from the flour. She crept along to Tristan, warned him, and lay down again.

This trap was mortal pain for Tristan. His desire for the woman was at its height and his heart yearned in his body as to how he could get to her. He acted in keeping with the saying that passion should be without eyes, and love know no fear when it is in deadly earnest. ‘Alas,’ he thought, ‘God in Heaven, what shall I do in face of this cursed trap? This gamble is for high stakes!’ He stood up in his bed and looked all about him to see by what means he could get there. Now there was light enough for him to see the flour at once, but he judged the two positions too far apart for a leap; yet on the other hand he dared not walk there. He was nevertheless impelled to commit himself to the more promising alternative. He placed his feet together and ran hard at his heels. Love-blind Tristan made his gallant charge too far beyond his strength; he leapt on to the bed, yet lost his gamble, for his vein opened and this caused him much suffering and trouble in the outcome. His blood stained the bed and its linen, as is the way with blood, dyeing

* Strange to say, being bled had pleasant and companionable associations at this time.
it here, there, and everywhere. He lay there for the briefest space, till silks and gold brocades, bed and linen, were altogether soiled. He leapt back to his bed as he had come and lay in anxious thought till the bright day dawned.

Mark was soon back and gazing down at the floor. He examined his trap and found no trace. But when he went along and studied the bed, he saw blood everywhere. This caused him grave disquiet.

‘How now, your Majesty,’ asked Mark, ‘what is the meaning of this? How did this blood get here?’

‘My vein opened, and it bled from it. It has only just stopped bleeding’

Then, as if in fun, he turned to examine Tristan. ‘Up you get, lord Tristan!’ he said, and threw back the coverlet and found blood here as there.

At this Mark fell silent and said not a word. He left Tristan lying there and turned away. His thoughts and all his mind grew heavy with it. He pondered and pondered, like a man for whom no pleasant day has dawned. Indeed, he had chased and all but caught up with his mortal sorrow, yet he had no other knowledge of their secret and the true state of affairs than he was able to see from the blood. But this evidence was slender. Thus he was now yoked again to the doubts and suspicions which he had utterly renounced. Having found the floor before the bed untrod, he imagined that he was free of misdemeanour from his nephew. But again, finding the Queen and his bed all bloody, he was at once assailed by dark thoughts and ill humour, as always happens to wavering. Amid these doubts he did not know what to do. He believed one thing, he believed another. He did not know what he wanted or what he should believe. He had just found Love’s guilty traces in his bed, though not before it, and was thus told the truth and denied it. With these two, truth and untruth, he was deceived. He suspected both alternatives, yet both eluded him. He neither wished the two of them guilty, nor wished them free of guilt. This was a cause of lively grief to that waverer.

Mark, lost man that he was, was now weighed down more than ever before by pondering on how he might find a way out and compose his doubts, how he might throw off his load of uncertainty and wean the court from the suspicions with which it was so busy concerning his wife and nephew. He summoned his great nobles, to whom he looked for loyalty, and acquainted them with his troubles. He told them how the rumour had sprung up at court, and that he was much afraid for his marriage and his honour, and he declared that in view of how the allegation against them had been made public and noised about the land, he felt no inclination to show favour to the Queen or to be on terms of intimacy with her till she had publicly vindicated her innocence and conjugal fidelity towards him, and that he was seeking their general advice as to how he could eliminate all doubt concerning her delinquency, one way or the other, in a manner consonant with his honour.

His kinsmen and vassals advised him forthwith to hold a council at London in England and make known his troubles to the clergy, to those shrewd prelates so learned in canon law.

The council was promptly called to meet in London after Whit-sun week when May was drawing to a close. A great number of clergy and laymen arrived on the appointed day in answer to the royal summons. And now Mark and Isolde arrived, both weighed down with sorrow and fear—Isolde in great fear of losing her life and her honour, Mark in great sorrow that through his wife Isolde he might cripple his happiness and noble reputation.

When Mark had taken his seat at the council he complained to his great nobles of the vexation to which this slander was subjecting him and begged them earnestly for the sake of God and of their honour, if they had the skill, to devise some remedy whereby he could exact satisfaction and justice for this delict and settle the issue in one sense or another. Many aired their views on this topic, some well, others ill, one man this way, another that.

Then one of the great lords present at the council rose to his feet, a man well fitted by sagacity and age to offer good advice, the Bishop of the Thames, who was old and distinguished in appearance and as grey as he was wise.

‘My lord King, hear me,’ said the bishop, leaning over his crook.

‘You have summoned us, the nobles of England, into your presence to hear our loyal advice, in dire need of it as you are. I am one of the great nobles, too, Sire. I have my place among them, and am of an age that I may well act on my own responsibility, and say what I have to say. Let each man speak for himself. Your majesty, I will
tell you my mind, and if it meets with your approval and pleases you, be persuaded by me and follow my advice.

'Alas, madam, your nobility and your good sense shall not be overcome by the base words of an unbalanced mind. I cannot allow your reason to be weakened by the counsel of such a person. A white man does not act as the black words of this tramp would have you believe. You, Fryas, have shown yourself to be a fool in your dealings with me. I shall not be swayed by your lies.'

Fryas turned pale and stammered, 'I beg your pardon, my lord. I was only speaking in jest, for it is well known that the truth is sometimes concealed by jests. I'm sorry if I offended you in any way.'

'Offended? You could not have offended me more than you already have. You have shown yourself to be unworthy of my trust and respect. Your words are baseless and your actions are base. You are a disgrace to your name and a danger to others. Go back to your village and think long and hard about the lessons I have taught you.'

Fryas bowed his head and turned to leave. 'Very well, my lord. I shall reflect on my words and actions and strive to improve. Thank you for your advice.'

The King watched him go, unable to wipe the smile from his face. He had shown Fryas the power of his words and the importance of respect. It was a lesson that Fryas would never forget.
Isolde, however, remained alone with her fears and her sorrows - fears and sorrows that gave her little peace. She feared for her honour and she was harassed by the secret anxiety that she would have to whitewash her falseness. With these two cares she did not know what to do: she confided them to Christ, the Merciful, who is helpful when one is in trouble. With prayer and fasting she commenced all her anguish most urgently to Him. Meanwhile she had propounded to her secret self a ruse which presumed very far upon her Maker's courtesy. She wrote and sent a letter to Tristan which told him to come to Carleon early on the appointed day when he could seize his chance, as she was about to land, and to watch out for her on the shore.

This was duly done. Tristan repaired there in pilgrim's garb. He had stained and blistered his face and disfigured his body and clothes. When Mark and Isolde arrived and made land there, the Queen saw him and recognized him at once. And when the ship put to shore she commanded that, if the pilgrim were halt and strong enough, they were to ask him in God's name to carry her across from the ship's gangway to the harbour; for at such a time, she said, she was averse to being carried by a knight. Accordingly, they all called out, 'Come here, good man, and carry my lady ashore!' He did as he was bidden, he took his lady the Queen in his arms and carried her back to land. Isolde lost no time in whispering to him that when he reached the shore he was to tumble head-long to the ground with her, whatever might become of him.

This Tristan duly did. When he came to the shore and stepped on to dry land the wayfarer dropped to the ground, falling as if by accident, so that his fall brought him to rest lying in the Queen's lap and arms. Without a moment's delay a crowd of attendants ran up with sticks and staves and were about to set upon him. 'No, no, stop!' said Isolde. 'The pilgrim has every excuse - he is feeble and infirm, and fell accidentally!' They now thanked her and warmly commended her, and praised her in their hearts for not punishing the poor man harshly. 'Would it be surprising if this pilgrim wished to frolic with me?' asked Isolde with a smile. They set this down in her favour as a mark of her virtue and breeding, and many spoke highly in praise of her. Mark observed the whole incident and heard various things that were said. 'I do not know how it will end,' continued Isolde. 'You have all clearly seen that I cannot lawfully maintain that no man other than Mark found his way into my arms or had his couch in my lap.' With much banter about this bold rogue they set out towards Carleon.

There were many barons, priests, and knights and a great crowd of commoners there. The bishops and prelates who were saying mass and sanctifying the proceedings quickly dispatched their business. The iron was laid in the fire. The good Queen Isolde had given away her silver, her gold, her jewellery, and all the clothes and palfreys she had, to win God's favour, so that He might overlook her very real trespasses and restore her to her honour.

Meanwhile Isolde had arrived at the minster and had heard mass with deep devotion. The wise, good lady's worship was most pious; she wore a rough hair-shirt next her skin and above it a short woollen robe which failed to reach to her slender ankles by more than a hand's breadth. Her sleeves were folded back right to the elbow; her arms and feet were bare. Many eyes observed her, many hearts felt sorrow and pity for her. Her garment and her figure attracted much attention. And now the reliquary was brought, on which she was to swear. She was ordered forthwith to make known to God and the world how guilty she was of the sins that were alleged against her. Isolde had surrendered her life and honour utterly to God's mercy. She stretched out her hand to take the oath upon the relics with fearful heart, as well she might, and rendered up heart and hand to the grace of God, for Him to keep and preserve.

Now there were a number present who were so very unmanfully as to wish to phrase the Queen's oath in a way that aimed at her downfall. That bitter-gall, Marjodic the Steward, plotted her ruin in many devious ways, but there were no few who treated her courteously and gave things a favourable turn for her. Thus they wrangled from side to side as to what her oath should be. One man wished her ill, another well, as people do in such matters.

'My lord King,' said the Queen, 'my oath must be worded to your pleasure and satisfaction, whatever any of them says. Therefore see for yourself whether, in my acts and utterances, I frame my oath to your liking. These people give too much advice. Hear the oath which I mean to swear: 'That no man in the world had carnal knowledge of me or lay in my arms or beseech me but you, always
excepting the poor pilgrim whom, with your own eyes, you saw lying in my arms." I can offer no purgation concerning him. So help me God and all the Saints that be, to a happy and auspicious outcome to this judgement! If I have not said enough, Sire, I will modify my oath one way or another as you instruct me.'

'I think this will suffice, ma'am, so far as I can see," answered the King. 'Now take the iron in your hand and, within the terms that you have named to us, may God help you in your need!'

'Amen!' said fair Isolde. In the name of God she laid hold of the iron, carried it, and was not burned.

Thus it was made manifest and confirmed to all the world that Christ in His great virtue is placed as a windblown sleeve. He falls into place and clings, whichever way you try Him, closely and smoothly, as He is bound to do. He is at the beck of every heart for honest deeds or fraud. Be it deadly earnest or a game, He is just as you would have Him. This was amply revealed in the facile Queen. She was saved by her guile and by the doctored oath that went flying up to God, with the result that she redeemed her honour and was again much beloved of her lord Mark, and was praised, lauded, and esteemed among the people. Whenever the King observed that her heart was set on anything, he sanctioned it at once. He accorded her honour and rich gifts. His heart and mind were centred only upon her, wholly and without guile.

His doubts and suspicions had been set aside once more.

When Isolde’s companion Tristan had carried her ashore at Carleon and done as she had asked him, he at once sailed from England to Duke Gilan in Swales. Gilan was young, wealthy, and single, as free as he was gay. Tristan was heartily welcome to him, since Gilan had heard a great deal in former days about his exploits and strange adventures. He was solicitous of Tristan’s honour, and of his happiness and ease. Whatever offered a prospect of pleasing him Gilan sought most assiduously. Only melancholy Tristan was always fettered by his thoughts, moping and brooding on his fate.

One day, as Tristan sat beside Gilan, lost in doleful thoughts, he happened to sigh without knowing it. But Gilan noticed it and sent for his little dog Petitcreiu, his heart’s delight and balm to his eyes, which had been sent to him from Avalon. His command was duly performed — a rich and noble purple, most rare and wonderful and suitably broad, was spread on the table before him with a tiny dog upon it. It was an enchantment, so I heard, and had been sent to the Duke by a goddess from the fairy land of Avalon as a token of love and affection. It had been so ingeniously conceived in respect of two of its qualities, namely its colour and magic powers, that there was never a tongue so eloquent or heart so discerning that they could describe its beauty and nature. Its colour had been compounded with such rare skill that none could really tell what it was. When you looked at its breast it was so many-coloured that you would not have said otherwise than that it was whiter than snow; but at the loins it was greener than clover; one flank was redder than scarlet, the other yellower than saffron; underneath, it resembled azure, but above there was a mixture so finely blended that no one hue stood out from all the others — for here was neither green, nor red, nor white, nor black, nor yellow, nor blue, and yet a touch of