



o. *Morien*

Translated by Jesse Weston

Herein does the adventure tell of a knight who was named Morien. Some of the books give us to know that he was Perceval's son, and some say that he was son to Agloval, who was Perceval's brother, so that he was nephew unto that good knight. Now we find it written for a truth that Perceval and Galahad alike died virgin knights in the quest of the Holy Grail; and for that cause I say of Perceval that in truth he was not Morien's father, but that rather was Morien his brother's son. And of a Moorish princess was he begotten at that time when Agloval sought far and wide for Lancelot, who was lost, as you have read here before.

I hazard that he who made the tale of Lancelot and set it in rhyme forgot, and was heedless of, the fair adventure of Morien. I marvel much that they who were skilled in verse and the making of rhymes did not bring the story to its rightful ending.

[The narrative opens with an injured knight coming to King Arthur's court; Gawain, who is very skilled in "leech-craft" in this story,¹ heals him, and the knight says he was injured by a knight dressed entirely in red, whose accent seemed Welsh. Arthur decides this must have been Sir Perceval, and Lancelot and Gawain vow to seek Perceval.]

The adventure tells us that in the morning, so soon as it was day, they rode forth together through many a waste land, over many a heath and high hill, down many a valley to seek Sir Perceval, but little did it profit them, for of him might they learn nothing. Thus were they very vexed.

On the ninth day there came riding towards them a knight on a handsome steed, and well armed. He was all black, even as I tell you: his head, his body, and his hands were all black, save only his teeth. His shield and his armour were even those of a Moor, and black as a raven. He rode his steed at full gallop, with many a forward bound. When he beheld the knights, and drew near to them, and the one had greeted the other, he cried aloud to Sir Lancelot: "Knight, now give me to know of one thing which I desire, or guard yourself against my spear. The truth will I know. I shall tell you here my custom; what knight soever I may meet, were he stronger than five men, and I knew it well, yet would I not hold my hand for fear or favour, but he should answer me, or I should fight against him. Now, Sir Knight, give me answer, by your troth, so truly as you know, to that which I shall ask you, and delay not, otherwise may you well rue it!"

Said Sir Lancelot: "I would rather be dead than that a knight should force me to do that to which I had no mind—so would

¹ The representation of Gawain as an expert in medical skill is an interesting feature that appears to belong to early tradition. The references in the poem before us are the most copious and explicit, but we also find the same accomplishment referred to in the romance of *Lancelot et la cerf au pied blanc* (D. L. Vol. ii.1. 22825) where Gawain instructs the physician as to the proper treatment of Lancelot's wounds; the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach (Book X. 1. 104) also refers to this tradition.

the shame be equal. Hold to your custom if you wish; I would rather fight than let you be, if only to challenge your pride. I ask for nothing but peace, yet will I chastise your discourtesy, or die in that task!"

The Moor, who was angry with Sir Lancelot, did not delay, but reined back his steed, and laid his spear in rest as one who was keen to fight. Sir Gawain drew to one side, since the two would fight, and thought in himself, as was right and courteous, that it was foolish, and the custom of no good knight, for two to fall on one man, since life stood not at stake. There would be time enough for him to take a hand in the fight, and stand by his comrade, if he saw him hard pressed. Therefore stood Sir Gawain still, as one who had no mind to fight, nor to break the laws of courtesy. Nevertheless he deemed that this was a devil rather than a man whom they had come upon! Had they not heard him call upon God, no man had dared face him, deeming that he was the devil or one of his fellows out of hell, because his steed was so great, and he was taller even than Sir Lancelot, and entirely black, as I said afore.

Thus came the two together, the Moor and Sir Lancelot; each had a great spear and broke it in two, as a reed, yet neither felled the other; but each remained upon his steed. Then each drew his sword from its sheath, and set to work with it, and truly, had not God Himself so willed it both would have died there, so mighty were their strokes that by right no man should escape alive. Had it been midnight, and dark as night, yet you would have seen the grass and the flowers by the light of the sparks that flew so thickly from helmet and sword and fell upon the earth. The smith that wrought their weapons—I say did not make them poorly: he merited a fairer reward than Arthur ever gave to any man for such work.

Neither the knight nor Sir Lancelot would yield to the other until Sir Gawain parted them by his prayer, and made them withdraw from each other, for he thought it would be a great pity if either there were slain; yet so deadly were the blows that they smote, and so great their wrath, that he saw well that if the strife endured but a short while longer they would receive such wounds as would be the death of one, or perhaps of both.

When Sir Gawain had parted the two, whom he saw to be weary enough, he spoke to the Moor, "It is an ill custom, this to which you are given; you shall here renounce it. Had you but asked in a courteous way that which you have a mind to know, this knight would have heard, and would have answered of right goodwill; he would not have refused, that I know well. You are both rash and foolish, and one of you two, you, or he, shall lose by it, and from that do I dissent, if you do not show better reason."

The Moor said, "Why do you speak thus to me? Do you think that I am afraid to fight against both of you; or that I have held my hand through fear of death? Even if one of you were Sir Lancelot, and the other King Arthur's sister's son (these two are praised above all in Arthur's court, as I have often heard, though never have I seen them), yet would I not yield a foot to them!"

Then thought Sir Gawain to himself, "We were foolish and unwise, since we failed to show courtesy to one who praises us so highly."

But Sir Lancelot had great lust either to win the fight or to play it to a loss, and Sir Gawain, who was well aware of this, prayed him straightaway, by the love he had for him, and for King Arthur his lord, that for their honour he should hold his peace awhile, and let the Moor say his will. "And this I charge you, by the faith you owe to my lady, my uncle's wife."

Sir Lancelot spoke: "Truly, had you not thus charged me I should have avenged myself or here been slain, since this knight forced the strife upon me without cause, and loaded me with blows; but since you so conjure me, I am he that will harm no man for profit to myself unless he first attack me. And since it seems good to you I will even lay the strife in respite. God grant me good counsel therein, since I do it not for cowardice, but for love of you and for your prayer."

Thus stood the three in the open, and Sir Gawain spoke to the Moor: "You are foolish for doing such things. Now, neither we nor you are harmed, yet you might easily do that which should cost you your life. Tell me what you seek, and I will give you good counsel. If I may, I shall tell you that which you should courteously have asked of this knight, who never before was so hard fought by any man to the point where he fell from his steed."

The Moor said, "You say well. Now I pray you, by all who own the laws of knighthood, and by Sir Gawain above all, since he is reckoned the best, he and Sir Lancelot, wherever it may be, in whatever need, far and wide throughout the world, of all men are these two most praised (I myself know nothing except that which I have heard tell), do you know anything about Sir Agloval, brother to Sir Perceval of Wales? I have asked many about him, this long while past; I have ridden here and there for half a year looking for him. For this have I dared many a peril, and here will I lie dead unless you two tell me, in friendship or in fight, if you know anything of Sir Agloval. Now we have had enough of this talk; it is time you answer, or we take up our strife once again, and see which of us the sooner has had enough."

Sir Gawain listened, and smiled at the black knight's speech, and spoke truthfully: "Now tell me what you want of

Sir Agloval that you thus seek him, and I will tell you what I know.”

And the Moor answered straightaway, “So I will tell you all. Sir Agloval is my father; it was he begot me. I will tell you more: it happened a while ago as you may now learn, when he came into the land of the Moors. There, through his valiant deeds, he won the heart of a maiden. She was my mother, by my troth. So far went the matter between them through their words and through his courtesy, and because he was so fair to look upon, that she gave him all his will—which brought her small reward, and great sorrow. Each plighted their troth to the other before she granted him her favours. She was ill-counselled, for he abandoned her more than fourteen years ago. And when he parted from her, she bore me, though he knew it not. He told her his quest, about which he was sorely troubled, and how it came about that he had to leave her. And that will I now tell you. My father was seeking a noble knight, who was lost at that time, and who was called Sir Lancelot.¹ Still more may I tell you: he told my mother that he and many of his fellows had sworn a great oath to seek Sir Lancelot, and their quest should endure two years or more if they did not find him, or could learn no tidings of him. Nor should they tarry in any land more than one night or two. This vexed my father sorely, that for this cause, and to keep his oath, he had to leave my mother. But before he departed he swore to her that he would return when he had achieved his quest; but he did not keep his oath. Thus have I sought him in many a court. All this did my lady mother tell me, and also of the troth-plight. Little good has it done me that he is my father, and that he swore to my mother, before he departed, that for her honour, and for her profit, he would return to her without fail. If he lives, God send him shame (this I pray in all humility), but if he is already dead, then may God forgive him his sins. I and my mother are disinherited, since he has deserted us, of great goods and of a fair heritage—we have lost altogether that which fell to her from her father. It has been denied us by the law of the land. I was also greatly shamed, for they called me fatherless, and I could show naught against it, nor tell them who it was that sired me, since my father had fled. So, I managed to be dubbed knight, and swore a

great oath (and I would be reluctant to break it) that never should I meet a knight but I would fight him, or he should tell me if he happened to know any tidings of my father, so that I might learn somewhat concerning him. If I met my own brother, I would not break my oath, nor my vow; and until now have I kept it well, nor broken it by my fault. And here would I ask you two, if you want to part from me in friendship, that you tell me what you may know of him, out and out, by your troth, and with that we will end this talk. Otherwise let us end this matter even as we began it, for there lives no knight under the sun for whom I would break my oath, whether it were for my hurt, or for my profit.”

Then was there neither of the two, Sir Gawain nor Sir Lancelot, but the tears fell from their eyes when they heard the knight’s tale. Such pity had they for him, they waxed pale, and red, and uncovered their faces, when they heard his sad story.

Sir Lancelot said, “By my good days, nevermore will I be wrathful, nor bear rancour against you for any lack of courtesy; you need no longer stand on guard against me. My heart is not evil towards you, and we will counsel you well.”

Then the black knight was blithe, and drew near to Sir Lancelot, and bared his head, which was black as pitch. That was the fashion of his land—Moors are black as burnt brands. But in all that men would praise in a knight he was fair, after his kind.² Though he was black, what was he the worse? In him was nothing unsightly: he was taller by half a foot than any knight who stood beside him, and as yet was he scarcely more than a child! It pleased him so much when he heard them speak thus of Sir Agloval that he knelt straightaway on the earth; but Sir Gawain raised him up, and told him their tidings, how they were but as messengers, and belonged to the court of King Arthur, which was of high renown, and that they rode at that time seeking Sir Perceval and Sir Agloval, since the king desired them both. “And his mind is to see and speak with them. We will try by any means to persuade those noble knights to return straightaway to the king’s court, if it be so that they will ride with us (further will we not exert ourselves—it is of our good will, and their pleasure). Thereby shall the king be the more honoured. They belong to the Round Table, and have done so of long time; both are of the

1 To which particular adventure of Lancelot this refers it is not easy to decide; on more than one occasion he disappears from court, and the knights, headed by Gawain, ride in quest of him.

2 Weston’s translation here is unclear. “After his kind” could mean “in the manner of his people” or “after his nature.” The Dutch reads “na sire wisen,” which is more accurately translated as “in their manner”; “with the subject in the preceding line (datmen an ridders soude prisén), the line indicates his knightly appearance and traits” (personal correspondence with B.M.J. Caers, 21 March 2022). Thanks also to Aiden Tait and Krista A. Murchison. — KEC

king's court, and knights of high renown. Now if you will work wisely, and shun your own harm, you will mount, and ride to King Arthur's court, and delay not. I hope in God that Sir Agloval shall come there within a short time, or that you shall hear tidings of him; for news from afar comes there very often. Go to court without tarrying—the king will receive you well. Tell him, and let him know who you are, and whence you come, and the quest upon which you ride; he will not let you depart before we come and bring with us your father, should God allow us to prosper. If you ride thus through the land, and fight with every knight whom you may meet, you will need great good fortune to win every conflict without mischance or ill-hap! They who will be ever fighting, and never avoid a combat, if they hold such custom for long, though at first they escape, yet shall they find their master, who will possibly change their mood! Now, Sir Knight, do our bidding, for your own honour's sake, and ride to court; grant us this grace, for before you have stayed a long time there I hope that you shall behold your father or receive tidings of him. But until that time stay at the court; there shall you be well at ease in many ways. Now promise us this. We shall seek your father, and if we find him, and God give us honour in our quest, then will we return as swiftly as may be, and please you and the king!"

When the Moor heard these words he laughed with heart and mouth (his teeth were white as chalk, otherwise was he altogether black), and he spoke, "God our Father reward you, noble knights, for the good will and the honour you have done me, and also for the great comfort with which you have lightened my heart that long has been all too heavy. If my steed does not fail me, I shall ride where you bid me to this king whom you praise so highly."

With that he pledged to the knights hand and knighthood, and called God to witness that he would do their bidding, faithfully, and without dispute, so long as he might live.

Then Sir Lancelot said: "Knight, if you should be in any need, when you come into Arthur's land—I suppose it is all unknown to you—only speak of us two whom you see here and men shall do you nothing but honour and courtesy, wherever you come, in any place. And when you come to the king, before you tell him anything else, say that you have seen and have spoken with us; and believe me, without fail, you shall be well received!"

The Moor spoke, "It is well said—God reward you for this courtesy. But if it is your will and pleasing to you that I knew the names of you two, then in truth I would be happier!"

Then straightaway Sir Gawain let him know who they were, and what they were called; and the Moor made no delay, but

fell on his knees before them. Sir Gawain raised him up, but the Moor laid his hands together and spoke, "God the Father of all, and Ruler of the World, grant that I may amend my misdoing to your honour. Sir Lancelot, very dear lord, I own myself right guilty, for I did evil, and nothing else!"

Sir Gawain said, "Don't take to heart what has happened here; it shall not be the worse for you."

Sir Gawain and Sir Lancelot were both mounted upon their steeds. The Moor said, "This is a labour lost. Such good knights as you are, since you at this time go to seek my father, by the power of our Lord I will not stay behind. It would be shameful if I did. I shall ride with you two!"

Sir Gawain said: "Then you must lay aside all outrageousness, and ride peaceably on your way, and whatever knight shall meet you, and greet you courteously, you shall greet him and let him pass on his way without strife or contention; and be his friend if he does you no wrong—this do I counsel you straightly. But he who is fierce and fell towards you or towards another, on him shall you prove your prowess, and humble his pride, if you can. And honour all women, and keep them from shame, first and last, as best you may. Be courteous and of gentle bearing to all you meet who are well-mannered toward you, and he who has no love for virtue, against him spare neither sword, nor spear, nor shield!"

The Moor said, "Since you will it so, I will at your bidding forbear, otherwise might I rue it! May God be gracious to me."

So they all three together rode till they came to a parting of the ways where stood a fair cross, and on which were letters red as blood. Sir Gawain was learned in clerkly lore: he read the letters saying that here was the border of Arthur's land, and let any man who came to the cross, and who bore the name of knight, think him well, since he might not ride far without strife and conflict, and the finding of such adventures as might easily turn to his harm, or even to his death—the land was of such customs.

[The three knights decide to follow separate paths, the better to accomplish their quest. Morien chooses the road that leads to the sea (included in the print version of *BAMAL*); Gawain goes to the waste lands, and Lancelot chooses the path with a marauding beast. Gawain, after various adventures, is captured and brought back to the cross.]

Gariet and Morien find Agloval, who accepts Morien as his son. Various adventures ensue; the knights reunite and together defeat the King of Ireland.]

The adventure tells that when the strife was ended, and Arthur's land once more at peace, Morien decided that he would make his father be wedded to the lady, his mother; and he prayed his uncle to journey with him if he would, and Sir Perceval was willing. Further, said Sir Gawain and Sir Lancelot, that they would ride with them for honour and for good fellowship. For this, Morien thanked them. Thus they left and went their way towards the hermitage. They rode blithely in company, telling of many things that had happened here and elsewhere, until they came to the seashore, where they took ship and crossed over. When they had passed the water they came straightway to Perceval's uncle, who received them with goodwill.

By this time Sir Agloval, who had been wounded, was whole, and Morien asked him straightaway if he were healed, and would he now keep the oath which he had before sworn to his mother. Sir Agloval answered that he was whole and sound, and ready to go: "The troth that I swore to your mother I will keep whenever it pleases you. As God is my witness I am altogether ready to do this."

Sir Perceval said, "Then why delay? Your son is so good a knight, and stout a warrior, that you may well thank heaven that you sired him. Get ready straightaway, and we will go with you. Sir Gawain and Sir Lancelot have come here in faith and good fellowship, and with us they will journey to the Moorish land."

Then was there no longer delaying, but they made themselves ready for the journey, and went their way with Sir Morien, who knew the road better than any man of them all. They rode so long that they came there; and when they of the land heard tell how

Morien had brought his father with him, they assembled themselves together, and some were in favour of refusing them entry into the kingdom, since they would rather keep his heritage for themselves. But when Morien heard this, he became so wrathful that he drew his sword and rode among them where there was the greatest crowd, and slew there fifteen of the nobles who wanted to deny him his inheritance.

When the others knew of this they came to him and sought his grace, and yielded to him all his heritage, and gave it into the hand of his mother, and became her men, to hold their lands from then on from her. When this was done, and they had proclaimed her queen over all the kingdom of the Moors, then they held the bridal feast of Sir Agloval and the queen, and thus they were wedded to each other. There was bliss and great rejoicing for fourteen days: even until nightfall they held a high feast with open doors; never a portal was shut. There was feasting and great merriment; all were well served, with everything on earth that they might desire. Many rich gifts were given, good steeds, raiments of fair colours, many shillings, many pounds, great plenty of all things by which men may the more comfortably live. The minstrels and the heralds received great largesse, for there was gold enough; each had that which he desired.

There would Sir Gawain and Sir Lancelot stay until the feast was ended—you can be sure that Sir Perceval and Sir Agloval the bridegroom prayed them to honour the bridal, and this they did, in a very courteous manner. No man of them all, poor or rich, but had enough and to spare.