This is the adventure of the rich and noble knight Sir Lanval, even as the Breton lay recounts it. Marie de France (12th c). Trans. Jessie L. Weston (1910).

The valiant and courteous King, Arthur, was sojourning at Carduel, because of the Picts and the Scots who had greatly destroyed the land, for they were in the kingdom of Logres and often wrought mischief therein.

In Carduel, at Pentecost, the King held his summer court, and gave rich gifts to the counts, the barons, and all the knights of the Round Table. Never before in all the world were such gifts given. Honours and lands he shared forth to all, save to one alone, of those who served him.

This was Sir Lanval; of him and his the King thought not; and yet all men loved him, for worthy he was, free of hand, very valiant, and fair to look upon. Had any ill happened to this knight, his fellows would have been but ill-pleased.

Lanval was son to a king of high descent, but his heritage was far hence in a distant land; he was of the household of King Arthur, but all his money was spent, for the King gave him nothing, and nothing would Lanval ask from him. But now Sir Lanval was much perplexed, very sorrowful, and heavy of heart. Nor need ye wonder at it, for one who is a stranger and without counsel is but sorrowful in a foreign land when he knows not where to seek for aid.

This knight of whom I tell ye, who had served the King so well, one day mounted his horse and rode forth for diversion. He left the city behind him, and came all alone into a fair meadow through which ran a swift water. As he rode downwards to the stream, his horse shivered beneath him. Then the knight dismounted, and loosening the girth let the steed go free to feed at its will on the grass of the meadow. Then folding his mantle beneath his head he laid himself down; but his thoughts were troubled by his ill fortune, and as he lay on the grass he knew nothing that might pleasure him.

Suddenly, as he looked downward towards the bank of the river, he saw two maidens coming towards him; never before had he seen maidens so fair. They were richly clad in robes of purple grey, and their faces were wondrous beautiful. The elder bore in her hands a basin of gold finely wrought (indeed it is but truth I tell you); the other held a snow-white towel.

They came straight to where the knight was lying, and Lanval, who was
well taught in courteous ways, sprang to his feet in their presence. Then they saluted him, and delivered to him their message. "Sir Lanval," said the elder, "my lady, who is most fair and courteous, has sent us to you, for she wills that you shall return with us. See, her pavilion is near at hand, we will lead you thither in all safety."

Then Lanval went with them, taking no thought for his steed, which was grazing beside him in the meadow. The maidens led him to the tent, rich it was and well placed. Not even the Queen Semiramis in the days of her greatest wealth and power and wisdom, nor the Emperor Octavian, could have equalled from their treasures the drapery alone.

Above the tent was an eagle of gold, its worth I know not how to tell you; neither can I tell that of the silken cords and shining lances which upheld the tent; there is no king under heaven who could purchase its equal, let him offer what he would for it.

Within this pavilion was a maiden, of beauty surpassing even that of the lily and the new-blown rose, when they flower in the fair summer-tide. She lay upon a rich couch, the covering of which was worth the price of a castle, her fair and gracious body clothed only in a simple vest. Her costly mantle of white ermine, covered with purple of Alexandria, had she cast from her for the heat, and face and throat and neck were whiter than flower of the thorn. Then the maiden called the knight to her, and he came near and seated himself beside the couch.

"Lanval," she said, "fair friend, for you have I come forth from my own land; even from Lains have I come to seek you. If you be of very truth valiant and courteous then neither emperor, count nor king have known such joy as shall be yours, for I love you above all things."

Then Love smote him swiftly, and seized and kindled his heart, and he answered:

"Fair lady, if it so please you, and such joy may be my portion that you deign to love me, then be the thing folly or wisdom you can command nothing that I will not do to the utmost of my power. All your wishes will I fulfil, for you I will renounce my folk and my land, nor will I ever ask to leave you, if that be what you most desire of me."

When the maiden heard him whom she could love well speak thus she granted him all her heart and her love.

And now was Lanval in the way to good fortune. A gift the lady bestowed upon him: there should be nothing so costly but that it might be his if he so willed it. Let him give or spend as freely as he would
he should always have enough for his need. Happy indeed was Lanval, for the more largely he spent the more gold and silver should he have.

"Friend," said the maiden, "of one thing must I now warn you, nay more, I command and pray you, reveal this your adventure to no man. The reason will I tell you; if this our love be known you would lose me for ever, never again might you look upon me, never again embrace me."

Then he answered that he would keep faithfully all that she should command him.

Thus were the two together even till the vespertide, and if his lady would have consented fain would Lanval have remained longer.

"Friend," said she, "rise up, no longer may you linger here, you must go and I must remain. But one thing will I tell you, when you wish to speak with me (and I would that may ever be when a knight may meet his lady without shame and without reproach) I shall be ever there at your will, but no man save you shall see me, or hear me speak."

When the knight heard that he was joyful, and he kissed his lady and rose up, and the maidens who had led him to the tent brought him new and rich garments, and when he was clad in them there was no fairer knight under heaven. Then they brought him water for his hands, and a towel whereon to dry them, and laid food before him, and he supped with his lady. Courteously were they served, and great was the joy of Sir Lanval, for ever and again his love kissed him and he embraced her tenderly.

When they were risen from supper his horse was brought to him, saddled and bridled; right well had they tended it. Then the knight took leave of his lady, and mounted and rode towards the city; but often he looked behind him, for he marvelled greatly at all that had befallen him, and he rode ever thinking of his adventure, amazed and half-doubting, for he scarcely knew what the end thereof should be.

Then he entered his hostel and found all his men well clad, and he held great state but knew not whence the money came to him. In all the city there was no knight that had need of lodging but Lanval made him come unto him and gave him rich service. Lanval gave costly, gifts; Lanval ransomed prisoners; Lanval clothed the minstrels; Lanval lavished wealth and honours; there was neither friend nor stranger to whom he gave not gifts. Great were his joy and gladness, for whether by day or by night he might full often look upon his lady, and all things were at his commandment.
Now in the selfsame year, after the feast of St. John, thirty of the knights went forth to disport themselves in a meadow, below the tower wherein the queen had her lodging. With them went Sir Gawain and his cousin, the gallant Iwein. Then said Gawain, the fair and courteous, who was loved of all: "Pardieu, my lords, we do ill in that we have not brought with us our companion, Sir Lanval, who is so free-handed and courteous, and son to so rich a king." Then they turned back to his hostelry, and by their prayers persuaded Lanval to come with them.

It so chanced that the queen leant forth from an open casement, and three of her chosen ladies with her. She looked upon Sir Lanval and knew him. Then she called one of her ladies, and bade her command the fairest and most graceful of her maidens to make ready and come forth with her to the meadow. Thirty or more she took with her, and descended the stairway of the tower. The knights were joyful at their coming, and hastened to meet them, and took them by the hand with all courtesy. But Sir Lanval went apart from the others, for the time seemed long to him ere he could see his lady, kiss her, and hold her in his arms. All other joys were but small to him if he had not that one delight of his heart.

When the queen saw him alone she went straight towards him, and seated herself beside him; then, calling him by his name, she opened her heart to him.

"Lanval," she said, "greatly have I honoured, cherished and loved you. All my love is yours if you will have it, and if I thus grant you my favour, then ought you to be joyful indeed."

"Lady," said the knight, "let me be; I have small desire of your love. Long have I served King Arthur; I will not now deny my faith. Neither for you nor for your love will I betray my liege lord."

The queen was angry, and in her wrath she spoke scoffingly. "They but spake the truth," she said, "who told me that you knew not how to love. Coward and traitor, false knight, my lord has done ill to suffer you so long about him; he loses much by it, to my thinking."

When Sir Lanval heard that he was wroth, and answered her swiftly, and by misfortune he said that of which he afterwards repented sorely. "Lady," he said, "you have been ill-advised. I love and I am loved by one who deserves the prize of beauty above all whom I know. One thing I will tell you, hear and mark it well; one of her serving maidens, even the meanest among them, is worth more than you, my lady queen, in face and figure, in beauty, wisdom, and goodness."
Then the queen rose up and went weeping to her chamber, shamed and
generated that Lanval should have thus insulted her. She laid herself
down on her bed as if sick; never, she said, would she arise off it
till the king did justice on the plaint she would lay before him.

King Arthur came back from the woods after a fair day's hunting and
sought the queen's chamber. When she saw him she cried out, and fell at
his feet, beseeching his favour, and saying that Sir Lanval had shamed
her, for he had asked her love, and when she refused him he mocked and
insulted her, for he had boasted of his lady that she was so fair, so
noble, and so proud that even the lowest of her waiting women was worth
more than the queen.

At this King Arthur fell into a rage, and swore a solemn oath that
unless the knight could defend himself well and fully in open court,
he should be hanged or burnt.

Forth from the chamber went the king, and called three of his barons to
him, and bade them fetch Sir Lanval, who indeed was now sad and sorry
enough. He had returned to his hostelry, but alas! he learnt all too
soon that he had lost his lady, since he had revealed the secret of
their love. He was all alone in his chamber, full of anguish. Again and
again he called upon his love, but it availed him nothing. He wept and
sighed, and once and again fell on the ground in his despair. A hundred
times he besought her to have mercy on him, and to speak once more to
her true knight. He cursed his heart and his mouth that had betrayed
him; 'twas a marvel he did not slay himself. But neither cries nor
blows nor lamentations sufficed to awaken her pity, and make her show
herself to his eyes.

Alas, what comfort might there be for the unhappy knight who had thus
made an enemy of his king? The barons came and bade him follow them to
court without delay, for the queen had accused him, and the king, by
their mouth, commanded his presence. Lanval followed them, sorrowing
greatly; had they slain him it would have pleased him well. He stood
before the king, mute and speechless, his countenance changed for
sorrow.

The king spoke in anger: "Vassal," he said, "you have greatly wronged
me; an evil excuse have you found to shame and injure me, and insult
the queen. Foolish was your boast, and foolish must be your lady to
hold that her maid-servant is fairer than my queen."

Sir Lanval denied that he had dishonoured himself or insulted his
liege lord. Word by word he repeated what the queen had said to him;
but of the words he himself had spoken, and the boast he had made
concerning his love, he owned the truth; sorrowful enough he was, since by so doing he had lost her. And for this speech he would make amends, as the court might require.

The king was sorely enraged against him, and conjured his knights to say what might rightfully be done in such a case, and how Lanval should be punished. And the knights did as he bade them, and some spake fair, and some spake ill. Then they all took counsel together and decreed that judgment should be given on a fixed day; and that Sir Lanval should give pledges to his lord that he would return to his hostelry and await the verdict. Otherwise, he should be held a prisoner till the day came. The barons returned to the king, and told him what they had agreed upon; and King Arthur demanded pledges, but Lanval was alone, a stranger in a strange land, without friend or kindred.

Then Sir Gawain came near, with all his companions, and said to the king: "Take pledges of all ye hold of mine and these my friends, fiefs or lands, each for himself." And when they had thus given pledges for him who had nothing of his own, he was free to go to his hostelry. The knights bore Sir Lanval company, chiding him as they went for his grief, and cursing the mad love that had brought him to this pass. Every day they visited him that they might see if he ate and drank, for they feared much that he would go mad for sorrow.

At the day they had named the barons were all assembled, the king was there, and the queen, and the sureties delivered up Lanval. Very sorrowful they were for him. I think there were even three hundred of them who had done all in their power without being able to deliver him from peril. Of a great offence did they accuse him, and the king demanded that sentence should be given according to the accusation and the defence.

Then the barons went forth to consider their judgment, heavy at heart, many of them, for the gallant stranger who was in such stress among them. Others, indeed, were ready to sacrifice Lanval to the will of their seigneur.

Then spoke the Duke of Cornwall, for the right was his, whoever might weep or rage, to him it pertained to have the first word, and he said:

"The king lays his plea against a vassal, Lanval ye call him, of felony and misdeed he accuses him in the matter of a love of which he boasted himself, thus making my lady, the queen, wrathful. None, save the king, has aught against him; therefore do ye as I say, for he who would speak the truth must have respect unto no man, save only such honour as shall be due to his liege lord. Let Lanval be put upon
his oath (the king will surely have naught against it) and if he can prove his words, and bring forward his lady, and that which he said and which so angered the queen be true, then he shall be pardoned; 'twas no villainy that he spake. But if he cannot bring proof of his word, then shall we make him to know that the king no longer desires his service and gives him dismissal from his court."

Then they sent messengers to the knight, and spake, and made clear to him that he must bring forth his lady that his word might be proved, and he held guiltless. But he told them that was beyond his power, never through her might succour come to him. Then the messengers returned to the judges, who saw there was no chance of aid, for the king pressed them hard, urged thereto by the queen, who was weary of awaiting their judgment.

But as they arose to seek the king they saw two maidens come riding on white palfreys. Very fair they were to look upon, clad in green sendal over their white skin. The knights beheld them gladly, and Gawain, with three others, hastened to Sir Lanval and told him what had chanced, and bade him look upon the maidens; and they prayed him eagerly to say whether one of the twain were his lady, but he answered them nay. The two, so fair to look upon, had gone forward to the palace, and dismounted before the daïs whereon King Arthur was seated. If their beauty was great, so also was their speech courteous.

"King," they said, "command that chambers be assigned to us, fair with silken hangings, wherein our mistress can fitly lodge, for with you will she sojourn awhile."

They said no more, and the king called two knights, and bade them lead the maidens to the upper chambers.

Then the king demanded from his barons their judgment and their verdict, and said he was greatly wroth with them for their long delay.

"Sire," they answered, "we were stayed by the coming of the damsels. Our decision is not yet made, we go but now to take counsel together." Then they reassembled, sad and thoughtful, and great was the clamour and strife among them.

While they were yet in perplexity, they saw, descending the street, two maidens of noble aspect, clad in robes broidered with gold, and mounted on Spanish mules. Then all the knights were very joyful, and said each to the other: "Surely now shall Sir Lanval, the valiant and courteous, be safe."
Gawain and six companions went to seek the knight. "Sir," they said, "be of good courage, for the love of God speak to us. Hither come two damsels, most beautiful, and richly clad, one of them must of a truth be your lady!" But Lanval answered simply; "Never before to-day have I looked upon, or known, or loved them."

Meantime, the maidens had come to the palace and stood before the king. Many praised them for their beauty and bright colour, and some deemed them fairer even than the queen.

The elder was wise and courteous, and she delivered her message gracefully. "King," she said, "bid your folk give us chambers wherein we may lodge with our lady; she comes hither to speak with you."

Then the king commanded that they should be led to their companions who had come before them. Nor as yet was the judgment spoken. So when the maidens had left the hall, he commanded his barons to deliver their verdict, their judgment already tarried too long, and the queen waxed wrathful for their delay.

But even as they sought the king, through the city came riding a maiden, in all the world was none so fair. She rode a white palfrey, that bore her well and easily. Well shaped were its head and neck, no better trained steed was there in all the world. Costly were the trappings of that palfrey, under heaven was there no king rich enough to purchase the like, save that he sold or pledged his land.

And thus was the lady clad: her raiment was all of white, laced on either side. Slender was her shape, and her neck whiter than snow on the bough. Her eyes were blue, her skin fair. Straight was her nose, and lovely her mouth. Her eyebrows were brown, her forehead white, and her hair fair and curling. Her mantle was of purple, and the skirts were folded about her; on her hand she bare a hawk, and a hound followed behind her.

In all the Burg there was no one, small nor great, young nor old, but was eager to look upon her as she passed. She came riding swiftly, and her beauty was no mere empty boast, but all men who looked upon her held her for a marvel, and not one of those who beheld her but felt his heart verily kindled with love.

Then those who loved Sir Lanval went to him, and told him of the maiden who came, if by the will of heaven she might deliver him. "Sir knight and comrade, hither comes one, no nutbrown maid is she, but the fairest of all fair women in this world." And Lanval heard, and
sighed, for well he knew her. He raised his head and the blood flew to his cheek as he made swift answer: "Of a faith," he said, "_this_ is my lady! Now let them slay me if they will and she has no mercy on me. I am whole if I do but see her."

The maiden reached the palace; fairer was she than any who had entered there. She dismounted before the king that all might behold her; she had let her mantle fall that they might the better see her beauty. King Arthur, in his courtesy, had risen to meet her, and all around him sprang to their feet, and were eager to offer their service. When they had looked well upon her, and praised her beauty, she spoke in these words, for no will had she to delay:

"King Arthur, I have loved one of your knights, behold him there, seigneur, Sir Lanval. He hath been accused at your court, but it is not my will that harm shall befall him. Concerning that which he said, know that the queen was in the wrong; never on any day did he pray her for her love. Of the boast that he hath made, if he may by me be acquitted, then shall your barons speak him free, as they have rightfully engaged to do."

The king granted that so it might be, nor was there a single voice but declared that Lanval was guiltless of wrong, for their own eyes had acquitted him.

And the maiden departed; in vain did the king pray her to remain; and many there were who would fain have served her. Without the hall was there a great block of grey marble, from which the chief knights of the king's court were wont to mount their steeds; on this Lanval took his stand, and when the maiden rode forth from the palace he sprang swiftly upon the palfrey behind her. Thus, as the Bretons tell us, he departed with her for that most fair island, Avalon; thither the fairy maiden had carried her knight, and none hath heard man speak further of Sir Lanval. Nor know I more of his story.