The Green Knight

Vera Chapman

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PIP
POLLINGER IN PRINT

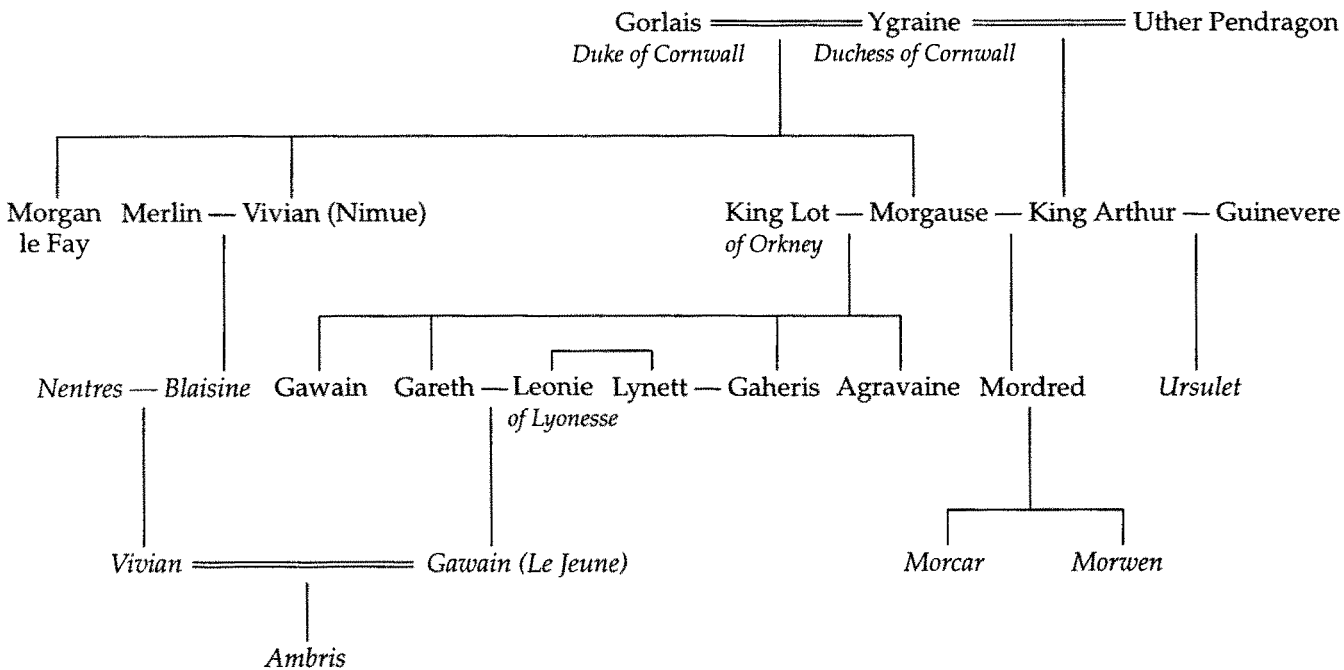
Pollinger Limited
9 Staple Inn
Holborn
LONDON
WC1V 7QH

www.pollingerltd.com

First published by Rex Collings Ltd 1975
This eBook edition published by Pollinger in Print 2007

A CIP catalogue record is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-905665-72-3



[*Author's note:* Those in italics are my own invention. The rest are according to Malory.]

Note from the Author

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight **is a metrical romance of the fourteenth century, of which the late and honoured Professor J. R. R. Tolkien made a very special study. Several modern versions of it exist, but the Professor's own version is eagerly awaited.**

The story is not to be found in Malory, though he has many tales of Sir Gawain of Orkney, a character who does not at all fit the present story, so that I have taken the liberty of supposing a younger Gawain. The story told in the romance seems on the face of it unfinished; and it occurred to me to speculate whether the Green Knight and the Lady of the Castle Haut-Desert might not both have been unwilling accomplices of Morgan le Fay. Thus the rest of the story developed in my mind.

The liberties I have taken with the traditional Arthurian legends are no more than gleeman or romancer would have taken in his day; this is a story and nothing more, and as a story it begs a hearing.

V.C. 1975

1 • Vivian

We turned our horses and rode into that terrible dark wood – the Lady Morgan le Fay, myself, her fifteen-year-old niece, and the four silent serving-men that followed us. I had never been in so dark a wood before.

Indeed, I had never been in any wood before – since up to an hour back, I had lived, as far as I could remember, in the quiet, safe, sunny retreat of the convent at Amesbury; and now I was going into this . . .

The horses' hoofs made no sound on the soft pine-needles. It was so dark that at first I could see nothing at all; then as my sight cleared, the first thing I saw was a little thin yellow snake, hanging head downwards from a branch, right on a level with my eyes – and its head and face were that of a tiny little woman. I cried out and crossed myself.

'Don't do that,' came my aunt's voice, low, level and severe. She pointed a finger at the woman-headed snake and it coiled

itself up like a spring above us, and we left it. But the whole wood was full of things, all rustling and stirring and peering with bright eyes – little birds were everywhere, but not only birds – squirrels and stoats, and what else? The wood was all of firs or pines, with no lighter trees or undergrowth – only the endless brown trunks, and the webs of spindly dead twigs that fringe the lower parts of fir-trees where nobody comes. Presently I saw that some of the small animals were not animals but tiny brown men, scuttling among the dead branches. Some were part men and part animals, squirrels with little human heads and arms, or birds with odd beaky human faces. They frightened me, but now I dared not cross myself.

'Why do you concern yourself with those things?' my aunt said, without looking round. 'They are quite normal and natural here – they are even vulgar. If you want marvels I will show you better ones presently.'

She was really my great-aunt, my only living relative as far as I knew. I am Vivian, the daughter of Blaisine, who was the daughter of Vivian called Nimue. This Vivian-Nimue had been the youngest of the three witchy daughters of the beautiful Ygraine of Cornwall – Morgause, the Queen of Orkney, and Morgan le Fay being the other two. But

Ygraine was also the mother of King Arthur by Uther Pendragon, so I am some sort of kin to King Arthur. Also I suppose there is witch blood in me, though I thought by the time it came to me it must have run rather thin. But I did not know then who my grandfather was.

My mother had died when I was born, and my father had died fighting for King Arthur, so as far back as I could remember my home had been with the kind nuns at Amesbury. A peaceful place, and still is; our poor Guinevere has found peace there at last, after all she has been through – but this isn't Guinevere's story, thank God, but mine. No one ever came to see me there but the Lady Morgan le Fay, and she was an exciting though rather disturbing relative to have. And then one day – the very day before this story opens – she had descended upon us, and told the Lady Abbess that she had come to take me home with her. She did not say where, nor yet why.

There she was in the Lady Abbess's parlour, glowing and crackling like a fire, and the Lady Abbess, who was an outstanding personality if ever there was one, and twice as alive as any of us, looking like a cold fish beside her. So when she said, 'Well, little Vivian, will

you come?' of course I said, 'Oh, yes!' as if I were spellbound.

'We will miss you, Vivian,' the Lady Abbess said gently, and I replied, 'Yes, of course—' in such an airy and offhand way that it wasn't till afterwards that I remembered that I had done less than justice to that kind woman and all the others. When I remembered, a long time afterwards, I cried, but it was too late then.

'When do we start?' I asked eagerly, and when Aunt Morgan said 'Tomorrow early,' I could hardly wait for the Lady Abbess's dismissal before I tore away like a wild bird, to babble the exciting news to my companions, fling my few possessions into a bag, and show off the gown and mantle my aunt had brought me for the journey.

She spent the night in the convent, of course, and never was there such exemplary courtesy, such meek piety, as Morgan le Fay showed at refectory and in chapel – so dignified, so gentle, so circumspect, so devout. That was something I laughed about afterwards. At the time I thought she should have been a Lady Abbess herself. Just two things were odd, and I only remembered them later. She never crossed herself, and she took care not to touch the holy water.

Early in the morning we started off. There was a nice cream-coloured pony for me to ride (of course I was accustomed to a little gentle riding, for we used to take sedate exercise in fine weather, on ponies, donkeys and jennets, through the village and down the safe part of Sthe road) – she herself had a tall white mule, and four serving-men rode with us on cobs, each leading a packhorse. We were quite a cavalcade. All was bustle and excitement, most of the nuns crying at my departure, and some of my companions too – the Lady Abbess looking very grave – the servants all in a flutter. My aunt gave out gold pieces to the servants like pennies, and they cheered her.

All this I recollected as we went through that eerie wood, until at last there was light in front of us.

'Aunt Morgan,' I ventured to ask her, 'where are we going?'

'To the Castle of Haut-Desert,' she replied. 'Sir Bertalik is the castellan.'

'Oh, is he your husband?' I asked, all in my innocence.

She turned right round in her saddle and looked at me.

'My husband? Good God, no. What a silly question to ask. You must learn not to

ask silly questions.' And she gave a short, shallow laugh.

I was glad when she turned away from me again. We began to see daylight now through the fir-trees, and soon we were out on the bare wild heath – such country as I had never seen, treeless as far as the eye could reach, and almost flat – the contours just gently undulating, high and dry under the heavens, sprinkled only with crouching juniper bushes. And there before us – there were the Stones, that great ancient place that the country folk called Stonehenge, or the Dance of the Giants. There it stood on the skyline above us as we came out of the wood – old, old, ever so old, but perfect, a circle of vast hewn pillars with an even row of lintel stones above them, sometimes dark thundery grey, sometimes, as the light changed, startlingly white; and above the circle made by the lintels, five great trilithons towered up from inside, three of them overtopping the rest. There was another circle of stones inside, and from somewhere within there went up a single thread of smoke. And outside, as we approached, one vast pillar of stone stood up alone by the lip of green bank that encircled it all; and between that upright stone and the circle another stone lay recumbent, with a wreath of flowers on it.

I quite thought, seeing that my aunt was at home with all witchy things, that she would approach the Stones as by right; and I dreaded to see her lead the way there, and drag me with her into some unimaginable rite of devils. Perhaps she had brought me here to lay me down on that recumbent stone and slit my throat with the knife at her girdle? But to my surprise and relief, she turned away, and led the cavalcade in a detour as far from the Stones as possible. Yet a shudder ran over me, such as they say happens when a goose runs over one's grave. We turned north, as far as I could guess from the sun, and soon were out of sight of Stonehenge and into another forest.

This forest was of oaks and beeches, lighter and gayer than the fir-wood, and as it was high summer, it was full of life and beauty. Wild-rose bushes and flowering elders stood here and there by the wayside, and the bracken was warm in the sunshine, with the deer showing their antlers above it. Here, instead of the small brown men, there were lovely winged creatures like little girls, fluttering up into our faces and away again; and several times I saw a gang of curly-headed fauns scuttling away together. But my aunt treated all these with contempt, as

if they were low forms of life not worth her notice.

It was high noon now, and I began to feel very hungry, so I was glad when she called a halt and we dismounted in a very pleasant grassy glade. We settled ourselves comfortably at the foot of a beech-tree, while the serving-men (who all this time had never said a word) withdrew a little way with the horses.

As we sat under the beech-tree, I looked at her, and wondered. Now, nobody ever knew how old Morgan le Fay was. That was only one of the odd things about her. I have seen her look like a girl in her teens, and I have seen her look like an old crone on the edge of the grave; but mostly she looked like a fine woman of forty-five. She was my grandmother's sister, I knew that, so she must have been old enough to be my grandmother – yet she had a smooth oval face, with a clear, slightly olive skin; black hair without a thread of grey, and I'd swear it wasn't dyed; a perfect figure, upright and supple as a wand, her waist no bigger than mine. But that gives you no idea of her bold, slightly sinister beauty. She was like a handful of jewels, even when she was wearing none. Men would feel the pull of her like a string, and even women could not remain indifferent to her.

‘Now,’ said my aunt, ‘if you really want to see something surprising—’

She raised her hand and snapped her fingers in a peculiar way.

First came the music – exquisite unearthly music, floating out of nowhere, as from no instruments I had ever heard, and blent with voices that sang a tune but no words. Then there entered through the trees, moving to the music, two tall beautiful women, one in pale green like the beech-leaves with the light through them, and one in silver-grey. They bowed low before us, and then came two more, one in copper-brown and one in the pale pink of the wild roses. All their dresses were most curiously wrought with gold threads and small pearls. Then they four went through a slow and stately dance. But then the music changed, and eight gay and slender little girls, in blues like the late bluebells and the wood violets, danced intricately round and round, and eight boys in brown and gold sprang among them and partnered them. Then came gay little dwarfish mountebanks all in gold from top to toe, dancing a neat, merry, laughable dance. And then came a stately procession of tall black men in gold and white and scarlet, bearing dishes of food, of the rarest and richest I had ever seen. There were

dressed capons, and jellied pies, and fruit, and sweetmeats – and oh! I was so hungry – how my mouth watered in anticipation of the feast they were setting before us . . . The black men bowed low and offered us the dishes, and, being very young and very hungry, I reached out and took one of the delicious cakes they offered – it was a cream tart, I remember – and put it into my mouth. My lips closed on just nothing. In my bitter disappointment I burst into tears, and instantly the whole pageant was gone.

'Heavens, child,' said my aunt, 'you expect too much.' She didn't seem furious, only mildly annoyed and a little amused.

'But I'm hungry !' I cried.

'Well, well! But of course.' She produced a saddlebag that lay against her knees, and took from it bread and cheese, pasties, apples and a flagon of ale; good homely food, and I was glad of it, but it wasn't like the feast I had seen spread before me. It was a long time before I got over the disappointment.

'I thought my shows might amuse you,' my aunt said. 'But of course – you prefer something more – shall we say? – material. Of course.'

Later on I ventured to ask her why the serving-men did not eat too.

‘Oh, them!’ she said. ‘They never eat. They are just shapes, like the others. Look!’ She beckoned one of them over – he stood dully before us, looking out at nothing with expressionless eyes. She snapped her fingers in front of his face, and suddenly he wasn’t there at all; then she snapped her fingers again, and there he was once more, without one ripple of expression on his stupid face. She sent him back to the others with a wave of her hand as if steering him.

‘Very useful,’ she said. ‘They put up a good show, in case of attack from men or beasts, and if necessary I could make them fight; but they never eat, drink or sleep, and I can get rid of them whenever I wish.’

We journeyed on through the afternoon, with the sun declining on our left, and when it grew dark the uncanny serving-men pitched a tent for us – ‘pight our pavilion’ as those court-poets would say – and there we spent the night, with those four ghostly servitors keeping watch, like statues, all through the night at the four corners of the tent, unsleeping. I can’t say I slept much; I knew we were quite safe with those inhuman watchers, nonetheless it gave me the creeps to think of them.

So we travelled on for two days more, always going northwards, through country

ever becoming wilder and more desolate. Never before had I seen forests growing in regions of sheer rocks, the roots of trees denuded and hanging in the air above precipitous falls, where we picked our way sideways along paths cut out of the face of the cliffs. The creatures we met grew stranger too – little brown or black earth-men, round and rolling and muddy; or big brown gnarled satyrs (the look of them terrified me) – and once in the distance a towering bearded centaur. But these were not at all friendly creatures, though they seemed, I thought, to please Aunt Morgan's temperament more than the others.

On the evening of the seventh day, with the sun low and red on our left, we came in sight at last of the Castle Haut-Desert. It stood on a high crag, rising out of the trees, and the evening sun caught and flooded it with amber light, picking out its intricate battlements and its gilded weather-vanes. A lovely picture it looked, and certainly the first human habitation we had seen in all our journey. We pressed on with good courage and soon reached a wide path leading up to the drawbridge, which had been let down for our reception. A bodyguard of house-carles was drawn up to welcome us, and at the outer gateway was my host himself.

And here a strange thing happened. We lost sight of the welcoming party for an instant, rounding a belt of trees, and then came full in sight of the castle's owner, quite close at hand. I looked – quite plainly and calmly in full light – and saw him as a young man in his early twenties or younger, with dark glossy hair cut straight below his ears, with a clean-cut and well-proportioned nose, brow and chin – with grey eyes – but, well there! all I could say is that beside and beyond, there was something that said to my whole heart and soul and body: 'This is he.'

Not knowing what I was doing, regardless of all manners and modesty, without a moment's hesitation I slipped from my horse and ran across the intervening space with my hands outstretched. I could not have done otherwise for my life. And then, somehow, the man to whom I was stretching out my hands was a thick-set, greying bullet-headed man of fifty – sturdy and powerful and jovial, with a short chin-beard and grizzled curls, eyes twinkling under bushy brows, thick lips coarse but cheerful – nothing like the young man I had just seen.

I almost fell forward into Sir Bertilak's arms – he put out his big warm hands and

caught me, exclaiming, ‘Little Lady Vivian! Welcome, child, and come in. Shall I call you niece, or would I do better as your grandad?’

I knew, almost on the instant, that this must be just another of Aunt Morgan’s sleights; but why, why had she done this to me? There I was, stirred and shaken to my heart’s core by the sudden glimpse of the man I would have died for – and there was Sir Bertilak, bussing me heartily on both cheeks, and rallying me for their paleness and coldness.

And so I went over the drawbridge into the Castle of Haut-Desert, commending my soul to God and Our Lady – but not daring to cross myself because of my aunt Morgan le Fay who followed close behind me.

Very soon my aunt Morgan began to educate me as a sorceress. This was unexpected and very interesting. Of course I was already lettered, for at the convent we learnt to read and write, and to understand Latin and French and a certain amount of ciphering; but now I had to go further and even learn a little Greek and Hebrew, as well as hard calculations about planets and stars and their positions in the sky. Astrology made up a large part

of my studies, and I became quite good at casting the nativities of purely imaginary persons – my aunt would never let me try real ones, and strictly forbade me to cast my own, threatening me with such dire bad luck that I did not care to. I also learnt a formidable quantity of correspondences, attributions, Names of Power and such; with strange lore about the properties of herbs and stones, and the secrets of the four elements. When I had learnt enough, my aunt said, I should be able to command those odd people we had seen in the woods on our journey – but only if she told me the right words, which she might do in the course of time. For those things, the elementals, were real beings, she told me, not shapes conjured up by her power. That power, the art of raising illusions and deceits, she kept to herself – it was her own in a very special way.

There were also exercises, such as sitting very still and concentrating all the power of my thought on one object; and sometimes she would send me into a kind of dream, from which I would awake cold and shaking. She would fire questions at me then about what I had dreamt, but I never could remember anything very clearly, and that annoyed her.

She said to me one day, ‘You know, Vivian, you are a witch by inheritance, and you certainly have some of the powers; but you will not have all the powers till you become a witch of your own will, and take the vows.’

I said, ‘What vows, Aunt?’

‘You will know when you come to them,’ she replied.

‘But whom do I make them to?’ I persisted, and then, very daring, ‘Must I make vows to Satan?’

She smiled. ‘Well, in a way no, and in a way yes,’ she said. ‘It depends on how you look at it. In the long run, you see, you make the vows to yourself, for your allegiance is to yourself, and in the end it is yourself you will serve. Do you understand?’

‘I understand,’ I said, and in that moment I did understand indeed. I felt a cold sinking in my heart, and a shudder. ‘Give me time to think about it,’ I said. ‘I can’t make any vows suddenly.’

So time passed. The castle was a pleasant place, full of people, Sir Bertilak’s retainers and men-at-arms mostly, with their wives and families. I came to know them, though Aunt Morgan was not on very intimate terms with any of them, and tended to keep me at a distance from them as far as she could.

My lessons, and the work in the kitchen and still-room and garden, took up a good deal of the time; but there was hunting too, and that was where Sir Bertilak came into his own. Almost every fine day he would lead us all out on horseback; all the men, and a few of the women, with a straggling of children following on ponies or donkeys or on foot; and we would scour the countryside, hell-for-leather, after the fox or the hare or the deer – or in the winter, with care and organization, for this was difficult and could be serious, the dangerous wild boar. I came to love the vigorous exercise in the fresh air. Uncle Bertilak, as I came to call him, was the best of company, and I became very fond of him. He was cheerful and loudmouthed and downright, and called things by their plain names in such a way as made the seneschal's wife frown, and the huntsmen's wives blush and titter – but Aunt Morgan never turned a hair. I was puzzled as to the relationship between them. They were of course not husband and wife; she had her wing of the castle, where I lived with her, and he had another, and their manner when together was in no way like lovers; yet even I could tell that he was entirely dominated by her, and afraid of her too.

My room was a corner turret, up a winding staircase that opened below into the great hall; and above it was my aunt's room, at the top; there was a way out from her room on to the leads, and there she kept a pigeon-cote with carrier pigeons. About once a week a carrier pigeon would come in, with a letter rolled up in a small case strapped to its leg. These were from her spies in Camelot, but who they were, or how the pigeons were conveyed to Camelot in the first place, I never learnt. Sometimes she would caress and feed the pigeon after taking the letter from it; but now and then, when the news displeased her, she would grab the poor thing in her strong, thin hands and wring its neck. I would find the pigeon dropped casually on the winding stair, and I grieved for the poor birds, who journeyed so far and so faithfully only to meet their death because of unwelcome news for which they were not responsible.

After a long time of studying and trying, I at last found myself able to do one little piece of magic – I succeeded in making myself invisible. It was only a small degree of invisibility – it would last, so my aunt told me, about half an hour, and during that time I could escape the notice of anyone

who wasn't expecting to see me or looking very hard. It was partly a matter of mental concentration – the rest, of course, I can't divulge.

It was a horrible, cold afternoon before Christmas – so black and cheerless and chilly, especially in our dark stony castle. The time of year when if you hadn't Christmas to look forward to, you'd give up altogether, and even with Christmas only a few days away, there was something so utterly depressing . . . I had shut myself in my room and was keeping myself warm as best I could with a brazier, and amusing myself by working hard at the invisibility experiment – when suddenly the image of myself in the big steel mirror on the wall flickered and went out. I thought, 'I've done it at last!' and almost at that moment one of the castle maids came in to put more charcoal on the brazier. I could tell at once that she couldn't see me, for she came in without a word of greeting or apology, looking all around as if there was no one there, and walked straight past me – she would have walked into me if I hadn't stepped smartly aside, for I didn't want to give her a shock and have her knock the brazier over. So I skipped out of the door she had left open and ran down the stairs in high glee to show my aunt

that she couldn't see me, so to speak – at least, to let her know that the experiment had succeeded. I could hear her voice in the hall below.

But on the stairs I nearly stepped on yet another of those poor pigeons – not only with its neck wrung, but mangled almost as if by a cat. My high spirits sank, and I stole down to the hall and stood invisibly at the stair foot, holding the newel-post.

The hall was at the moment flooded by the afternoon sunlight, cold but coloured by the stained glass of the high windows; a fire burned in the wide hearth; and there was my aunt, pacing to and fro, with Sir Bertilak standing uneasily by the fireplace.

'But this must not be,' she exclaimed. 'I say it must not be.'

'No, indeed, my dear,' he said in his kind but rather dim way. 'I'm sure – but what?'

'This news – this news,' she said. 'Don't you understand? Guinevere is with child.'

'Why – well,' he said. 'I suppose that's excellent – oh yes, very. We all would wish—'

'What I wish and what you wish,' she snapped, 'are two very different things. You ought to know that by this time, fool. Arthur must not, must *not* be allowed to establish his line. I would – you've no idea what would

happen. I *will not* have it. This child must not be born. Do you understand?'

'Yes, my lady,' he said, drooping; and I began to feel a chill steal over me, as the sunlight died out of the coloured windows and a flurry of snow burst against them.

'I can't do it myself,' she went on, pacing up and down in agitation. 'I am not welcomed at Camelot, and she wouldn't accept anything I sent her.'

'Anything you sent her?' he repeated in a horrified tone. 'You don't mean you'd—'

'I would, but I couldn't. She'd take nothing that came from me. And there's a reason why I can't get at her by magic. I can't tell you why, but it is so. And so—' she rounded on him – 'you will have to go.'

'What, me?' he said.

'Yes, you – and you'd better if I tell you to. You know that.'

'Yes, my lady,' he said helplessly. 'But what can I do?'

'Put fear on her. Fear. That's poison enough, to a woman or to the child within her.' She gave her low secret laugh, and the poor old knight hid his face in his hands.

'But you know,' he said, looking up after a minute. 'Guinevere's a stout-hearted lass. It will take more than a fright to do her any harm.'

‘Fright? You talk of fright? Do you think I mean a nurse’s bogey to scare a naughty child? – Real fear, my Bertilak – real terror. Have you forgotten? The terror that freezes the breath, paralyses the limbs – before the vampire bites, before the werewolf leaps – you should know, Bertilak, you should know.’

‘No,’ he said in a smothered voice. ‘No. You don’t mean – you don’t mean to send me back into what I was?’

‘That is just what I do mean,’ she said.

To my horror, as I watched them unseen, I saw him fall on his knees in front of her, reaching up with his hands.

‘Not – not the Beast!’ he said in a more broken voice than I ever heard a man use. ‘Oh God! Not the Beast!’

She gave an impatient exclamation.

‘All right, then. The Beast will not be needful. The Green Man will suffice.’

He groaned, and then – before my eyes I saw him change.

He rose slowly and heavily from his knees, and went on growing taller – her hand was outstretched towards him, and seemed to be directing power at him – he grew not only taller but broader, rougher, darker – a shadow overspread him, as shadows seemed to rush inwards from the corners of the dark

hall. Out of the shadow a dark glimmering green outline seemed to cover him and build up over his own shape, and then came clearer. The thing that stood there was half as high again as the tallest of men, vast and shaggy, and everywhere bright green. Its clothes were richly encrusted with gold and jewels, though strange and old-fashioned – the hair and beard were that same bright unnatural green, hanging down in a thick mane over the rich clothes whose ornateness somehow added horror to the savage face. Never could I have imagined a face of such brutal malignity – to say it was animal is not enough, for no animal's face could convey such repulsive, hideous evil. The skin and hair and all were a luminous diseased green – all save the fiery eyeballs, which were red, as were the gums that dripped red around the jagged yellowish teeth.

I don't know how I stood my ground, and did not cry out or faint. I knew I must not, or I should betray my presence to my aunt; so I clung on to the newel-post, shaking. I watched while my aunt gestured towards the terrible creature – who stood drooping stupidly before her – turned it round, saying, 'Go!' – and steered it out through the door as I had seen her steer those witless servants of hers. It – I could not call it Sir Bertilak

– went out of the door, and I broke away from the stair-post and dragged myself up the stairs almost on hands and knees, knowing that I must surely be visible now, and Aunt Morgan must not know what I had witnessed. I locked my door and lay on my bed trembling for a long time, till I fell into an exhausted sleep.

That was a gloomy Christmas for me, you can be sure; it took me a long time to get over my fright, and everyone in the castle missed Sir Bertilak but none dared ask where he had gone. The castle people of course had their feastings and mummings, in which I took part but languidly; and there was the High Mass in the castle chapel at midnight, which my aunt dared not omit, no matter what she may have felt about it. She gave courteous hospitality to the priest who had journeyed over from a distant monastery, and attended the service with the same face of demure hypocrisy as I had seen her put on at the convent; but I noticed that she did not receive the Sacrament, nor touch the holy water. But oddly enough, where the house-carles' children had hung up the heathen mistletoe in other parts of the castle she seemed to avoid that also.

And then on Twelfth Day, when my aunt and I were sitting to noon-meat at a small

table in a corner of the great hall, there was the sound of a horse in the courtyard, and Sir Bertilak strode in at the door, in his old leather jerkin and hose, as if he had been hunting. He flung across the room shouting for meat and drink, kissed us both on the cheeks as was his custom, and sat down in his big chair. I cannot say how glad I was to see him again. He was no different except – except that round his neck, if you could see between his beard and his collar, ran a thin green line.

He was surly and silent at first, and ate as if famished.

'Well?' my aunt thrust at him, caring nothing, it seemed, for my presence. 'Is it done?'

'I did what you told me,' he said, without looking up from his meat.

'But did she – is she—?'

'I don't know. How could I tell? – I ask you how would you expect me to know?'

She frowned, and tapped her fingers on the table.

'Oh very well, very well. But did Arthur take your challenge?'

He looked up for a moment.

'Arthur? No. A young fellow stepped in and took the challenge for him – so of course he must come here next year, and not Arthur.'

My aunt sprang up, knocking her wineglass over, spitting with rage like a cat.

'You fool, you fool! You've let everything slip through your fingers. We could have had Arthur here, alone – do you understand? – and bound to submit his neck to your axe. The Old Sacrifice would have been made by you, and I would have taken my rightful place by your side – oh, the chance that's lost!'

She paced up and down the hall, wringing her hands. He went on stolidly eating and drinking.

'Who is this young man that comes in his place?' she asked, halting and turning to him.

'I don't know. Some unknown youngster. Gawain, the name was.'

'Not Gawain of Orkney? He's no youngster. Morgause's boy – King Lot's heir . . . at least he's royal, and next in descent—'

'No, no – it wasn't Gawain of Orkney. I'd know him. A younger one altogether. Oh, I don't know. Anyway, he'll be here in a year's time, according to the custom.'

'Well, well,' she said, biting her lips. 'Not even one of the distinguished knights. You've made a pretty mess of things, I must say. Anyhow, something might be done with

that young fellow. Something will have to be done.'

'And now,' Sir Bertilak suddenly boomed out, having finished his blackjack of ale and evidently feeling better, 'now do you realize that's the first decent meal I've had for a fortnight? No Christmas dinner, by the Mass! Here—' he pushed his chair back noisily and stood up, 'Here – I've done what you told me to do – what you made me do, my lady – and by the Splendour of God, I'm going to have my Christmas now, in spite of you and the Devil and his Dam. Come on – house-carles, hullo! It's Twelfth Night, and we'll feast tonight for the blessed Christ's sake. Go get a feast ready.'

He put a warm protecting arm round me.

'Little Vivian – you look frightened. You look as if you'd seen something, or heard something. Now listen and I'll tell you, so you won't be afraid any more – listen now—'

He lowered his head to my ear, but my aunt broke in between us.

'What, whispering in a corner, old lecher?'

And from that moment she never left me alone with him, but watched us as if she had indeed been a wronged Juno. Even

in the revels that night (which at last I was able to enjoy) she would not risk his having a moment near me, not even in the figures of a dance when we could have put mouth to ear for the fraction of a second – so that whatever he might have had to tell me for my reassurance remained untold.

It was on Midsummer Eve that she next had news from Camelot. I heard the fluttering of pigeons at the window above mine, and an ominous pause – then the carrier pigeon came whirling away downwards, as if she had carelessly flung it aside – at least with its life and limbs, poor creature – and I heard hysterical laughter, and the tapping of Morgan's shoes as she raced down the spiral staircase, past my door and into the hall.

Her laughter was mingled with harsh dry sobs, and seemed more of rage and frustration than anything.

'Bertilak!' she screamed. 'Bertilak! Come here at once!'

'Yes, my lady,' he answered, obediently as ever, appearing from behind the leather curtain that screened the little cubbyhole where he liked to polish his armour. She ran across the great hall to him.

'Look here – did you ever hear anything so – so—' She went off into another hysterical,

angry peal. ‘All our trouble for nothing! After all that! – The woman Guinevere – she’s – she’s – she’s delivered of a daughter.’

‘A daughter?’ The old knight stared rather stupidly at her, shaking his head. ‘A daughter? Not a son after all?’

‘That’s what I said, idiot – can’t you hear? A daughter!’ and she seized his jerkin and did her best to shake him.

‘And you – I – *we* had all that trouble, and wasted all that effort – and she goes and has a daughter. What do I care if she has forty daughters? And you – you – don’t you care, that all my plans came to nothing?’

‘Of course I care, my lady,’ he mumbled uneasily, but I could see he didn’t even understand what she was getting at.

‘And you didn’t even get Arthur,’ she went on, ‘the best chance I’ve had to get him since he began—’

‘I did my best,’ the old fellow growled. ‘How could I help it if a younger man stepped in? After all, my lady, if you *must* work your devilment – and God help us all! You’ll have that young man come here next Christmas, and won’t he do for you instead of Arthur?’ He spoke as one long tired out and resigned to evils he was helpless to prevent.

She stood still, releasing her hold of him, and then paced over to the window;

there she stood looking out for many long minutes, while Sir Bertilak and I exchanged uneasy glances and waited in suspense.

Then she spoke, thoughtfully and quiet.

'Yet I mistrust this daughter of Arthur's. Gawain, Vivian, the daughter of Arthur – no, I can see something, and I mistrust it.'

She came rustling back from the window.

'I have it,' she said. 'You and Vivian must be married.'

Both of us said, '*What*?' as with one voice, and then held our breath.

'I said married,' she said, with her light shallow laugh.

'But, my dear aunt—' I cried.

'But, good God Almighty—' cried he.

'And when I say you must be married,' she said, 'of course you know you must.'

And that, we felt with sinking hearts, was true. What could one do or say when she said 'You must,' like that? If anyone doubts this, or finds it strange, I can only say that they never knew Morgan le Fay.

'And – when?' he managed to utter.

'At once,' said she. 'No time like the present. Midsummer Eve, a good day and a short night. Preparations? – pooh! what need? I'll see to that forthwith—'

And suddenly the hall, and all the castle, was full of people, servants, ladies-in-waiting, tradesfolk with baskets and bundles – all the house-carles and their families were there, somehow mingling with those shapes she had called up, I knew, out of thin air. In the instant, they had begun to prepare a wedding. The whole castle was being furbished up – I could see Hilda, the wife of a house-carle whom I knew well, stretching out a rich gold arras with the help of a tall pale woman in green whom she certainly couldn't have met before – for the woman was just a little taller than a woman possibly could be, stretching out her skinny white arms to fix the arras, and when her green skirt lifted a little, I could see she had feet like a cow's. The rest of the strange helpers were like that too. There was a short fat man rolling barrels up from the cellar, who seemed to have four legs as well as his two arms. But my aunt bustled me away up to my room, where thin spectral ladies in black were unrolling garments of such delicacy and magnificence that I could almost forget their grotesque faces and their fingers like dry scaly twigs.

My dress was a shimmering cloth of silver, with a tall pointed headdress from which dropped a transparent veil spangled

with gold; and I could scarcely be blamed for enjoying its beauty, and the picture I made in the great mirror. I felt all the time that this could scarcely be real – but then, there were the real people whom I knew quite well – there was the falconer's little daughter, Maud, helping to spread my train out, and there was Ralph from the stables stealing sweetmeats off the sidetable, and it seemed he could taste them too. And yet it was all quite absurd – all in one moment like the snap of two fingers, I was being married to old Sir Bertilak. Oh yes, it was usual enough for a young maid to be given away ruthlessly without her consent – but he? He didn't want this any more than I did, but neither could he raise a finger nor a voice against this woman Morgan. Oh God, if only all this were a dream . . . yet I knew well that it was not. The things that Morgan le Fay caused to happen were all deceits and lies, but they were not dreams – they were nothing so harmless as dreams.

And here she was, proffering me a goblet of wine to drink.

'Here's courage for you, my dear niece,' she said sniggering. And I took the cup from her, and drank a sip of it – about half, maybe – and then I thought of what I was doing, and when her back was turned

I poured the rest of it into the rushes on the floor. So, when I began to see things even more oddly, it was only in about half measure. The phantom people faded a little, and I could tell them from the real ones; but the most startling effect of all was that, when I slowly made my way down the staircase, across the threshold of the hall, towards the chapel door where Sir Bertilak waited to meet me – I saw, mirrored across Sir Bertilak's shape, like a reflection on a transparent glass window, the shape of that other man – the young man I had seemed to see when I first entered the castle – the man I was meant to love. And I knew that, had I drunk all my aunt's potion instead of only half, I should have been quite sure that *he* was there instead of Sir Bertilak, and that it was *he* to whom I should be married.

So, in a world full of half-seen shapes, I went on into the chapel for my wedding. My aunt's magic must have been potent indeed, for it worked even in the holy building. All the real people were there, for this had to be a real wedding, before witnesses; and there was a priest there too, a stranger, but certainly a real priest. But all the vacant spaces were filled up with unknown people, richly dressed, smiling and amiable, and yet

somehow not quite right as human beings, and thinner, less certain of outline to my half-enchanted eyes, than the people I knew to be flesh and blood.

And always there floated before me, sometimes clearer and sometimes less clear, the image of the man who ought to have been my bridegroom.

In a dazed, almost drunken state I was led through the service, said some words – I hardly knew what – placed my hand in Sir Bertilak's, which was hard, strong, dry, and yet somehow cold and remotely trembling – and heard the priest pronounce us man and wife; and then people on each side of us led us, still hand in hand, to the feasting dais.

I had seen a few weddings in the castle during the time I had been there, and they all struck me, at the time, as terrifying affairs, at least for the bride. Always there had been the long-drawn-out feast, and then the dancing, until anyone who wasn't drunk must be tired to death – and then the bride would be at last dragged upstairs by a shrieking crowd of bridesmaids, and the bridegroom dragged off in the opposite direction by an even noisier crowd of groomsmen. Then would begin the undressing of the bride, by all the

bridesmaids and all the dames of honour. This was both a ritual and a game, and everyone made the most of it – the bride's garments would be dragged off one by one, each with an appropriate song – and what songs. The respectable matrons, the house-carles' wives, seemed to see nothing wrong in them, but I – I was convent-bred . . . The whole thing always became a riot in the close, stuffy, curtained room, with the girls shrieking and almost pulling the poor bride to pieces – then at last they got her into bed, usually stark naked, and then began an interminable wait while the groomsmen, in another room, were doing the same with the bridegroom, or worse, and all getting roaring drunk. Then eventually, when the men thought they had got the bridegroom sufficiently encouraged, he would be led in, usually too drunk to stand, and tumbled into bed beside the bride. Everyone would contemplate them there in the great decorated bed, and sing some more songs, and pelt them with flowers and sticky comfits. At last the bride's mother would draw the curtains, and the party would retire, but no further than outside the door, where most of them would wait the rest of the night still singing and shouting jokes, and waiting avidly for evidence that the

marriage had been consummated and the bride found a virgin. And at daybreak they would be back again to wake the happy couple up – assuming that they had slept at all. No wonder I dreaded what was before me.

I sat through the banquet, and whether the food was real or illusory I couldn't have told. And afterwards I led the dance, as best I could, with Sir Bertilak. Just for one moment he came close enough to me to whisper, and what he whispered was, 'Don't be afraid.' Bless him! My heart warmed a little to him even in my bewilderment and despair. But the festivities dragged on, and the hall was so hot and smoky and airless, and people crowded so upon me – at last I was almost relieved when my aunt, with the bridesmaids, came and led me firmly upstairs – although now came the time of which I hardly dared to think. I, who had lived so quiet and withdrawn among the nuns at Amesbury, to be suddenly exposed to all this public performance . . .

At least the undressing was over quickly – my aunt, smirking like a cat and trying to look maternal, set a limit to the number of songs, and cut short some of the feminine horseplay – I can remember her tossing my garters to the bridesmaids,

and one was caught by little Maud, but the other by a slender strange girl who seemed to have a face like a vixen. To my relief they did not put me naked into bed, but arrayed me in a furred robe of white satin. And there I lay trembling against the great embroidered pillows. Fortunately the waiting was not too long. There were shouts and torches outside, and the groomsmen led in Sir Bertilak. I no longer saw him overshadowed by the shape of that other, or I think I could not have borne it. I knew by that that the half-measure of enchantment was passing off. He wasn't drunk but looked dazed and unhappy. He wore a red brocade bed-gown, and I remember thinking that he was a fine figure of a man, well-built, clean and tough, and his face was handsome in its way, and gentle. Indeed, an older woman might have found him attractive.

The groomsmen, who were all of the strange people, thrust him roughly into the room and into the bed. My aunt, with a revoltingly sly smile, drew the covers up over us, and then dragged the curtains together; the company raised a cheer, and trooped surging to the door. And then the door was shut.

I lay crouched up in my corner of the bed, shaking. Fortunately the bed was a large one.

Presently, as the noise died away outside the door, Sir Bertilak said very quietly:

‘Don’t be afraid, my girl – I’m not going to touch you.’

I could feel his thick robe near me in the bed, but, indeed he didn’t touch me.

‘It’s all a deceit of Madam Morgan,’ he went on, speaking low. ‘I can’t say much, or she might hear us even now. I believe she hears what I think. I can’t fight against her, neither can you – but I shan’t let her hurt you. There are some things even she can’t make me do.’

He put out his hand and rather clumsily patted my shoulder.

‘You’ve nothing to fear now, little Vivian. There, roll yourself up in your robe and go to sleep.’

And so I did, and to my surprise I slept soundly.

2 • Gawain

I am Gawain – but I have to keep on explaining, till I am embarrassed, that I am not the 'great' Gawain – I am only the 'little' Gawain. I am only his nephew: great, rough, irascible, terrifying, sometimes lovable Gawain is my awesome uncle – Gawain, the most famous man after Lancelot at King Arthur's court – Gawain of Orkney, son of grim old King Lot and the witch-queen Morgause, brought up in the fierce bleakness of Orkney with Gaheris, Agravaine, Gareth and the sinister Mordred. I am older than Mordred, but I am Gareth's son, and as long as I can remember we have lived apart from the Orkney family, in the south, in Lyonesse. My mother is the Lady of Lyonesse, Madam Leonie, whom Gareth, the gentlest of the Orkney knights, rescued from the Knight of the Red Laundes (now a very harmless old gentleman, and about to retire into a monastery, they tell me). Her sister Lynett, who accompanied my father on his quest and treated him so badly,

is my aunt, of course, and lives with us – she was married to Gaheris when my parents were married, but it didn't last – Gaheris hadn't my father's patient temperament by any means, and after the marriage night, she left him and became the King's messenger. Later she came back to her sister – and to my father, who I fear is the only man she really loves. She's a queer creature, is my aunt Lynett. I often think that if Arthur had given her to my uncle Gawain instead of to my uncle Gaheris, he would undoubtedly have swapped off her head in one of his bloody rages. As it is, she ranges about the forest roads on horseback, and is never happier than when carrying letters from Arthur to his knights. We wonder every time she sets out whether she will return alive – it isn't really safe, and she takes nobody with her but my father's old dwarf – but the ruffians of the forest seem to have some respect for her, perhaps because she is a remarkably good physician. That always brings a woman under suspicion of being a witch, though there isn't much of a witch about my aunt Lynett. Or perhaps it's her sharp tongue they are all afraid of.

We have lived as far back as I can remember in the land of Lyonesse, a sunny country stretching south from Cornwall. The sea

surrounds us on three sides, a narrow neck of land joining the peninsula to St Michael's Bay, where we can see the great Mount whence they flash signals on a polished shield all the way to Scillonia, which lies in sight of us. Ours is a rocky land, like Scillonia, but not high. The sun beats off the sea and warms it, and the spring flowers come early; for nine long months of the year there are soft breezes and the scent of honey; but for the other three months the sudden storms pounce on us like beasts of prey, and it is recorded that Merlin said that in a hundred years' time there will come a day when the sea will sweep right over the land and nothing will be left of it. And the thought of it is a grief to me.

Before I went to Arthur's court to be made a knight, I served my time as squire with my father, and learnt all that is required for a knight to know. I did not have to serve as a page, since I came of a noble house and had been bred up to courtly usages by my mother, who taught me every kind of noble manners. With my father I would gallop about the countryside after hares and foxes and deer and wild boars and sometimes wolves – dressed in rough leather and plastered with mud, stopping to snatch our noon-meat at some dirty, smoke-blackened

alehouse, or swigging our leather bottles of ale and munching our lumps of cheese under a tree. Then when I came home I would wash, and comb my hair, and put on silk and satin, and wait upon my beautiful mother, handing her the dishes and cups on my bended knee. Then presently she would laugh and tease me, and we would sit in her cosy bower, with the bright curtains to keep the warmth in, and tell long stories of the heroes of old and of the world of Faery.

There were no others of my age and rank in the castle – the house-carles' boys and I came together but little, and otherwise there were only my father and mother, my aunt Lynett, and such guests as sometimes came our way; and I grew up rather solitary, and very much of a dreamer. And what did I dream of? Why, of knighthood, and King Arthur, and his great Round Table, and how one day I should be numbered among them, and be the best – oh yes, the bravest, the truest, the noblest knight of them all. And of course, of women. That is, of fair ladies. For in my mind I saw them all as goddesses. How wonderful they were, I thought – starting with Our Blessed Lady, to whom I prayed day and night – then my adored mother – then my aunt Lynett in spite of her sharp tongue – and my comfortable old

nurse, why, she was a woman too, and so I must think of her with respect – and then all the wonderful ladies of whom I had heard tell – Queen Guinevere and Queen Yseult (no one had yet whispered a word of scandal to me, nor would I have suffered it) – Queen Morgause my grandmother (I had never seen her, and no one called her a witch in my hearing) – Ygraine, that far-off great-grandmother, and all those others: damosels and ladies in story and song, beyond number, all beautiful, all saintly, all to be served and protected. True, there were old crones who came to the back door for alms, and loud-voiced greasy kitchenmaids with red noses and bad teeth, and silly yellow-haired dolls who fooled about with the men-at-arms – but what of that? I was taught to look beyond the outward appearance, and remember all the tales of goddesses who had walked the earth disguised as peasant lasses or old women in rags. As I grew older the idea haunted me, obsessed me, that I must respect all women, protect them, shield them from danger. Men did dreadful things to them, I learnt with a shudder. The priest who came to teach me my catechism talked to me about Temptation. I, even I, he said, might be tempted to do dreadful things to those sacrosanct creatures. Dear

God, I . . . ? – How I prayed, how I resolved. I would be a pure knight to my life's end. I would love the most beautiful lady in the world, and lay my chaste adoration at her feet. Perhaps she would take my hand in hers and accept me for her true-love, and I would love her, but never, never touch her beautiful body. I would vow myself to virginity for her sake, all my life long. It never occurred to me that the lady might not care for the arrangement.

By which it can be seen plainly that I wasn't a very wise young man – in fact it might be said, with some justice, that I was a good bit of a young prig as well. I don't deny it, neither do I deny that I was as green as little apples, long after I should have known better.

The time drew near for me to be made a knight – as a knight's son, I could be knighted at eighteen years, my father standing sponsor for me, and vouching for me as having served my time as his squire. My birthday fell in November, so at Christmas, as ever was, I should be taken to Camelot, and presented to King Arthur, and there fulfil the solemn rites of knighthood.

You can imagine how the castle was in a flutter, and how my parents busied

themselves in providing me the best outfit that a knight could have. My father journeyed to Winchester, to procure me a magnificent suit of armour – part chain-mail, part plate, ingeniously jointed, decorated with damascene-work, and padded with soft leather inside to make it easy in wear. But the sword he bought at Marazion, from the Jewish merchants who came there from the Holy Land as they had done since time began – and this was a real blade of Damascus, than which there are none better unless they are of elvish work. My mother and Aunt Lynett made the rich crest and hanging silk draperies that should crown the great jousting helmet; the crest represented the hawk of the Orkney family, but white to distinguish it from the others; and my shield had no device at all, but was maiden white until such time as I should win myself an honourable blazon. Besides all these, of course, there were jerkins and hose of leather and of wool, and of stout linen, and shirts of fine linen; and courtly suits of silk and velvet, with a short mantle trimmed with squirrel's fur, in which to wait upon the King and Queen. To say nothing of boots and shoes and gloves and nightcaps and God-wot-what. It took three sumpter-mules to carry them all, in the end.

My father had often told me how he, in his time, came to Arthur's court in an old leather jerkin without a penny in his purse, plodding on foot till he was so footsore that he arrived at Camelot unable to walk at all, and had to lean on two old men to hobble up to the dais; and how he hid his identity, and became a scullion in Arthur's kitchen, because he was afraid of the scorn of his big brothers who had always bullied him, and also because he was too proud to bear their patronage and pity. He bided his time, watching and learning, and won his prize in the end. His mother Morgause, indeed, would have overwhelmed him with knightly equipment, and helped him with magic too – not for affection, but for family pride – but he would have none of it. He set out on foot without even a sword. But he was determined that my start in life should be different, and so was my mother; and as for Lynett, she looked me up and down, but there was no knowing what she thought.

For my horse, I had my father's own, a good reliable fellow called Trojan, not too large for me, not too fierce; perfect in manners and manage, and an old friend of mine. I had been secretly afraid that knightly honour would oblige me to ask for a taller and more fiery horse, so I was relieved when

my father insisted, on my obedience as a son, that I should have Trojan and no other. Trojan could be trusted in every emergency. I had practised jousting on his back, with my father and various of his friends, and we knew what to expect of each other. Jousting is a game like any other, and I was pronounced to be reasonably good at it. I would, of course, have to take part in the tourney after I was knighted.

The journey was a long, cold, tedious one, and I wasn't at all surprised that my mother and aunt Lynett had excused themselves from it. There was only my father and myself, besides the men-at-arms. I was glad – the nervous tension was quite enough without the ladies being there to make me more anxious. I don't think I could have borne it.

After rain and cold, mud and fog, we came in sight at last of the towers of Camelot, a little after noon of the short, dim day. A thrilling sight – how all its towers and pinnacles glistened, and its banners waved, above the massive stone ramparts and the little bright-coloured town that clustered at its foot. The great gate stood wide open, with the drawbridge down, and folk of all sorts went in and out with noise and cheerfulness; music played, trumpets

sounded from the turrets, bells rang, and already lights gleamed in the windows. My father said he could smell the dinners cooking a mile away. We clattered through the great gates, where men-at-arms in Arthur's livery stood more as if to welcome guests than to guard; a trumpeter above the gate blew notice of our arrival. Through bailey and keep and across the courtyard we went, to the royal hall, and there all was warmth and light and the colour of rich robes. I expected that we would be presented to the King and Queen with ceremony, after we had washed and changed; but the King made no formality with us. From the high dais he had seen us come in, and he came striding down the hall, hand outstretched. He was dressed only in a huntsman's suit of leather, for it was not yet the hour of state; but his look marked him out as the King. A tall man, taller even than my father; fair-haired and with a close beard, and I should judge between forty and fifty years old, with a head like one of those marble statues the Romans left behind, and large, bright grey eyes. If he had been in rags you would have looked at him twice and three times. He seized my father warmly by the hand and greeted him as an old friend; looked me up and down and laid a firm, rather heavy hand

on my shoulder, and led us both up to the dais, where the Queen was sitting.

They say her name means 'The White Apparition'. Truly I have never seen a lady so white – her hair like pale gold thread, but her face and neck and arms all like gleaming pale ivory, or like a sea-cliff in the summer with the sun beating on it, as you look from the sea. Her eyes were luminous too, light and clear, like the sea on a calm day. A beautiful white ghost of a lady, the moon to Arthur, who was the sun. She was robed in white and silver, loose and flowing. I knew that she was said to be with child, and as such she seemed to me very sacred indeed, hardly less than our Lady herself; and I thought my heart would stop beating at the wonder of her. Falling on one knee to kiss her hand, as I had been taught to do, I could hardly get up again, and my father had to jerk me, but not unkindly, to my feet.

Guinevere dismissed me with a rather remote smile, and my father took me to meet some of the other knights. Mostly he greeted the older ones, who had been with Arthur from the beginning, some twenty years back – Sir Kay the Seneschal, and Sir Lucan the Butler – their jobs must have been honorary by that time, or at least supervisory, for Sir Lucan never drew a

cork or tapped a barrel in those days, and Sir Kay's concern was more with the ciphers and lists of supplies in the chancellerie than with the kitchen; though my father still looked at him rather askance, as if he remembered being set to wash the dishes and nicknamed 'Pretty-Hands'. There was Sir Griflet, who was the first knight that Arthur had made, now, like Arthur, a strong man of forty or upwards; and Ulphius, who had been in his first great battle; and old Ector, who was Arthur's foster-father, now very grey and long-bearded. Some of the younger knights were there too, for a second generation of the Round Table was growing up; Lamorak and Percivale, the sons of King Pellenore – Percivale, a noticeable young man, rather over-tall and drooping, but with luminous dreaming eyes. There was Tristram, pale-skinned and dark-browed, but formidable; there was Dinadan, the cheerful, lovable joker, light-footed and light-tongued, leaning over the left side of Guinevere's chair, and trying to make her laugh; and there on her right side was Lancelot—

But now my father was greeting his brothers, the three Orkney-men, my uncles – Gawain, my namesake, Gaheris and Agravaine. They were big, overwhelming,

loud-voiced men, with Northern accents I could hardly understand. The four of them were caught up in a clamorous family clack, full of loud laughter and obscure allusions. I heard Gaheris asking after his wife with a sour smile, and not waiting to hear the reply. My father drew me into the middle of the group. ‘Here’s the boy,’ he said. They all bore down upon me and made me feel very small.

‘He’s thin,’ said Gawain, pinching my shoulder. ‘No muscle there. By God, Gareth, why couldn’t you have married a good Orkney lass?’

‘Why couldn’t I, you mean,’ interjected Gaheris. ‘There’s a dozen I could have if some obliging robber would—’

‘Enough said,’ interrupted my father. ‘We know all about that. Well, here’s my son, and I daresay he’ll do as well as any of them here. Will you give him the buffet tomorrow, Gawain?’

‘That I will,’ said Gawain, and I knew I was in for something.

Then he took hold of my father’s elbow, and drew him a little aside; and I heard him mutter out of the side of his mouth, ‘Mordred’s here.’

‘Mordred?’ My father’s eyebrows went up. Of what followed I could only hear

the word 'Sixteen', but there was a great deal of secretive grimacing and jerking of heads and thumbs, that made me faintly uneasy.

Then my father led me out of the great hall into the long cloister, and approached a door from which an uproar was coming that made the big hall seem quiet by comparison.

'That's where you must go,' he said. 'The squires' hall, till you've been through the ceremony tomorrow and the next day. I can't be with you now – you must manage on your own.'

My heart sank.

He gave me a bundle of clothes.

'Here's your things for this evening. Not your best. I'll keep them for you, and send them to you by a page when you need them. No good having more with you now – you'll soon know why . . . Now go on, and God be with you.'

He pushed me towards that door.

'*Go on,*' he insisted, and feigned a playful kick towards me. I braced myself, and opened the door.

In the middle of the bear-garden roar that came from the crowd inside, a rather high, drawling voice was saying, 'And now this lady, as I said – well, she took off her clothes—'

‘*All* her clothes?’ chorused several voices.

‘All her clothes, and was about to . . .’

The voice stopped suddenly, and the whole crowd turned and looked at me.

I suppose they weren’t bad lads really, but I saw them as a hostile pack of wild animals; and they looked back at me as such. The boy who had been telling the story, who seemed rather younger than myself, put himself at their head. He was fair-haired and complexioned, and vaguely reminded me of someone; but his whole texture was coarse – heavy eyelids, thick lips, swollen nostrils, spotty skin, and small reddish hairs shining all down his cheeks. His hair lay on his neck in thick blond curls, and his eyes were like blue marbles. He addressed me.

‘Oh . . . a newcomer. Well, how delightful. And what might you choose to call yourself?’

I stood up to him with what courage I could muster.

‘Gawain,’ I said.

‘Gawain!’ – The name was greeted with a shout of incredulous laughter.

‘That’s lie number one,’ said the ringleader.

I felt my face getting hot.

‘I’ll have you know that it’s my name,’ I said. ‘I’m Gawain the son of Gareth of Orkney.’

‘Oho!’ said he, stretching his marble eyes a little more. ‘Are you so? Why, then you’re my nephew. Meet your uncle Mordred.’ And he held out his hand to me.

I didn’t like the look of that hand, but I felt I could hardly refuse to take it; so I took it, and he swung up his left hand and caught me a stinging blow on the side of my face, that sent me skidding across the room to crash into the row of washbasins. A pewter basin went over, drenching me and the clean clothes I was carrying. I picked myself up off the floor, dazed and hurt and wet.

‘There’s your knightly buffet,’ he said. ‘You’ll be glad to know,’ he addressed the room, ‘that this person here – my nephew – is to be made a knight tomorrow – at eighteen! Because he’s his father’s son. Some people have all the luck. Come here, nephew, and kiss the toe of my boot. Come on.’

‘I’ll see you in hell first,’ I said.

The others laughed. I couldn’t tell if they were for me or against me, but I rather thought the latter. Then a chap whose face I didn’t at all dislike came up. ‘Give over, Mordred,’ he said. ‘That’s enough.’ This new fellow had a wide, goodnatured

mouth, a short nose, smudgy brows. 'My name's Bedivere,' he said. 'Let's see what's happened to your clothes.'

Mordred drew off with the crowd, but they went on chattering and guffawing, polishing bits of equipment as they did so, and tidying themselves for the dinner. Bedivere did what he could to sort out my general dampness.

'His Majesty's looking pleased tonight,' someone remarked casually.

'And well he might,' another voice put in. 'Everyone knows about the Queen. Next Midsummer, they say.'

'So the old chap will have an heir at last?'

'As if he hadn't one already,' came Mordred's voice. 'And as to lawful heirs, well – it's a wise child that knows its own father, they say. No doubt our good King will be very pleased about the *Queen's* child.'

Rather incautiously I emerged from my corner.

'What do you mean by that?' I said across the intervening heads. Mordred fixed me with those blue pebble eyes.

'What I say, my good greenhorn. We all know about Lancelot – don't we? About Lancelot and my lady Guinevere? Don't

we? – All, that is, except our good King himself – who *thinks* he's going to have a lawful heir to the throne—'

This was too much for me. I pushed forward through the crowd.

'Draw your sword,' I said in a voice I hardly recognized as my own.

'Eh? Oh, it's me nephew. Now then, boy, none of that—'

'Draw your sword,' I repeated.

'Oh, God! What's the child think he's doing?'

'You shall *not*,' I said, 'you shall *not* say what you have said – about our Lady the Queen. Draw your sword, I say!'

'Oh, don't be a fool!' he laughed. 'I'll say it again if I please, I'll say she's a—'

With one bound I was across those who stood in my way, and had my hands on his throat – a bench went over with a crash, and we rolled on the floor together. My heart was pounding and my head buzzing so that I hardly heard, but rather felt, the sudden silence as the door opened and an older voice said:

'What's this brawl? Get up there.'

Mordred and I both scrambled to our feet. Old Sir Griflet, who I later learnt was in charge of the squires, stood frowning.

‘Well? Fighting like drunken churls in an alehouse?’

‘Sir,’ I said, with my eyes on his feet, ‘he spoke shamefully of – of a lady . . .’

‘So. The ladies here, as well as their Majesties, would be better pleased if you kept the peace. You – you’re Sir Gareth’s boy, I believe?’

‘I am, sir, so please you.’

‘To be knighted on Christmas Day. A bad beginning. No, I’ll not report the matter, for that cause only. Be quiet now, all you cubs, and get yourselves ready for the hall. The meat’s about to be served. Now get to your stations.’

He swung the door to, and we went sullenly to our washbasins and combs. Bedivere stood by me.

‘Don’t heed Mordred,’ he said quietly. ‘We all know what he’s like. Let him alone. We none of us like him, but the weaker ones follow him, and we have to put up with him because of his—’ here he checked something he was about to say, and amended it with: ‘—because of his mother.’

Bedivere kept by me for the rest of the evening, and made up his straw pallet next to mine for the night, so keeping Mordred and his followers away, or I don’t think I could have endured it. Bedivere was

a good chap, very dependable, but with strange dreamy ideas too. In the course of a long, whispered conversation that night, he told me that he had once had a dream about being the very last of King Arthur's knights to be left alive after a great and terrible battle – the very last, and Arthur dying in his arms. He had awakened in a shaking fright, as cold as stone, and had never told anyone about it till then. He was to be knighted at Easter.

We were all up long before light, on the chilly morning of Christmas Eve; and came to a good breakfast in the big hall, the squires alone, the knights breaking their fast in another chamber. We had broth and bread, salted butter and small ale: and I was counselled to make a good meal, for I had to fast until breakfast next day. All very well, but I was feeling sick with excitement and apprehension and the sense of the occasion. I swallowed some broth, but no one could say I made a good breakfast.

I was very glad when presently a monk in a brown habit appeared, and beckoned me. Bedivere said, 'Now for it – good luck!' and gave me a handshake; but Mordred looked up from the end of the table, pushed out his thick lips, lifted his coarse nostrils in

a sneer, twitched an eyebrow – as it were casting a smear over the whole thing. Just when I wanted my thoughts to be serene and undisturbed.

The monk led me into the great church, where I made my shrift – and how I tried! I was determined that my soul should be as clean as I knew how. Painfully I scrutinized every corner of my mind, and accused myself of sinful intentions that I probably never had, just in case . . . After the effort, and the priest's quiet words, I felt very clean in soul, and all the discord and unpleasantness of Mordred and his friends slipped away. I was then led into a big echoing room next to the kitchen, where I had the ceremonial bath. There was a large round tub of hot water, filled up by scullions from the great cauldrons in the kitchen next door – the last of these had just tipped his canful in as I entered the room. There were perfumed herbs in the bath, and rose petals floating on the surface. My father and my uncle Gawain, being my sponsors, were there, and undressed me, saw me step into the bath, and then laid embroidered cloths over the bath so that only my head could be seen; they then recited to me, by turns, a long exhortation about the duties of

knighthood. For myself I sat at ease on the wooden stool in the tub, with my back resting against its side, relaxed in the warm, sweet-smelling water – after all the excitement rather drowsy and dreamy, with the sonorous, monotonous words going on and on – and nearly fell asleep. It was pleasant and peaceful, and I wished I could stay there for ever. The words of the exhortation just ran together in my mind as a kind of vague magnificent music – I couldn't have told you what they meant. I was miles away – till suddenly the words stopped, the covers were ripped off, and my father was hauling me out. The air was wretchedly cold as I struggled out of the warm water. My father and my uncle wrapped warm towels round me and led me off, padding barefooted, into a little room close at hand, and laid me in a fine white-draped bed. And now, I thought, I'll be allowed to have my sleep out. Not a bit of it. The rest in the bed, it seemed, was only symbolic. I had hardly lain there a minute when, after a prayer, they hauled me out again, thrust a new shirt, tunic and breeches at me, and bade me be dressed – for, they said, I was now a new creature, just born, and must rise and take up a new life.

It must have been late by this time – I don't know how the time had passed, but it was already dark, and the torches were lit. In the great church the knights were assembled, glimmering in the candle-light. Here there was long chanting and praying, and reading from the holy words; and here they showed me my breastplate and my helmet, my shield, my sword, my spurs and my belt, and explained what each should mean to a knight; and laid them, one by one, hallowed with both holy water and holy incense, on the altar of the little dark chapel behind the high altar.

The officiating priest, a distant impersonal figure, led me by the hand, bareheaded and clothed only in tunic and hose, to a faldstool before this, the eastern altar, and directed me to kneel.

'Remain here,' he instructed me in a whisper, 'and watch your arms upon the altar till the hour of prime. Do not move from where you are, and do not look behind you even once. The Lord be with you,' – and he rustled away from me. Behind me I could hear the choir and the knights going out – from the dimming of the light that shone on the eastward wall behind the altar, I could tell how the candles were being extinguished one by one; in the end one

candle, as I could guess, still burned. The footsteps died away down the long length of the church. I was left alone.

Now, knowing the long vigil before me, I tried to fill my mind with the thoughts that should be there. At first this was easy, for I had much to think about – how I was at last and indeed being made a knight, and that power would descend upon me, as it had done at my First Communion, and how I should never be the same again. I would be a perfect gentle knight, always courageous, always gentle, always strong, always trustworthy. Now both my soul and my body were clean, so clean that I was afraid to brush the bloom off them. If only I could die now, I felt, surely I should be safe for ever and go straight to Paradise? But no, I was to be a knight, and have duties to do. Oh, I would, I would . . . And then the spate of fine inspiring thoughts began to spend itself and die down, and I began to be more aware that I was alone, that this place was dark and vast and silent, and that there was no escape for long hours yet; that I must not move from where I knelt, nor turn round . . . not turn round, when who knows what might be behind me? I listened behind me, with my heart sinking. Silence – silence broken by all those little uncanny creakings

and rustlings and tickings that belong to a large dark empty building at night . . . How cold the back of my neck felt . . . Rustlings and sighings, the creaking of old wood. No, I mustn't look round. Before me lay the altar, an old plain stone one, with a purple cloth whereon lay my armour, high above was an arched window, and on the plain brick wall between altar and window a black wooden cross, on which I tried to keep my eyes fixed; but to right and left of the cross was pale blank wall, on which the single taper behind me cast its light; and as I watched, in the space to the left of the cross a shadow rose up, and took shape – the shape of a head, with horns and wagging ears—

I stifled a scream – but I must not, must not look round. I was a knight – or was I? I had to *be* a knight, God help me – and with that horror looking over my shoulder—

And then I heard a footstep, and a rustle, and a malicious chuckle behind me. Mordred! My relief was more than half anger that he should have tried to frighten me with this childish trick. Why, I knew how to make better shadow-pictures than that . . . But that he and his hangers-on – I couldn't tell how many – should come and bait me now – intruding on my solemn trial

with their silly horseplay – I was all alone too, and at their mercy. What should I do if they attacked me? Should I snatch my sword from the altar and round on them? I had been told not to move or turn my head. Oh God, it was hard.

They remained there behind me for quite some minutes, making their devil-shadows, sniggering, waiting to see how I'd take it. They made noises too – hissing, whispering, tapping, groaning. But now that I knew what the noises were, I took no notice – only praying that they would do no worse than make noises. And after a while, as they became sure that they would get no response from me, they gave it up and went away, and I heard their footsteps clank away down the far end of the church. Once more I was alone.

And now it was harder to collect my scattered thoughts. Supposing – my mind said to me – supposing that thing on the wall had *not* been just a shadow? But no – I must think of the ideals of the knightly life. To be good and true, to respect and protect damosels and virgins – oh, yes, yes indeed, certainly I would . . . in spite of the . . . what? In spite of that old man I could see out of the corner of my eye, who kept on saying '*You – You* protect damosels and virgins?

– You know what you'll do – you'll deflower a virgin some day. Yes, you will. *You!* You will ruin a helpless girl, and take from her what she can never have again – and she'll be disgraced, and perhaps she'll kill herself. And you! The finger of scorn will be pointed at you – you'll have your spurs hacked off by the cook – they'll cast you out, and what will you do then?'

I tried to swivel my eyes round to see him – he was grey and long-bearded, with yellow teeth that hung over his lips. He seemed to be palely luminous. As fast as I moved my eyeballs to try and see him, he went further back behind my head. And he went on saying:

'And perhaps nobody will ever know it was you, and that will be worse. You will be torn with remorse, everyone thinking you are a faithful knight, and all the time that poor girl— perhaps several poor girls. You will know yourself vile. You'd be better dead. You know you'll do it. You know you will. You a knight! Better jump up from your knees now, and run into the hall, and tell them all you're no good. You daren't? You haven't even the courage? You'll go on then, and fall and be damned.'

I could hear him cackling and chuckling, and this time I knew it wasn't the squires.

It was something quite different. Was it the rattle of charnel bones I could hear, as he rubbed his hands together? and couldn't I smell the awful reek of the grave?

And then at the other side of me a round, floating thing, like a ball of light, came oscillating across in the tail of my sight – came a little nearer in, and I saw it was a shining globe, and in it the face of the loveliest woman I had ever seen. The beautiful face brought tears into my eyes, and I felt like stretching my arms out to her in entreaty. The vision, a face and nothing more, hovered so close that I almost thought she would have kissed my cheek; she was so close behind my elbow that I could only with the very greatest effort forbear to turn round. She seemed to be calling me, too. Then she rustled forward again – surely it was the rustle of silk and satin that I could hear on the floor at my side? From the shining head a form seemed to extend – and then as I dropped my eyes as far towards her as I dared, the light from that gleaming globe hit the form below it – and it wasn't human at all, it was a huge, dark, glittering snake – a snake with a body thicker than my arm, dark indigo blue and iridescent, coiling away into the dark behind me, and its head, its head that heartbreakingly beautiful face—

I could hear myself sobbing aloud, and the sweat poured off me. Pray? I prayed frantically – and all the time the grey old man at my other elbow was saying, 'It's no use, you see, it's no use . . .' But I held on – literally held on, for I gripped the faldstool with both hands, fixing my eyes on the cross in front of me and trying to imagine Our Blessed Lady and the holy angels – and then at last I heard the great bell begin to ring, and the footsteps of the priests coming to release me – and at that the phantoms were suddenly gone. But I was shaking all over, and as the priest raised me up he looked at me strangely and said, 'All right now – poor lad, you've had a hard vigil. See, your limbs are stiff – that's from the long kneeling. There, easy does it, my son.' Indeed, I had to lean heavily on his arm as I got up, for I could hardly stand.

They helped me into a vestry, and let me sit down for a few minutes, slumped against the back of a chair, and one of the monks sponged my face with cold water – they couldn't let me break my fast yet. And then beyond the vestry door there were lights and chanting and the smell of incense – the rumour and rustle of a great and brilliant crowd collecting, and the holy voices of priests. One of the monks

said, ‘Come,’ and drew me to my feet, and with a monk each side of me I stepped out again into the church. It was ablaze with lights now, lamps and tapers in shining groves, and the high altar draped with white and gold; and the whole building was packed with knights and ladies, bright with polished metal and coloured silks, with faces of solemn exultation turned towards the altar. So the first Mass of Christmas Eve began (not of course the great Mass of Christmas, which would be at the coming midnight). There was built up a white and glowing glory around us all; and when the Holy Office was over, the King himself stepped from his place and stood on the altar steps; and the monks led me before him. Two squires closed in on me, and as the priest brought from the altar my helmet, my breastplate, my sword and belt and the rest, King Arthur himself gave them to me, and the squires buckled them upon me. Then, full armed all but my helmet, I knelt on the steps before King Arthur, and received the accolade.

One cannot speak much of moments like this. It was all I had expected and more. From that moment I was King Arthur’s man for life or death, and I was something more than myself. Something of Arthur’s spirit,

his personality, his special interest, entered into me – a feeling that he could trust me, use me as a limb, a sword in his hand. That was what I felt when, having bent before him for the accolade, I looked up when he bade me rise and saw his face.

Then bells were ringing overhead, and people were thronging and jostling round me to shake my hand and call me Sir Gawain. My father was first, of course, unashamedly kissing my cheek; and then the Queen, who had let him go before her, held out her white hand for me to kiss; then Lancelot's handclasp, and Sir Griflet, and Sir Ector . . . Sir this, and Sir that, and all the while the bells went on ringing, and suddenly I was tired to death and very hungry. We slowly passed out of the church door, and there was my uncle Gawain, coming up smiling, and the people cleared a space before him. He held out his hand – and then I felt a smashing blow at the side of my head, and went down into the dust like a ninepin, and all the people cheered. I heard him say, 'And be thou a good knight,' and he hauled me to my feet. This was too much for me, overwrought as I was, and I felt the tears spring into my eyes, and my chest tightening to explode into a catastrophe of weeping; but I held so tight to what was left of my

control – I held so tight that everything went dark and I lost consciousness.

I opened my eyes again, and I was in a small, warm, light room, with my father propping me up and putting a cup of wine to my lips, and my uncle Gawain saying awkwardly, 'Och, maybe I hit you a bit too hard, but it's the custom, ye ken – I'm sorry, laddie, but ye see, my hand's a bit heavy – ye're no hurt?' My father was a bit short with Uncle Gawain, and very gentle and understanding with me. I think he knew what my last effort had meant.

Then, when they had recovered me somewhat, we went in to a great breakfast at the Round Table itself. The Hall of the Round Table was a different place from the great hall of the castle, where all would assemble and where the King and Queen and their peers sat on the dais, and the lords and ladies, the knights and gentlewomen, squires and pages, men-at-arms and all, sat before them in their degrees at the long tables. The Hall of the Round Table was a place reserved for the knights alone. It was four-square, with the Table in the midst; the Table was divided into three times nine sieges; for twenty-four knights, the King, the Queen (the only woman who might be present) and Merlin. Of course

there were more than twenty-four knights in the Order now, but when there were more present, the rest sat along the square sides of the hall. One seat was left vacant at the Table, and that was the Siege Perilous. Each knight had his name painted on his place at the Table, and those that were present would sit in their own sieges if possible; but of course not all of them were present at any one time, and many of the original twenty-four were dead and gone, but their names remained there, with the names of the new owners added above them. My uncle Gawain arranged that I should sit in his siege over his own name, Sir Gawain, which was now mine also; and he himself sat elsewhere. I had hoped to see Merlin there, of whom I had heard so much; but he was not at court any more – people said he was growing too old – a younger magician took his place, much to my disappointment.

Meals at the Round Table were always very special – like this one, they were solemn, and yet they were merry, as if we were all a little light-headed with wonder, after the high and holy daybreak. That was the Table where, once or twice before, and as I was to learn later, once or twice after, the Sangreal itself appeared.

I ate and drank heartily, for I certainly needed it, and it was a good breakfast too; and everyone made much of me and was amiable to me, as the new knight. I felt better, and after breakfast my father took me away to one of the small rooms in the knights' quarters – no more keeping with the squires, thank God! and let me sleep in a soft bed for the rest of the day and part of the night.

Before midnight I was roused again, to take part in the Midnight Mass of Christmas. By this time I had become quite bewildered as to day and night, and fairly lost between today and tomorrow and yesterday. But having slept since long before noon, I was rested and fresh, and enjoyed the late collation after Mass more than those who had stayed up singing carols and waiting for midnight; and when they all went to bed I was still wakeful, and roved about the hall, warming myself by the fire, polishing my armour for the tourney the next day, and killing time as best I could.

At last, at early light, the company bestirred themselves, and all prepared for the great event of the day, the jousting. This I knew was going to be my great test. I had practised and practised, and gone through every possible exercise and training at home, and I knew all the techniques, and

had ridden in small jousts with neighbours and visiting friends; and my father assured me I ought to do reasonably well if I kept my head. As for old Trojan, he knew it all backwards.

Everybody knows how a tournament is set out, how the lists and the barriers are arranged, how it all looks – the pavilions, the royal gallery, the banners and pennons, the colour and glitter, the noise and the excitement. And there was I, in my brand-new jousting helmet, out of which I could only see through a narrow slit. Nonetheless, I had learnt to calculate my distances, from what I could see through that narrow slit, to a considerable degree of accuracy.

We drew for opponents; if you beat your first opponent you went on to the next in line, and so on as far as your success lasted. I waited in line, watching, through that slit, the knights on the opposite side as they came up one by one, but having no means of knowing one from another, hidden as they were by their armour, save by their crests and the devices on their shields, and those didn't as yet convey much to me – they were all strange. The herald cried their names as they rode up. Each rode against the barrier, sideways on to his opponent, meeting him with a slash

and trying to sweep or thrust him off his horse. One or other always went down with a huge clatter of armour, but the armour was so padded that, though their spears were usually splintered, hardly anyone was hurt more than a few bruises. Of course, accidents did sometimes happen . . .

Now my turn came. I heard the herald shout, 'Sir Segwa rides against Sir Gawain le Jeune . . .' and I gave a shake to Trojan's reins and was off.

I saw my opponent riding up the other side of the barrier, a big man in blue armour. Carefully I remembered everything I had been taught, and followed the formula exactly. It worked like a spell. Aim, point, slope, sweep – so! He was off his horse with a rattle like a ton of old iron, and I swept on along the barrier, round and back, and the crowd roared applause. I lifted my beaver and saluted the King and Queen, and saw my father's delighted face beside them. Then I wheeled about ready for the next course.

'Sir Gawain le Jeune against Sir Leontine . . .' shouted the herald, and I was off again – but as I swung my lance I felt something was wrong. My balance was gone – my girth slipped, the saddle turned under me, and I crashed to the ground. I heard the crowd groan as I felt the pain of the fall

in all my joints, and with an effort rolled clear of Trojan's hoofs. Some of the crowd applauded my opponent, but most were disappointed because of me. I struggled to my feet, and stood dazed, while one of the squires caught Trojan – it isn't easy to run in jousting armour – and brought him back to me, carrying the saddle. I plodded from the lists on foot, heavy -hearted and mortified. But what had happened? I was sure I had tightened that girth properly. How had it worked loose? Hadn't I secured the buckle?

My father came up behind me as I took my helmet off. 'Hard luck, boy,' he said. 'But how did it happen? Didn't you tighten the girth?'

'Of course I did, Father,' I replied, and then suddenly it flashed into my mind that someone could have undone that buckle – leaving it so that it didn't slip at once, but only after I had ridden one course – and even while I thought of it I saw, over the heads of the crowd of stable-boys, the sneering face of Mordred. It was on the tip of my tongue to cry his name aloud – and then I thought that an honourable knight could hardly do so without any proof at all; neither would it be knightly to start making excuses and saying it wasn't my fault. So I held my tongue. My

father went off shaking his head, and soon I learnt that he persuaded the marshals to let me ride another course. I led Trojan back to the horse-lines and put his saddle on again, very carefully you may be sure. I took a good look at the buckle of the girth, but it told me nothing. (It was a very good thing that we were not using the full caparison, with the great flouncing skirts draping the horse's legs, or the whole thing would have tangled up, and Trojan's legs might have been broken.)

And, of course, after that I should not have left Trojan alone for one single minute – nor would I have done, but that my uncle Gawain called me out from the horse-lines and I couldn't say no to him; so I gave the reins to one of the horse-boys and went to his pavilion. It was just to tell me that I was to ride once more, against Sir Dinadan – a kind and jolly man who was anxious to give me another chance. My uncle also advised me, rather gratuitously, to look well to my girths this time. So I took my leave of him as soon as I could, and hastened back to Trojan.

The herald announced, 'Sir Dinadan against Sir Gawain le Jeune,' and I mounted and moved in. The moment I was in the saddle I knew there was something very wrong – Trojan winced and started and

sidestepped – then as I put him to the gallop and lowered my full weight with the lance into the saddle, he seemed to go mad. He plunged and reared, threw up his forelegs and then his hind legs; struggled, raged – he bore me out into the clear space of the field, away from the barrier where Sir Dinadan had already hurled past – I clinging on desperately, being tossed about, hardly knowing what was happening to me – at last, with a scream such as horses give in battle, Trojan reared right up, pawing the air with his hoofs, and as he came down again, threw me. I crashed across the width of the lists and fell heavily against the railings. I could see nothing in my helmet, but I could hear Trojan scream again, and the thunder of his hoofs. Then someone dragged me clear and pulled my helmet off.

My father and uncle supported me away from the field – three or four grooms were struggling with Trojan, who was lashing out and foaming at the mouth.

'I think you'd better quit now, son,' my father said, very kindly and quietly.

'That's a vicious horse,' said my uncle. 'Why d'ye let the boy ride him, Gareth? Ought to send him to the knacker's before he slays someone.'

‘What, Trojan?’ said my father. ‘Trojan’s not vicious. I don’t know what’s come over him. I trust him like – like my son.’

I was too miserable and humiliated to speak. I just went with them, back to the horse-lines, with Trojan being led clattering and stumbling behind us. Knights came up and spoke to me, saying how well I’d tried and how sorry they were. They were all so dreadfully kind to me.

And then Mordred came up, with his rancid smile, and said, ‘I hope everybody is being kind to you, nephew?’

I couldn’t go for him then and there. There was absolutely nothing I could do. I felt I wanted to scream aloud, or to lie down and kick, or be sick, or throw myself out of a window—

Only one thing I could do. I got two men to hold Trojan’s head firmly, and I carefully removed his saddle. There was a beech-nut under it . . .

And so it was that I came to the great Christmas banquet, miserable and humiliated, my pride in the dust, hurt and angry, and altogether at the bottom of the world. As the new-made knight and my father’s son I was given a seat on the dais with the King’s special friends, and

placed next to Lancelot – just when I was longing to crawl away and hide myself in a dark closet. Nobody spoke of the jousting, and in my hurt pride I imagined that they were all carefully, kindly refraining from speaking of my humiliation.

We went early to the feast; such sun as there was, low and cold on the snowfields, was still in the sky, and glowed in redly through the leaded and coloured windows of the great hall. Where we sat, on the dais, the big outer doors faced us where important strangers, embassages and heralds were wont to enter; but now they were closed against the cold. Yet we sat waiting, and everyone looked at those doors.

'It's as well we are assembled early,' Sir Dinadan said to me in low tones – he was on my right, and on my left was Lancelot, who was on the right of the Queen. 'I hope you're not too hungry, for dinner won't be for another hour. I took a nuncheon of bread and ale before coming in. You see,' he went on in reply to my enquiring look, 'it's our King's custom at the big feasts. Dinner can't begin till he's seen a marvel . . . as if it wasn't marvel enough that we all wait patiently for our meat. So they all know about it, and Sir Kay brings us all to table a full hour before the meat's ready. There's always something

turns up. When Merlin was here he used to manage one of his sleights or phantoms or whatever they are – that is, if no real adventure presented itself. Now poor old Merlin's decided to leave us, we have to make do with what we can – I think they've got some mummers with a masque – unless, of course, anything *does* happen—'

'I'm sorry to miss Merlin,' I said. 'Why has he left?'

'Oh – poor old chap, he's growing very old. Very old and feeble. We're all sorry he's gone. It's – somehow not so safe as when he was here.'

A silence fell – everyone sat quiet, looking towards the King, who gazed towards the door. Some of the pages giggled nervously – they were silenced.

'Why is it getting so dark?' I whispered to Dinadan.

'It's the snow – yes, here it comes,' he replied as a gust of wind hurled itself against the windows. And then far off we all heard something. It wasn't the wind – it was a drumming – a horse approaching, yes, no – larger and heavier – der-um, der-um, der-um – nearer, nearer, louder, louder—

A shudder, without reason, swept through the hall. Men held their breath, as the

thundering drew ever nearer, and every face was white; for the drumming, drumming, carried a menace beyond words – Dogs below in the hall slunk under their masters' feet. The Queen's two little trainbearers, little damosels of twelve or so, were clinging together and quietly weeping for fear. Arthur and Lancelot closed up each side of the Queen, and I saw her reach out a thin pallid hand to each of them . . .

Then the drumming ceased, and was followed by a heavy, dull plodding, as if some heavy beast approached, step by ponderous step, shaking the earth. Then on the door, three shattering knocks – and the door flew open with a rush of cold wind that swept the torches sidelong; and in the doorway stood That which had come.

The thing was a monster.

No other word would describe it – it was human in shape, but too big – terrifyingly too big. It stood all of eight feet high, and with its shaggy head and great hulking shoulders filling the width of the door – its head drooped like a bull's about to charge, and its arms swung forwards – the fingers of one hand dropped down, well below its shambling knees, and the other hand clutched a weapon. At first, against the wan gleam of the snow, the figure stood as a shape in black – then,

as the light of fires and torches shone upon it, I could see that it was green, a strange gleaming green all over – its tangled hair and bristling brows, like a tussock of rank grass; the flesh of the face, the neck, the bare arms and great coarse hands, all an unnatural, reptilian green – as well as the figure's clothes and armour, rough and ancient, yet encrusted with gold and gems as if arisen from some older world. Only the eyes were red, and the teeth were an unclean yellow with red and drooling gums; and on the face was the most bestial ferocity that I had ever seen on man or brute. And the weapon it leant on was an axe.

I had heard that there were still such creatures in the world – offspring of an older time, hardly human, dwelling upon the fringes and in the outer wild. But here was one, in the midst of us, in the light of the torches and between the dressed tables, within arm's reach of the gaily dressed women and the little pages . . . as if it were a dangerous wild beast, a deadly snake raised to strike. We were forty knights and sixty men-at-arms, but most of us were unarmed, and if that Thing had but swung its long axe it would have mown down ten before the rest could stir – and worse, the front ranks were the women and children . . .

None moved.

With deliberate heavy step the monster advanced into the hall, and then we heard its voice – harsh, deep, croaking, as from long disuse.

'King Arthur.'

'I am King Arthur,' he said, in a voice that did not shake.

'I come in peace.'

A sigh of relief went round the hall, but we still held ourselves tense and apprehensive. What might this Thing mean by peace?

'I ask a boon.'

'Say on, and I will – grant it.' Arthur's voice in the known formula, only hesitated a fraction.

'A Christmas game!' and the monster gave a slow, cackling laugh. 'No more than a game! – Give me a man here to exchange blows with me. One blow for one blow. No more. Have you one brave enough?'

I could hear the hissing sound of a deep indrawn breath from all in that assembly. None answered.

'One blow for one blow,' the monster persisted in its creaking voice. 'With this axe of mine. Let your champion strike me first – one blow on the neck – and then let me strike him. Come now, is there none of you—?'

Heads were turned, and now the hall rustled with men looking this way and that – but none came forward.

The creature grinned, convulsing its horrible features, rolling its red eyes. One hand smote the heft of the axe on the floor before it, the other thumped its breast like a drum.

'What – not one? Not to save the name of the Round Table? Cowards and cravens – ha, ha! Not a man to stand up to me! Not one! All, all afraid of me. Oh yes, I could lay my hands on your pretty ladies, pick up your little pages and swing them against the wall, and snatch at your lovely Queen there – but I won't, though I could. I only ask you for one man, one man to stand up to me, for one blow – and you can't give me one!'

I saw Lancelot, who was on my left, start from his place – but in the same instant I saw the Queen, whose hand still rested in his, tighten her hold, while her lips framed the word 'No.' Then Arthur himself rose, loosing her other hand from his.

'I answer the challenge,' he thundered across the hall, 'I, myself, will defend the honour of the Round Table.'

I saw Guinevere's face then: and whatever men may now say of her, I know and will

always maintain that though she loved Lancelot, she also loved Arthur, and she loved him with compunction and sorrow. In her eyes I could see the torment of her soul. And that was the moment that decided me—

I stood up, thrusting back my stool clumsily with noise, and stepped to the edge of the dais. Then I raised my voice.

'My lord King – I pray you let this aventure be mine.'

All were silent as I spoke. So far the words of the formula, but I must needs go on and add more.

'My lord King, I'm the youngest knight here, the least of you all – quite useless, quite valueless. Nobody here will miss me – the Round Table won't be the poorer for just me – while you, my lord—'

I stopped, embarrassed at the sound of my own voice. Arthur, who was already on the floor and had received the axe from the hand of the giant, turned to me, and I saw his eyes light up. He held the axe out to me horizontally in both his hands.

'My good knight,' he said loudly, 'yours be the aventure, and may God give you joy of the due performance thereof.'

That, again, was the formula, but there was more in it than a ritual utterance. I

came down from the dais – I could feel the tenseness all round me as the company watched me. Arthur placed the heavy axe in my hands, while the giant shambled to and fro at the far end of the hall, snuffling like a bull in a field.

'My lord,' I whispered to Arthur, 'shall I strike to kill?'

'Surely,' he replied. 'Strike once and make an end, and you'll not have to fear his blow.'

'I will, my lord,' I replied, with a confident smile that was a long way from my heart.

I approached the monster, who looked me up and down, as if it only dimly appreciated that a change had been made. Then to my surprise it sank on one knee, placed its clasped hands on the knee that was upraised, and bowed its head. The rank green hair fell forward, baring its neck – I could see the coarse yellowish-green skin, with larger pores like a pig's, and the short hairs springing up blackish-green and bristly.

The axe was not a weapon I had ever used much, being no part of knightly warfare, but belonging to an earlier age; but I had chopped wood, and sometimes jointed the carcase of a beast. The edge, I saw, was sharp enough for any work. But this must all be done with one blow – there could not be a second. I swung

the axe for a minute to get the feel of it, then made a prayer and heaved it high, and with a good bold swing brought it down. It fell true and with all my weight behind it – I felt it bite bone and gristle . . . it went through, and the head leapt forward and rolled on the ground. Rolled and rolled and went on rolling – it spun horribly right across the hall, and thudded against the booted feet of a man-at-arms, who, with an instinctive movement that was half a shudder, kicked it back into the middle of the hall again. I saw with sickened fascination that the blood that dribbled from it as it rolled was not red but green – a sticky dark green like green paint. Then I heard gasps of amazement all round me, and I looked back at the body of my adversary.

The headless trunk, that should by rights have fallen prone on the floor, still knelt, with green blood pumping from the severed neck – and then, incredibly, it heaved itself to its feet, headless as it was, dead as it ought to have been – and stood, tottering and bleeding. Then, step by step, groping before it as a blind man walks, it stumped across to where its head lay, and scooped up the head in one huge hand. The creature held its head thus, and waved it before us all – the eyes open and rolling horribly, somehow

still alive, the mouth twitching, the neck still dripping green blood. Right before Guinevere it held the head – she closed her eyes and sank back, and her women gathered quickly round her and carried her out of the hall.

A voice came from the head – or was it from the headless body, where the head should have been – how could we tell?

'Haaaa—' it said, a long mirthless laugh. 'Your champion has struck his blow. Let him abide mine—'

And at that, I felt that there was no more blood in my heart. And I do not think the bravest of knights could have felt otherwise.

'But not now,' went on that hollow unearthly voice, as if indeed something else, that was not visible, spoke through those dead lips. 'Let him come in a year and a day. Let him come to the Green Chapel that is by the Castle Haut-Desert, north-west from here – and let him call on the Green Knight. Write it down, you scribes of the King. And let him not fail, or your Round Table is shamed for ever.'

The axe lay on the floor where it had fallen from my hand. The giant touched it with its foot.

'Let him – bring – this – axe,' it said, slower and slower, like a clock that is running down, 'for – his – token.'

And then – good God, it would have been a thing to laugh at if it had not been so horrible – it thrust its head back on its shoulders, and strode out as it had come, all men drawing back to make way for it. None followed to see where it went. The great doors swung together behind it, and it was gone.

And all at once the hall was full of noise – made up of laughter and shudders and excited talking – we had to laugh, it seemed, to shake off the fear – though some were crying, and not only the women either. And Arthur descended from his dais again, and laid his hand on my shoulder, and everyone looked at me. I saw my father's face, and he was as pale as death. Guinevere had taken her seat again, whiter than her usual white, but composed, and Arthur led me up to her. I knelt and kissed her hand, but she bent forward and pressed her lips on my brow. And I heard my father say, 'Oh, my boy, my boy – God knows I'm proud of you – but did it have to be – like this? What shall I tell your mother?'

And I knew that they all regarded me as under sentence of death.

3 • Vivian

Time went on, after that fateful Midsummer, and the year turned towards Christmas.

Bertilak, now my husband, never came to my chamber after our wedding night. He was gentleness and consideration itself, and gave me full honours of my position as lady of the castle, seating me on his right hand at the table, and setting my aunt Morgan on his left – she didn't like that, I could see! – and insisting that the castle people should call me 'Dame' instead of 'Demoiselle'. He gave me presents too, and spoke to me always with a wistful gentleness; hardly ever did he lay a hand on me, save in the formal gestures of courtesy; but sometimes he would take my face between his hands, and very gravely kiss my forehead, and then there seemed to be unshed tears in his eyes.

But I could still see the little green line that ran round his neck, and it made me shudder in spite of myself.

He was still afraid of Aunt Morgan, and under her power. Once I overheard him saying to her, 'For God's sake, madam, let me alone now – I'm a married man – 'and she replied by laughing in that horrible way I knew only too well.

I occupied myself now with learning as much as I could of magic, without committing myself to Aunt Morgan and the powers she served. She was always saying that there were things she could not tell me till I had taken the vows and undergone the rites – but I put her off from day to day, and meantime set myself to learn how to protect myself against her powers. For there is a white magic as there is a black magic. Never would I perform the sacrificial rites with her, or invoke the names she invoked; but from her books I learnt the angelic names, and the prayers to the high powers; I learnt the stars, and the times, and the correspondences; and all that could be done by increasing the power of the will and the mind, without calling upon the demons. And after a while I mastered a few small arts. As I have related, I stumbled upon invisibility, and learnt to use it a little; and I became fairly proficient in the outward art of shape-changing, when given time and the help of such things as clothes. I could not

instantly become a cat or an owl, as Morgan could; but I could make my face and body pass for that of an old woman, or an old man, or a country yokel, a nimble small boy, or a grave priest, when I had dressed myself in the right garb and had time to think about it. Now and then I would amuse myself, and gain practice, by walking about the castle precincts in a disguise, and mingling with the folk. But Morgan would always know me. Most of the disguises I enjoyed – I liked being a swaggering man-at-arms, or a page-boy, or a mincing clerk; but one I disliked, although it was a useful and effective disguise, and that was an old woman. I hated to have to impair my fine healthy body, and make it withered and feeble – to see my face so wrinkled and colourless, and my teeth seem to disappear; to feel my limbs heavy and stiff, and my eyesight dim. It seemed a horrible anticipation of what old age must some time make me.

Christmas was coming, and something important was to happen at Christmas. Preparations were being made as they had never been made before. As November drew on and December approached, I was surprised to see room after room hung with rich arras, new tables spread with Eastern carpets, carved chairs with cushions, sideboards with

silver vessels, screens of Saracen work – I had never seen such a display. Of course I suspected it of being illusion, and went about fingering cushions and hangings, and carefully sitting down in chairs, to see if they were real. Usually they were – except when Morgan was in the mood to play me a mischievous prank, and the chair disappeared the moment after I had sat down in it . . . But mostly it looked as if this display were to last, and be used. The castle people were surprised, of course – but they all knew better, by this time, than to ask questions. And the odd people who had appeared on my wedding night kept on cropping up, too, and mingling with the house-carles and bower-maids and pages. Sometimes they were there, and sometimes not.

December set in, wild, cold and rough; and just before Christmas it snowed for a week, and the wind howled. All the rich new furnishings couldn't make the castle anything but cold, especially at night. In the long, long evenings we sat by the fire in the solar chamber, our fur mantles heaped over our backs to keep out the chilly draught behind us, with little to do but talk and listen to the same old storyteller. But Morgan would stare into the heart of the fire as if communing with the spirits there,

and waiting for someone to arrive. Often I tried to see what she saw, but no picture would come.

And then one night, just before Christmas, as we sat thus, I saw Morgan lift her head, as if she listened; and far off a hound bayed, and another hound in the yard took it up. Then, over the sound of the cold wind, very, very far off, came the faint blowing of a horn. And at that sound my heart turned over in my body.

Morgan rose from the fire, and spoke at the portal curtain to the servants, quiet and purposeful; and I listened where I sat in my corner. Half an hour, maybe, passed, and then we could hear a horse, and the heavy clanking of the armour of him that rode it, coming nearer across the wild. Heavy and slow it came, as if lame; then once again the horn rang out, and this time an answering trumpet from the battlement startled me, blaring out over my head. And then the castle's bell pealed.

'He has come,' Morgan said.

'Who has come?' I said faintly.

'Go and see.'

I ran down the winding stair from the solar, and rustled in my long stiff gown across the hall. The men-at-arms were grouped by the door – the stranger, I could

tell, had crossed the moat and passed the guard-house and through the courtyard, on Morgan's orders to let him through, and now he stood outside the hall. The seneschal stood directing a man to unbar the door. As the door swung open, all the torches swept one way in the wind, and a man in armour toppled off his horse as if unable to stand. The icy blast seemed to sweep him into the hall. For a second he clung to the doorpost, swaying on his feet, while the snow blew in behind him – then he recovered himself a little, took a step into the hall, and as I put out my hand to welcome him, stumbled and fell forward at my feet. The seneschal lifted the helmet off his head, and there, looking up at me, was the face I had seen at my wedding – the face I had seen when I first entered the castle. The face of the man I was to love.

I hardly heard his indistinct words of greeting and apology. Bertilak was close behind me, exclaiming.

'Good God, the man's half dead with cold! Bring him in, Walbert – look after him there, can't you? Wine – no, the fire – no, best take him off to bed – come on, you carles—' and all was bustle and solicitude round the new arrival. The men carried him off to restore him, and I looked round to see Morgan at

the far end of the hall, very composed and smiling, saying, ‘In an hour we dine.’

Now all the strange glamour that had been laid upon the bare bones of the castle took gloss and lustre. There were already curtains and carpets all over the stony walls and floors, but cressets of soft white flames were now lighted, and braziers steamed with delicate perfumes. And those peculiar attendants, always unobtrusive, filled up corners and alcoves. It was like a king’s court – but a king’s court in some far outlandish region.

The stranger-guest, rested, warmed, restored and clothed in a handsome fur-edged mantle, took his place in the hall, and I, in a new plum-coloured satin gown, came forward to meet him. But when I looked back at Morgan following me, I caught my breath in astonishment. Her bold dark beauty was altogether hidden. Not only was she clothed in the severe black-and-white that becomes an aged dowager, but her face was a mass of wrinkles – her eyelids like paper in the discoloured sockets, under straggling grey brows – her neck sagging, save where the severe white wimple braced it up. One heavy gold ornament clanked on her breast, and her wrists and hands were a mass of bangles and rings. She

was the perfect respectable duenna to complete the picture I made, as I sank down in my curtsey before that dark-haired, pale-browed knight, and felt his eyes searching mine.

The meal was magnificent, there was no denying it; and Sir Bertilak, sitting next to the stranger, plied him and cheered him in his hearty, noisy way. There was no need for me to say anything. Sitting sideways to him I could not look directly into the stranger's face, and it did not seem to me that he had looked at me with any notice at all, except for that one strange intense look he had given me when he had fallen at my feet at the door. That might have been in a dream, and now he was awake and had forgotten all about it.

It was the convention that no stranger was asked his name or his business until he had eaten and drunk. Presently, when the meal drew to an end, Bertilak, with much clearing of his throat as if squaring up to the occasion, filled his glass, and said in the usual set form of words: 'Now, sir stranger knight, if it so please you, declare unto us your name and your errand.'

And the stranger got to his feet, and still following the formula, answered, 'Gramercy, good mine host, for your kind welcome. My name is Gawain the Younger,

of the Court of King Arthur, Knight, and I come in search of the Green Knight whom I must meet at the Green Chapel, near to the Castle Haut-Desert, on the day following Christmas.'

A silence fell, and many in the hall drew in their breath. The lights flickered just for one moment – and shuddering, I glanced at Sir Bertilak.

But he was his hearty, mortal self, red-faced and jovial, and I could not see the green ring on his neck at all. Rather, he glowed with warmth and wine, and broke the formality with his next words.

'Castle Haut-Desert? This is it, my dear fellow, this is it. And as for the Green Chapel – know it well. Not a couple of miles away. You're at your journey's end here, what? Nothing more to do. Just stay here a couple of days – it's – what is it now? – three days – and then you'll be right at the day. Tomorrow, then Christmas Eve, and then Christmas itself, and then St Stephen's, that's the day. St Stephen the Martyr's.'

Morgan turned to the stranger, graciousness itself, and said, 'Good Sir Gawain, since that is your name, come you within to the bower, and there tell us more of your strange adventures.' She wheeled about with a rustle of skirts, and led the

way up the winding staircase to the solar above. As I followed her, Sir Gawain stood back to let me pass, and extended his hand in a courteous gesture – his eyes met mine, and our hands touched just for an instant – and in that instant something passed between us – the sympathy of two lonely people? – Much more than that; but I have no words for it now. And in an instant it was gone, and he had become once more a man guarded, aloof and dedicated; and I was tense and apprehensive of horror and cruelty to come.

The solar was warm with the big fire in the chimney, and the many-coloured hangings closing us in around a gilded table, where flagons and cups had been set, and chairs for the four of us.

Bertilak, still laughing boisterously, turned to the knight. He had altogether dropped the archaic, ritual form of speech.

'Now, my dear chap, we'll have a jolly evening together, and make you as welcome as we can. You needn't worry about the Green Knight. In a matter of single combat I've no doubt you'll come off the best.' He stretched himself in his big chair before the fire. But Gawain, seated upright and unrelaxed in a straight-backed chair, replied frowning.

‘It’s not quite like that, sir. Not exactly single combat. I have to go – to – give myself up.’

This, I felt, was the thing I feared.

‘To give yourself up?’ came Morgan’s voice, soft and purring. ‘But pray, how can that be?’

‘This Green Knight,’ said Gawain, pale and serious, ‘is no earthly man but a monster. He came to Arthur’s court last Christmastide, and defied us all to exchange one blow for one blow. For – for the honour of the Round Table I took the aventure. There and then with one blow I struck his head from his shoulders, and – and – he did not die.’

His voice faltered into silence; the others watched him, saying nothing, and I watched them.

‘He – still living – bade me meet him in a year and a day, and bide one blow from him, without defence. So of course – I have come. And when I meet him – there will be nothing I can do but – keep my bargain.’

Again silence fell – and then Bertilak shattered the silence, slapping his hand on his thigh.

‘Why, it’s like a tale of old times!’ he roared. ‘Come now, it does my heart good to find one so young and valiant. So you’ll keep your tryst with this hobgoblin on

St Stephen's Day? Fine, fine. Ah, never look downhearted, man. What must be, must, and yet there's much can happen between now and then. Have another cup of wine.'

'You'll keep Christmas with us, and then we'll see you on your way with goodwill,' said Morgan smiling.

I was aghast. They knew *what* they knew, and yet they could laugh and cheer him? Up to that moment, indeed, I had known that he must meet the Green Knight that was Bertilak's other self – but I had not suspected the manner of their meeting: that he, mortal, must bow his defenceless neck to some unimagined shape of evil from the other world, and lift no hand to save himself . . .

'You must have a good rest first,' went on Bertilak. 'I shall be off early tomorrow, to hunt for this feast, but don't you stir. You lie in bed as long as you like – you'll need it after your journey. One of the serving-men will bring you your breakfast. Promise me you'll have a good long rest? You can do the same for the next three days, and after that you'll be fit for anything—'

The chattering and vociferating went on, and presently they called in a couple of jongleurs to play an interlude; but I was sick

at heart, and hardly knew a thing till we had parted for the night, two handsome serving boys (but not quite earthly) leading the knight to his chamber.

As I went into my turret room, and Morgan passed up the stairs to hers, I caught her sleeve and drew her back.

'Aunt,' I cried, 'in God's name what are you doing? What are you making Bertilak do? Do you mean to murder this man?'

She held me off at arm's length, and under her disguise of wrinkles her face was mocking.

'Oh, so we're interested, are we? I thought so. My poor silly niece, it's little you know of magic and its workings. True, your fine cavalier is in great danger – you've found out something, but not enough, you see! But he can be saved, and it is for you to save him.'

'Me? It is for me to save him? Oh, God knows, I'd do anything – anything to save him – only tell me how.'

'Come and see me at daybreak tomorrow,' said Morgan, coolly drawing her sleeve from my clutch. 'I will tell you then. Meantime, go to bed, and sleep soundly.'

She kissed me on the forehead, and I shuddered from head to foot; and then she passed on up the stairs and left me – but not to sleep soundly.

The winter daybreak was late and dark – I had slept very little, all those long dark hours. At last, when the faint light came, I dressed, and stole upstairs to Morgan's room.

She was up and walking about in her furred night-robe, her disguise all gone and her face boldly handsome as ever, even at that hour. She handed me a silver tray, with a stoup of ale and a manchet of white bread.

'There,' she said. 'You will take him his breakfast in his chamber. And then you must tempt him.'

I felt as if I had been struck a blow over the heart.

'I don't understand you,' I gasped. She turned on me, suddenly furious.

'Oh, in hell's name! – I knew they bred fools in convents, but *such* fools! "I don't understand you!" – Then have it in plain words – you must offer him your body, make him take you to his bed. Or must I say it plainer than that?'

I set down the tray, or I should have dropped it.

'But why – why must I do this?' – I know my voice was stupid, but I was stupefied.

'My good foolish niece,' she said, suddenly calm again, 'didn't you tell me last night that you wanted to save this man from

the danger he is in? Come, I know you love him – you've made it plain enough. Well, do you want to save him or don't you?'

'Oh,' I said, fighting to get my breath back – 'I do – I do – I'll do anything to save him – anything you say – but why that?'

She turned away from me and stared into the fire that burnt under the chimney-cowl. 'This, my girl, is a magical matter, and you know nothing, nothing at all about magic and its operations. All you know is that he is in danger from an enemy from the Older World, and you're right in that. Now understand this: this man Gawain stands in danger now from the operation of the planet Mars, under whose dominion he is. You must bring him from the dominion of Mars to that of Venus. If you can place him under the power of Venus, then Venus will protect him and he will be saved. Otherwise, Mars must have his life.'

As she told me this, it sounded very convincing. How was I to know how altogether false it was? I was not to find that out until much later, when indeed it was too late. I should have known that all Morgan's words were lies; but who else had I to guide me in the dark region where I was wandering?

She turned and handed me the tray again; but I did not put my hands out.

‘No – I can’t do it,’ I said. ‘I can’t bring myself to do it.’

‘Ha!’ She gave her bitter, nasty laugh. ‘Well, you’re a fine ardent lover! Maiden modesty, is it! Convent-bred, I know. Oh yes, you think you love him, you say you do, but you won’t do that much to save him from death. Not to save his neck from the axe – come, you’d rather see his blood flowing, his brains battered out – rather than venture your pure body – or is it perhaps your soul?’

I could not answer, but the tears ran down my cheeks.

‘And much good your virginity will be to you, when he lies a bleeding corpse—’

‘Oh, God help me!’ I cried. ‘Is it true then – is it true that if I make him yield to me it will save his life? Will you swear it? What will you swear it by?’

She relaxed a little, and smoothed her brow.

‘My dear niece, your hallows and mine are not the same. If I swore by anything that you worship, I would swear without faith, and you would not believe me; and if I swore by my own hallows, they mean nothing to you. So let’s have no swearing. Only I do assure you that what I have told you is true. Come now’ – for seeing me weakening, she

suddenly changed her mood – 'poor child, you are shivering with cold. You've not broken your fast. Come, sit down and share my morning posset.'

She had a milk posset, with honey and spices, keeping warm in a chafing-dish; and it is true I was cold and wretched and very thirsty, after a long sleepless night. I took the posset and drank it eagerly – never remembering about her subtle potions. But as soon as I had drunk it, my mind changed, and I had no more scruples nor doubts. I saw everything differently, as it were drawn to one point with nothing before it or after it.

I stood up and took the tray.

'I'll do it,' I said.

'That's my girl!' and she held the curtain aside for me to walk out.

And then she threw me a last word.

'Remember, he can't scorn you altogether, or he fails in his knightly courtesy.'

I went down the stone staircase, across the empty hall, still dark, and up into the opposite turret where our guest lay. The illusory power of Morgan's potion was strongly upon me, and I had forgotten fears and scruples, as if I were not myself at all. The heavy oaken door of the chamber was not barred; I opened it by the latch, quietly, and went in, closing it behind me.

The room was small, as most of such rooms were; the thickly curtained bed took up most of the space, and all the curtains were drawn; but light came from a little window by the side near the door, glazed with coloured glass, and below it stood a small chest. I set my tray down on the chest, and stealthily drew back the curtain.

He lay in his bed, relaxed in sleep, his head thrown back so that the red and purple light from the window played on his face and throat. He slept like a child, and my heart turned over in me as I looked at him. So beautiful, so unconscious, so strong, and so helpless. I was emboldened by the potion, it is true – but it was something quite other than any magic of Morgan's that came over me at that moment, and made me stoop over the bed, fling my arms round his neck, and press my lips to his.

He woke, his eyes looking right into mine with a look of unutterable bliss and sweetness; the lovely moment hardly lasted the time of a heartbeat before recollection came, and a look of horror wiped out the smile, and he thrust me away from him, and clutched the sheet up to his neck, crying, 'Who are you? – What do you want? – Go away!'

Then, as I reeled back, he recollected himself still further, and a look of confusion swept over his face with a deep blush, and he stammered, 'Oh, I'm sorry – oh, my lady, I'm very sorry – forgive my words – I – I was taken by surprise – I was discourteous—'

I myself was taken aback now; I remembered what my aunt had said, that he must not repulse me altogether, because his knightly code forbade him to offer me any discourtesy.

'Oh, no, no,' I cried. 'Don't, don't distress yourself. I came upon you too suddenly. You see, I've brought you your breakfast—'

'That was kinder than I deserve, lady. You should have sent a serving-man.'

'And – I have brought you something more—'

'Yes?'

I didn't know how to go on; and like a fool I just blurted out, 'I love you!'

I saw him start, and draw his breath in sharply. I had said it now, and I went on desperately, 'And I've come to give you – all of myself—'

Again he breathed deeply and frowned, and his hands tensed on the coverlet. But he said nothing. I had to go on.

'Then will you not – eat the breakfast I have brought you?' I had heard of that kind

of double-talk, but I wasn't very good at it; and he didn't help me by taking it literally.

'Lady, I shall be very glad of your bread and ale – it was good of you to wait on me. But – do not ask me anything more.' He looked straight before him, and it was hard to read his expression.

'No?'

'No. You – you honour me greatly, sweet lady, but I'm no paramour for you. Forgive me, but you deserve better. If it pleases you, I will be your true servitor, and hold you for my worshipped lady – will that content you? – I see it will not.'

'At least don't send me away,' I almost whispered.

'How could I do that? It would be unforgivable. I am under your roof. But, lady, you should not be here. Your husband—'

'He has gone to the chase, you know that.'

'Your aunt—'

I stifled the bitter laugh on my lips.

'The servants—'

'They will not stir yet.'

'Oh, I see you have arranged it all—' —and he frowned.

'No, no!' I cried wildly. 'Say that I just took the opportunity because – because I love you—'

He shook his head, and put on the air of a grave elder admonishing a child.

'My dear lady, it cannot be. You know I am a man under sentence. I cannot, in any case, be any lady's lover. Don't set your heart on one who has only three days more in this world. All you can do is pray for me.'

And at that, the recollection that all this desperate stratagem was for the purpose of saving him from his fate so overcame me that I burst into sobs, my face in my hands.

He was all concern at once.

'Oh, lady, dear lady, you mustn't cry. What a brute I am – how could I hurt you? Oh, forgive me—'

I raised my face from my hands.

'At least you don't hate me?'

'Hate you? Heavens, no. But, my dear, I cannot do what you ask. Please understand this, and leave me.'

And I could do nothing else.

At the foot of the stairs to my own room, Morgan met me. She took one look at me.

'I see you've failed.'

'Yes, I've – failed.'

'Well!' she burst out, 'of all the weak ninnies – of all the feeble niminy-piminy, milk-and-water minikins – you demi-nun, you! Failed, and there's a man's life at

stake! I love him, says she – I'll do anything to save him, says she – and then at the pinch she can't take her lover to her, to save his precious life!' She stopped for breath, and I put in, 'He wouldn't. He refused me. What could I do?'

'What could you do? Oh, of course, you could take no for an answer, couldn't you? Call yourself a daughter of Eve? Come now, this won't do. You've got two days more, and you must try again tomorrow.'

'Then,' I said, 'be sure you give me your potion again, or I'll never have the boldness—'

'What's that? Oh, ay, that I will!' and she went away laughing.

But I crept up to my room, and stayed there all day. I did not come down to dine, though I listened down the stair, and heard Bertilak come back from hunting, noisy and cheerful as ever. He flung down a load of heavy carcases – I could hear the horns click on the stone floor.

'Deer – a good bag. Need them for food. Oh yes, we'd good sport. You have to take them by surprise, you see, for your deer's a timid beast – if you don't creep up on him and take him suddenly, he's off and away and you'll never catch him, this time of

year. Now tomorrow we hunt the boar. The boar, now, you must take by bold assault, and fight him hand to hand—'

'I'd like to come with you,' I heard Gawain say, and I hoped fervently that perhaps he might, and I be excused from the task I dreaded.

'No, no – you must gather your strength. You stay and rest tomorrow and the next day. You've enough before you. No, you stay and rest while you can.'

And so the next morning found me again at his door, with my platter of bread and stoup of ale. As before, I stole in quietly, but he was awake, and I think he had been expecting me, for he looked up from his pillow.

'May I come in?' I said diffidently. 'I've brought your breakfast again.'

'Certainly, come in. It's very good of you.' He sat up and took the tray from me.

'Are we friends then?' I ventured.

'Why, of course we are friends—' and he smiled, so that I was encouraged to seat myself on the side of the bed.

'Then let us talk as friends,' I said. 'Talk to me while you eat'

'Will you not share my breakfast?'

With a little ceremonious gesture he handed me half of the manchet, and then the stoup of ale to sip from.

'Tell me,' I said, 'all about yourself – your home, your family.'

So he told me, warming to the subject as he went; how his father was Gareth Beaumains, and his mother the proud and beautiful Lady Leonie of Lyonesse; and about his aunt Lynett, the bold lady that rushed about the country running errands for King Arthur; and of his three uncles, the brothers of Orkney, the greatest of whom was the other Gawain, whom he called Gawain the Great, saying that he himself was only Gawain the Little. But I wouldn't have that, for I said he was as good a knight as any of them. Then he told me of how he was knighted by King Arthur, and all his trials and humiliations, and how in sheer despair and lowness of spirit he had taken the challenge of the Green Knight; and how he had spent the past year in discipline and exercise to prepare himself for his ordeal. But I tried to lead his thoughts away from this, and asked him what he thought of ladies, and damosels, and women in general. He told me he had been taught to give worship to all ladies, and discourtesy to none, and to serve them

all, and in particular lovely Guinevere, the Queen.

And all this while, I sat on the silken coverlet, with the silver tray between us.

'But did you,' I said, 'never love a lady of your own?'

'No, never,' he said.

'Then,' I said, leaning towards him, 'then—?'

'No!' he cried vehemently, and swept the tray and all that was on it to the floor, so that it crashed down noisily. 'No, don't speak of *that* again. I tell you, I won't listen—' and he glared at me with such a look of terrifying hatred that I gasped in fright, and burst into sobs like a child. It was all too much for me, and I cried and cried without control.

Suddenly, to my astonishment, I felt his hands on my shoulders.

'Oh, lady, lady, I'm sorry- that's twice I've made you cry — oh, I'm a clumsy brute—'

'And don't call me lady,' I sobbed, slapping down his hands from my shoulders. 'Call me by my name, which if you remember is Vivian.'

'Oh, Lady Vivian – I mean, Vivian – dear, dear Vivian, don't cry—' and in spite of my feeble slapping hands, he gathered me into his arms, and I lay there with his hands

caressing my head and shoulders – and oh, heavens! in that moment I knew, and he knew, that thus it was meant to be, and that this was love. I had forgotten all about the part I had to play; I only knew that we were meant for each other.

But after just an instant he put me gently from him. 'We forget ourselves,' he said.

'Oh no,' I said bitterly, gathering myself up from this repulse. '*You* don't forget yourself. You remember yourself. You don't forget. You'll go no further.'

'How could I?' he said, and it maddened me that he should, as it were, preach at me.

'You'll venture nothing,' I said. 'You'll not venture your body – or is it perhaps your soul?' The moment I had said it I remembered where I had heard those words before. These were Morgan's words – how had she put them into my mouth? I hadn't *wanted* to say them.

'That was cruel, Vivian,' he said.

'Oh I know, I know,' I cried wildly. 'I didn't mean to say that. Forgive me,' and I seized both his hands and held them.

'You know I cannot give love to any woman,' he said. 'I am a man under sentence—'

‘Not even for the first and last time?’ I pleaded.

‘Not even for the first and last time. You are my host’s wife—’

‘His wife only in name.’

‘Even then, I am trusted. So you see—’

His hands were very warm in mine.

‘But if,’ I said, ‘if it were not so? Just supposing it were not so? What then?’

Our faces were close together, and his eyes burned into mine.

‘If it were not so—’ he whispered. But then he lowered his eyelids over those burning eyes.

‘Let us remain friends,’ he said. ‘Go – and go quickly before I weaken.’

‘Let me stay here till you weaken.’

‘No – no. I wish that we may remain friends. Go, before we become enemies.’

And so sternly he looked at me, that I could do nothing else but gather up the tray from the floor and go, without looking back.

I know I was shaken and flushed when Morgan met me, and my cheeks were still stained with tears. She looked me up and down.

‘So? Not unmoved. Well, try again tomorrow. You might save the man’s life yet.’

Once again I did not show myself all day, though it was Christmas Eve. At dusk Bertilak returned, blood-smeared, and flung down the carcase of a boar.

'He fought well, and it was a near thing,' he said. 'Tomorrow it's the fox – he's more cunning, and we have to use indirect ways.'

Now I could no longer keep to my room, because the customs of the feast demanded me; but I sat through it with a heavy heart, in spite of the glow of tapers and glamour of holly and mistletoe. Never once did I raise my eyes to Gawain's face, though he sat beside me at the table; nor did he address any but formal words to me.

But as soon as the dinner was over, I slipped away, though by rights I should have kept the Christmas Eve vigil and gone to the midnight Mass. Instead, I went up to my room, made fast the door, and took down from the shelves certain books I had been carefully studying all the day. These were books of my own, into which in days past I had laboriously copied all that I could learn of Morgan's magic, as far as it was not tainted with the names of devils.

Now I took from my coffer a knot of green ribbons, and having drawn a circle upon the floor, and traced out the signs, I

sat down within the circle and plaited those green ribbons into a belt. I plaited them intricately with many twists and turns, for that way the evil influences are twisted and turned aside and made to lose their way as in a maze. I fitted it with a copper buckle – for copper is the metal of the Lady Venus; and a beautiful thing it looked when it was finished. Then I laid it in the centre of the circle, and having sprinkled it with water and blessed it with the smoke of incense, I put upon it the strongest magic that I knew, to fill it with the protecting power of Venus, that he who wore it should be safe from all the strokes of Mars, from iron and bronze and brass and stone and wood and fire; and that no power of the leaden Saturn should touch his life, but that the power of Mars in him should turn to valour and victory, and that of Saturn to peace and length of days, all under the dominance of sweet Venus, the bringer of peace, the mother of us all.

Then, when I had completed my work upon the girdle, I buckled it round my own waist and hid it under my robe.

. . . And so, I thought, I might even then save his life, without doing what Morgan wished me to do. God knows how I longed for him in body and soul – but why, oh why had Morgan brought him here – as I was sure

she had contrived it – I so unnecessarily tied to Bertilak, and Gawain a man devoted to his fate, from which only dishonour could save him? But perhaps my magic would prevail over Morgan's, and save him without dishonour either way. I would try.

Down below in the hall I could hear those who had been present at the midnight Mass, still carolling for Christmas, and I felt very remote from them. But when I set the tray for Gawain's breakfast, I laid on it a sprig of holly, and a rosy apple, and a comfit of dates and spices, and filled the cup with wine instead of ale. I was in my best robe, too, a beautiful crimson damask, sweeping the floor and cut well away at the neck, where a soft edge of fur warmed my bare shoulders.

So I lifted the latch and opened the door.

Once again he was awake, and I think he had been expecting me, but his first words were, 'You should not have come.'

'Why not?' I said, stepping up to the bedside and placing the tray across his knees. 'You had to have your breakfast – could I let you starve on Christmas morning?'

He smiled and fingered the rosy apple.

'Then lady – no, I should say – Vivian! – I'll wish you a merry Christmas – and thank you – and now you must go.'

I frowned at him.

'Not much of a Christmas greeting? – Oh yes, I'll go – but first I've a present for you. At least you'll let me do that.'

'A present? Why, that's good of you, but I don't think I can take it, for you see, I've nothing to give in return.'

'You must take it, you must!' I burst out wildly, and unbuckled the green girdle from round my waist, and held it up before him. 'Gawain—' (and this was the first time I had called him by his name) – 'this time I ask nothing more of you, but just that you accept this, and wear it.'

He fingered it doubtfully, as it lay all across the bed, the green boldly contrasting with the red and purple lights from the window.

'And wear it? But what *is* it – what is in it?'

'Do you mean – '

'Yes. A thing like this can only be magic.'

'Then I will tell you. Oh, my dearest, my beloved—' (and now once more the tears were streaming down my face) – 'It is a charm to preserve you from danger, the strongest charm I could make. Tomorrow I know you must go and meet your challenge, and I shall never see you again. Go then, but

take this and go in safety. Your life will be safe, though I shall never – never—'

I could say no more. To hide my face I bent and took up the tray and laid it on the chest under the window, and stood with my back to him. I heard his voice.

'Sweet friend – what else can I call you – you are so kind. You know that I ought not to try to shield my life with any magic, for I have to offer myself willingly.'

'Was *he* protected by no magic?' I cried. 'That monstrous Green Knight who – who was not what he seemed?'

'No matter. That was his way, mine is another. I made a bargain and must keep it. And I do not – admit to fear.' (Perhaps not, but his voice shook ever such a little.) 'So I do not accept your gift as a protection to my life. But I accept it for your love.'

I turned back to him with a sudden leaping of the heart. He drew me to him and kissed me gravely on the forehead.

'And so goodbye, my lady and my only love. As we met so let us part, in honour and worship. My heart is yours if I live or die, and so God be with you.'

And so we made our farewell.

Saint Stephen's Day – Saint Stephen the Martyr. And how cold, cold, cold a morning!

Christmas Day had been a bitter one for me. As in duty bound, there I had had to sit on the dais throughout the revels, with Morgan, in her dowager disguise, one side of me, and Bertilak the other, while below in the hall a gay party of pretty girls, and a few smooth young men, led Gawain through his paces in all the traditional Yuletide games, as if he had been a pet animal or a child they were determined to spoil. I don't know where they came from, but strongly suspected that they were only some more of Morgan's phantoms. They fussed over him and flirted with him, and ever and anon broke into sentimental lamentations, that such a fine young man should have to go and meet his fate . . . I don't think any real human beings could have acted so.

And Bertilak – there he was, the hearty, courteous host, urging him to drink and enjoy himself, whipping up the fun. A wave of disgust swept over me – how could he, knowing what he knew? – He had come home from hunting soon after noon, and flung down a bedraggled fox. 'That's all we got,' I heard him say. 'He's clever, the fox, but he breaks all the rules. Does things you wouldn't think of. Not a chivalrous beast—' and with that he turned and looked straight at me. But I looked back at him. If

I was a deceiver, so was he. So I reflected while I sat beside him on the dais. But how could I condemn him if, like myself, he was only a tool in the hands of subtle, smiling Morgan?

And now the morning of St Stephen's Day was breaking, and it was the day appointed for Gawain to go. A bitter cold morning – no wind, no rain, but a grey pall of cloud, through which the sun showed as a red globe for a few minutes after sunrise, and then vanished again into the greyness. Snow everywhere, and a bitter frost hardening it as it lay. Glimmering white fields extending out to a comfortless horizon, and long icicles hanging from battlement and balcony. The far-off trees made caves of shadow below their laden branches, and the black specks that moved in the distance here and there might well have been wolves.

From my turret window I could see the courtyard, where the great hall door opened out, and here were Morgan and Bertilak – Bertilak – saying goodbye to Gawain, and seeing him mount his horse. A serving-man went with him on a mule, to guide him to that place, the Green Chapel, wherever that might be. I disliked the look of that serving-man. He wasn't one of our honest house-carles, but only too plainly one of Morgan's creatures.

I had the impression that under his cap his ears stood up straight like an animal's.

The murmur of words came up to me – endless, ceremonial goodbyes in the old formal speech, handshakings, bowings. There – he was mounted at last, and that sinister serving-man took the lead, and they went out through the great portal and over the moat. For a moment I lost sight of them behind the curtain-wall; and they were on the road and going up the hill.

And at that moment I took a resolve. I hurried into my warmest clothes, such as I would wear for hunting; and summoning up all I knew of magic, I made myself invisible. Then I slipped downstairs – carefully avoiding Morgan, for I was not sure how far my invisibility was proof against her – and hastened out to the stables. My favourite horse, Deerfoot, knew me by touch and voice – I do not think he minded not being able to see me. I saddled him, mounted, and was off by the postern gate. Quickly I slipped round the circumference of the castle walls, and picked up the line of the road that went up from the main gate; as I did so working hard in my mind to extend my invisibility to Deerfoot, and as far as I know I succeeded. I knew the path that Gawain must take for the first three miles, for there was no other; but

after that the road forked, but his tracks and that of the serving-man's were plain enough, and I followed them, through that dead, cold, miserable landscape, and presently I sighted them, going away towards the desolate north. So I followed, just keeping them in sight. Why? Just because I had to know what became of him.

The road grew wilder and more desolate still. Woods closed round it, their snow-weighted branches roofing sinister caverns. What might be lurking there, I dared not think. I remembered the strange creatures I had seen in the woods when Morgan and I had ridden up from the south – some of those were terrifying enough, and that had been in the summer – but what kind of beings might hide in these darker, grimmer places? – And wolves, undoubtedly there would be wolves. It was little comfort to me to know they could not see me – they could hear me and smell me. I wondered if, in a crisis, I should become visible quickly enough for Gawain to see me if he turned at a cry for help – or would he just see a struggling mass of wolves devouring something, and leave them to their feast?

I kept Gawain, with the serving-man, just within sight, and if he heard me he would no doubt think it all part of the spectral

torments of his road. They pressed on until the day was far advanced. We went up into hills, zigzagging up the sides of sheer cliffs. At the top of one such climb, where a dark coombe opened between the shoulder of that hill and the next, I found they had halted, and an argument was going on between Gawain and the servant. They sat on their mounts, facing each other, and a steam went up from the horse and the mule into the frosty air. Their words came down to me clearly.

'Good sir, this is where I leave you – and – and—'

'And what, my good man? You seem afraid to speak.'

'And – if you wouldn't take it amiss – you won't go on either. I know the place, and I know about it – that man you're going to meet. I tell you, sir, I wouldn't go on for a fortune.'

'No one is asking you to.'

'No, sir. But you yourself—'

'Never mind myself. You were sent to guide me to the Green Chapel, and that's all that concerns you. Now, are we near it?'

'Just up that valley, sir, straight before you. But – if you please, sir – I *don't* like to think of you going up there. To put it plainly, it's certain death.'

‘Supposing I know all that?’

‘Yes, sir. But I beg you – now supposing, sir, you were to go off down *this* way, which will lead you towards Wales and the sea. I’d go back, and never say a word to anyone, except that I left you just here, and no one would ever know—’

I could hear the harshness in Gawain’s voice, as he replied, ‘Go away. Go away and leave me. You may not understand, but I have to go on. I tell you, you miserable coward, that if you go back and spread any lie about my backing out and running away, when my bones are lying dead in that valley up there, my skull will fly after you screaming – Now, go your way and let me go mine.’

He gathered up his horse’s reins and turned him with the spur; the stones his horse kicked up in turning went rattling down the face of the precipice. I saw the servant turn the other way and begin to pace down the hill path. From where I was placed I could see them both when they were out of sight of each other – and as soon as the servant was hidden from Gawain by a spur of rock, both the man and his mule just vanished. I knew then for certain that he was one of Morgan’s phantoms. If he had been an earthly man under enchantment, I should have been able

to see him, being myself at that moment partly in the Otherworld; but this creature had no underlying substance at all, and had now disappeared completely. As I passed the spot where he had last stood, I was conscious for a moment of a colder breath, and that was all. So I hurried on up the slope after Gawain, and shortened my distance. His moment of peril was approaching.

The ravine was like a narrow dark passage, where the light hardly penetrated from the weak, clouded sun above, and the winter air rushed through it in a deadly draught. Then it widened a little, into a dell, with a torrent breaking through under icicles; and in the middle rose an ominous shape – a high, rounded mound, shadowy and grass-grown, the grave of a giant. A dark doorway opened in its side. I had heard of places like that – ancient burial hills of the men of old, hollow inside, and with winding entrances at the quarter-points of the sun, leading away into darkness within, where, they said, the Old Dead sat in a circle, crowned with gold. If this was the Green Chapel, what unholy prayers were offered here?

Then as I approached, I heard a strange and frightening noise, coming up as it were from under the ground. First a thudding, a vibration that shook the road below so that I

felt it all up through my horse's body – then a sort of grinding roar, with a shrill edge to it – what on earth, or under it, could make that noise? Deerfoot threw up his head, checked, trembled – I could see Gawain's horse, that was much nearer the source of the noise, wince and shy and dance. Gawain held the reins firmly and coaxed the terrified animal on. But after a few yards forward, he dismounted, tied his horse to a thorn tree, and proceeded on foot. He held in his hand the great axe he had brought with him, but he put himself in no posture of defence with it. He had cast aside his cloak, and with a little comfort I saw that he was wearing my green belt.

The horrible noise ceased – then broke out again, juddering back from the stony walls. And now I knew what it was – a grindstone. Somebody within there was sharpening an axe.

I dismounted, tied Deerfoot, and moved quietly forward till there were perhaps three hundred yards between us. Then the noise ceased once more, and this time there was quietness, deadly expectant quietness in which I could hear the stream, and the melted ice dripping from the trees, and the piping of a forlorn small bird. Nothing else moved – until, when I thought I could bear it no longer, Gawain shouted.

‘Hola—’
and the echoes mocked,
‘Hola – a – a—’

Then out of the dark twisted entry of the barrow, shouldering its way through the overhanging growth, came that green horror I had seen before. Shambling and huge, it walked like a bear, but it was larger than a bear. It – I could not think of it as Bertilak, though I knew – it was larger than I had seen it before. Its eyes and nostrils glowed red against the horrible green flesh. It strode forward, leaning on an axe, a much larger axe than that which Gawain carried, an axe freshly sharpened; and it loomed over him.

He looked up at the frightful thing, but I could not see his face.

‘I have come,’ he said, and his voice was small but steady.

The monster spoke, slowly and creakingly.

‘You keep faith. That is well. You have struck your blow. Now I strike mine.’

Gawain laid on the ground the axe he carried, and very deliberately removed his helmet. He wore no plate-armour, only a leather jerkin. And so he stood, quite still, and bent his head forward. The monster wheeled up his huge axe – and I could watch no more. I shut my eyes – I heard the

whipping sound as the axe descended, and then a kind of muffled shout.

‘You flinched,’ the monster said.

I opened my eyes – Gawain still stood there, unhurt, and the axe swung in the monster’s hand, to the right of his victim.

Still I could not see Gawain’s face, but I heard his voice.

‘I am sorry. Strike again, and this time I will not move.’

Once more the axe swung upwards, and this time I watched as if spellbound. Incredulously, I saw it fall past his ear, to the left this time, and not touch him. Gawain did not move as it fell, then he tossed his head up, puzzled and angry. The monster let out a roar of ugly laughter.

‘I did not move that time,’ Gawain said. ‘You, whatever you are – for God’s sake don’t make a mockery of me. Strike and make an end of it.’

‘I will so,’ grunted the giant, and once more swung the axe.

Down it came, and – I think I must have cried out, for I saw it gash his shoulder, and suddenly there was blood running all down him. But he was still standing, while the giant stepped back and made no move towards him.

A breathless moment they stood so, and I waited to see Gawain stretch his length on the ground. Instead, he snatched up the smaller axe that lay at his feet, and with a laugh, whirled it in the air and leapt towards the giant.

'You've had your blow,' I heard him shout, 'And I'm still alive and now I can fight you. Come on, you hobgoblin – '

With an answering laugh the monster parried his stroke with one arm, wrenching the axe from his grasp – and there was Bertilak, and no monster, holding Gawain off at arm's length as I have seen him hold a puppy.

Bertilak's huge laugh rang against the rocks.

'No need to do that, lad – that's enough. Steady now – you've done very well. It's all over now.' And then, taking up the formal language of knighthood, 'Hold, Sir Knight, for thy quest is accomplished. Right well hast thou endured, and here I yield thee the mastery.'

He released Gawain, who staggered back against the rocky wall with his hands spread out behind him to hold him from falling – more shaken than I had seen him in all the time before. Bertilak leant on the axe, which still remained in his hand, and addressed him confidentially.

‘You did very well, my boy. I’m sorry about that gash, but it isn’t very much, only a flesh-wound, and I had to do it. You see – the once that I didn’t touch you was for the first time you resisted my wife. It would have gone hard with you if you hadn’t. Twice was for the second time. But the third time I had to wound you just a touch, because, you know, you did fail at the third test just a little.’

Gawain’s face, that had been so white, reddened slowly.

‘But I swear to you – I swear to you – I never – oh, believe me, never, never—’

‘I know you didn’t, my boy. Mind you, I’d have smashed your skull in if you had – I’d have had to, d’you see? No, it wasn’t that at all, so don’t worry about it. It was that green baldric you’re wearing.’

‘This? – oh, heavens, take the horrible thing away,’ and he tore it from him and flung it on the ground.

‘Yes – you accepted it from my wife, you know, not just for a love-token, but as a charm to save your life. That was against the rules, now wasn’t it? Am I right?’

‘Oh yes, you’re right,’ said Gawain, miserably, with hanging head like a chidden schoolboy. ‘That’s absolutely true. I did fail, and I was afraid, just a little. Oh Lord, that’s all the good I am.’

‘No, my boy,’ said Bertilak very kindly. ‘It was a hard trial – you had to be tested in all sorts of ways, you see, and you’ve come out of it very well. Look, you must wear this,’ and he picked up the green baldric and handed it back to him, ‘when you go back to King Arthur’s court, as a sign of your victory.’

‘As a sign of my defeat,’ he insisted. ‘A sign of my failure and humiliation. I’ll not wear it.’

‘You must. You must wear it to let them know you have accomplished your geste. Look, lad, you mustn’t blame yourself – the forces against you were very strong. It was all devised by Morgan le Fay – the old lady in black in the castle was herself in one of her disguises. Part of her schemes and deceptions, directed against Arthur and Guinevere, but you’ve beaten her after all. And you mustn’t blame my pretty wife either.’

‘What?’ Gawain looked up sharply.

‘No – she was put up to it by Morgan as well. It was all part of the scheme to try you. I had to agree to it, of course. She didn’t really want to do it at all – you’ve no idea the difficulty Morgan had in persuading her.’

If Gawain’s face had been pale before, it was paler now. He put his hands to his forehead, and leant back against the rock.

‘Oh, my God!’ I heard him say. ‘Oh, my God – I thought it was because she loved me.’

Silence hung between them for a long minute.

Then Bertilak, with his broad, heavy, kindly, stupid face all concern, stepped to Gawain’s side with a pad of linen for his wounded shoulder, exclaiming, ‘Now, now, my lad – don’t take it to heart. Come on, no harm’s intended. Here, you come on back with me now, and get that cut seen to, and have a good meal and a rest – there’s ten days of Christmas still left. And you must meet the lady wife and make your peace with her.’

‘No, no!’ cried Gawain wildly. ‘No more women! No more women ever at all! I’ll never look at one again. They – they deserve all that has been said about them. Ha—’ (and he shuddered) – ‘I had a vision once of a serpent with a woman’s head. No, I beg your pardon, my lord. I forget my courtesy – it was kind of you. But I’d rather not come back with you. I’m no fit company for anyone in my present mood. Let me go my way.’

‘Well, if you must, lad – back to King Arthur’s court by the shortest way, I hope?’

‘Perhaps. I don’t know. I can’t think. I must just be alone for a while.’

‘At least get that cut seen to. Look, follow this track out of here the way you came, and the first path that branches to the west – see the sun? – will take you to an abbey. Don’t wander about in the cold, in the state you’re in—’

‘Thank you,’ he said shortly, and moved towards his horse. He walked right past me, and never even felt that I was there, and I saw his stricken face.

‘Goodbye, lad, and take care of yourself,’ said Bertilak, ‘and don’t think too hardly of us all. You’ve shown yourself a brave knight, and never let anyone say the contrary.’

I mounted my horse as quietly as I could, and followed Gawain as he rode away out of the dell, as shattered and dejected as he was; Bertilak remained behind, leaning on his axe, frowning and screwing up his eyes in puzzlement. All I understood now was that Gawain hated me; but that lief or loth, I must go with him to see what befell him, though it were to the world’s end.

4 • Gawain

When I turned away from the Green Chapel and rode alone down the mountain path, I was too sunk in misery to know or care what became of me or which way I went. I had no feeling of having passed successfully through an ordeal, or of having fulfilled the purpose for which I was sent – on the contrary, my pride, my love and my faith were shattered, and I had nothing left to live for. Add to this that I was weak with shock, that my wounded shoulder ached and burned, that I was tired and empty, and that the cold wind blew right through to my shivering skin. It was more thanks to my horse than to myself that I took the turn Sir Bertilak had suggested, and came in time to the abbey, where the good monks were very kind to me, and put me up comfortably for the night, and did what they could for my wound. They pressed me to stay for a few days till I was properly recovered, but I was restless, and with the sheer perversity of

a sick man I insisted on going on the next day, though I felt far from well, and the old infirmarian was most reluctant to let me go.

Without much definite purpose, I set my face to the south, perhaps having a notion that the south country might be a little kinder than that rough north, where the snow still lay and the wind blew chill. I kept on feeling suddenly hot and sweating in my heavy accoutrements, and then shivering again – the wound in my shoulder throbbed, and my head ached so that I hardly knew what I was doing. I rode along in a miserable half-dream, in which the shapes of my unhappiness rose before me and tormented me.

Presently I began to take notice of small sounds behind me, as of a rider approaching. In that haunted country I had experienced a number of times the sound of phantom steps seeming to follow my way, and anyhow everything seemed phantasmal to me now – I hardly cared what spectre rode behind me; but now I felt that it was something real. Round the corner behind me came a small brown donkey, with a small black bundle on its back. I drew rein and waited while the donkey picked its way delicately up the road; and then the rider was revealed as a little old woman.

She dismounted and came up close to me. She seemed very old indeed – the skin of her face was like parchment, such wisps of hair as escaped from her white wimple under the black coif were like faded winter grass, her mouth was fallen in so as to show no lips at all; yet she seemed spotlessly clean, and her eyes, though deep in the bony sockets and without a trace of eyebrow or eyelash, were bright and, I thought, kindly. She was so little that her face hardly reached to my stirrup.

'Please you, sir knight,' she began – and her voice, though high and thin, was clear, without the annoying tremolo of so many old women.

'Sir knight,' she said, 'this is a lonely road, and I am unprotected. Would you be so kind as to let me ride with you till we come to a better place?'

And now I was seized with doubt and misgivings. A woman! No more women for me. The very sight of a wimple and gown made me wince with pain. Oh, to be able to forget that such creatures existed!

'I am sorry, dame,' I said, 'but I am resolved to have nothing to do with any woman—'

'Resolved?' said she, with a wrinkling smile. 'Not under vow, but only

resolved? – But then, good sir, look and behold you'd hardly count me as a woman. St Anthony himself would hardly trouble about me. No woman, sir, but only a poor old nurse out of employment.'

I looked her up and down, and certainly, there seemed little enough of Eve's allurements about her.

'I was a nurse, good sir,' she went on, 'to the family of my Lord Egerton, but the children are all grown up now and need me no longer, so I'm on my way to my sister's daughter at Sarum, who I trust will take me in. But it's a long road, and I'm afraid of robbers.'

I took another look at her, for another thought had struck me – what if she were a witch? That was always possible with an old woman.

'Nay, I know what you're thinking!' she exclaimed. 'No, I am not a witch. Look, I wear a silver cross round my neck. My feet are not cloven – see here,' and she lifted her long skirt to show me her little feet in thick worn shoes. 'And you may prove me with holy water at the first church we come to.'

'No, no, good dame,' I said. 'I'm sure you're not a witch.' I was indeed in great perplexity, for all my life's training had been to respect and help all women, old or

young, high or low; and hurt and suspicious though I was, I could not quite go against it now. 'Fair enough, good dame,' I said, 'you can ride with me and welcome. I'll see no harm comes to you. But forgive me if I'm but poor company.'

'I'll not give you any trouble,' she said. 'I'll ride behind you on my little donkey, and I'll promise not to speak unless I'm spoken to.'

So we rode on in silence, I feeling more and more miserably ill with each hour that passed. At length she called to me from behind as she rode.

'Sir knight – I think from the sun it's time for noon-meat. There's a cave over yonder would give us some shelter from this cold wind.'

I was glad enough to agree; and I was so weak that as I dismounted I lurched and almost fell to the ground. She steadied me on my feet.

'Why, the man's sick!' she exclaimed.

'It's nothing, dame,' I said. 'Just a touch of fever brought on by a slight wound – a trifle—' As I spoke everything seemed to spin round me, and a horrible wave of cold shivers swept over me.

She kept her hold of my arm. 'Men!' I heard her say. 'Call a high fever a trifle . . .'

And then I must have fallen forward, and been for a long time wandering out of my mind; for there was nothing for me but uneasy dreams, and struggling in the darkness, and burning heat, so that sometimes I thought I must be dead and in hell. Meaningless words echoed in my ears – horrible faces swam up before me, some of them with horns and double noses and gnashing teeth. I seemed to run and run, round and round in circles. Then at one time I thought my mother was there, I clung to her, and laid my head on her breast, and cried bitterly for a long, long while. And then, I think, the faces ceased to trouble me.

At last I awoke, easy and relaxed and cool, but very weak. I had no idea where I was, but before I opened my eyes I could feel that I lay on a comfortable bed of sheepskins, with a clean linen shirt next to my skin. I opened my eyes, and saw firelight flickering above me on the rough roof of a cave. At first I thought I was still at the abbey, and wondered why they had moved me from a cell to a cave. For a cave it certainly was, with a fire that burned in the crevice at the back, where I lay warm and cosy on sheepskins; and then a shadow came over the mouth of the cave, and the little old woman entered bearing a bowl of broth.

‘Awake at last, son,’ she said. ‘That’s right. Now sit you up, and sup this good broth.’

With a shock of shame I realized that this woman must have stripped me naked and put me to bed. I was horrified. But what could I do? To jump up out of bed then and there in my shirt would be more and worse shame – moreover I felt extremely weak, and extremely comfortable where I was, and the smell of the broth was very appetizing. I gave up resisting.

‘How long have I lain thus?’ I asked.

‘Three days.’

‘Was I sick?’

‘That you were, and not too well yet. You can thank God for sending you a nurse, for by the Rood! you needed one.’

‘You nursed me?’

‘You’d have died else.’

‘Then,’ I cried, ‘I owe you my life?’

‘No doubt you do,’ she replied drily. ‘Now be a good lad and drink your broth, and then rest again.’ But she turned her face away from me, and her voice shook in a way I hardly understood.

Later, as she sat by my bed, I asked her, ‘What are you called, dame?’

‘My name is Dowsabel,’ she replied.

‘Dowsabel,’ I mused. ‘*Douce et belle* – gentle and beautiful.’

‘Beautiful I was once,’ she said, with her eyes cast down to her clasped hands. ‘And gentle I can still be to you, if you will let me.’

‘Gentle you are indeed,’ I cried warmly, ‘and beautiful you will still seem to me for your kindness.’

She did not answer, and I almost thought she was weeping.

That night the fever came on me again, and once more the ugly faces rose, and I wandered through hot deserts and up unending flights of stairs and through crowds of cruel people, perplexed and hot and frightened – then, as before, it seemed that my mother came, and I clung to her and cried. Then for a moment I awoke, and as I opened my eyes I realized that it was dark, and I could not see the face of her that held me.

‘Mother?’ I said.

‘Lie still, lad,’ said the gentle voice. ‘It’s only Dowsabel, old nurse Dowsabel. Lie still and rest.’

And so weak was I, that I lay back in her arms, and let her put a cooling drink to my lips, and presently slept again.

*

We remained there a full ten days more, as I grew stronger. Each day Dowsabel would ride away on her little donkey and get provisions

from some lonely moorland village – whether she bought them or begged I never knew, but we always had enough. In the early afternoon she would be back – I would be glad to hear the donkey's little hooves on the stony path – and she would make up the fire and cook supper, and we would sit together by the glowing hearth, warm and snug enough in spite of the cold and rain outside. We would talk, and gradually I would forget that she came of the treacherous and accursed race of women – or perhaps it was that as my health returned I tended to forget my griefs and grievances. I told her all my story, though she would never tell me hers. When I told her of my betrayal by the Lady Vivian, I was surprised to see, in the firelight, tears running down the old woman's cheeks.

'Why do you weep?' I asked her.

'I weep for that poor lady,' she said.

'But, Dowsabel, she was a traitress as well as a temptress—'

'Listen, lad – suppose she too suffered? You were told that she was forced to do what she did, by the power of that wicked Morgan – supposing she did indeed love you?'

I shook my head. 'Not possible, not possible.'

'Remember she gave you the green baldric for your protection.'

‘For my protection! It was for my downfall. Had I not taken it, I’d never have had this wound, to remind me of my failure.’

‘Yes, but suppose she had indeed meant it to save your life?’

Her look and her voice were strangely urgent, but I could only murmur. ‘No, no – let’s speak no more of her,’ and turn away.

Dowsabel would not let us move from our encampment until she considered I was well enough, and indeed as long as I remained there she was the mistress. I well remembered how when on the sixth day I put on my riding armour and tried to get on my horse, she scolded me as stoutly as if she had been my good aunt Lynett herself. I had to give in and wait her time.

I never knew where she slept – I think she had another cave near at hand, for there were many along the hillside. There was one where my horse and her donkey were stabled, and it may be that she slept there. But for the first week or more I doubt she slept much at night – whenever I woke I would find her watching by my bedside.

The weather grew milder as we advanced into January, and by the tenth day after I had recovered consciousness, she let me mount my horse and ride about a little, to get my

strength back. It was strange how I obeyed her as if she were truly my aunt Lynett – or my mother.

One early afternoon, as I had ridden out in the watery noon sunlight and was returning, I came upon a strange sight. I had stabled my horse, and was walking round the foot of the cliff where our dwelling was. Beside the mouth of our cave there was a kind of niche in the cliff, facing south, sheltered from the wind and open to such sunshine as there was; the first aconites and snowdrops had broken through here, in the short pale grass, and overhead the brambles and ivy hung like a canopy and dropped down like icicles. Inside this little bower, Dowsabel was sitting; and as I live! – stretched out at her feet was a great white unicorn, with his head in her lap. The great beast was as huge as a warhorse, but as gracefully built as a deer; his limbs were drawn up under him, at rest, and showing the silver hoofs; his eyes shut, save that between the long black lashes came now and then a gleam to show he was not quite asleep, as she caressed his pearly horn. She sat there, calm and composed, like an image of Our Lady amongst the frosted boughs and the early flowers; save that her poor old ravaged face was more fitted to a St Anne. Yet the

hands that played over the unicorn's noble head were, I noticed, smooth and white and shapely like the hands of a young girl.

When she heard my step she looked up, smiled gravely, and laid her finger on her lips; so I went softly away. When I returned, in about an hour as far as I could tell, the unicorn was gone, and Dowsabel was inside the cave and busy about the fire.

'Where is our beautiful guest gone?' I said.

'Oh – just gone,' she answered.

'Gone – but where?'

'Why, I don't know. Just gone.'

'Were you not cold, sitting out there in the snow?'

'No, he warmed me with his breath.'

'So, little Dowsabel,' I said (for I knew the meaning of the unicorn), 'it seems you have never known love?'

She stopped what she was doing and turned to face me.

'It is true,' she said, 'I have never known the happiness of love. That is not to say that I have never loved.' And there seemed to be all the sorrow of the world in her eyes.

Impulsively I took her hand and held it. (Had I thought her hand was white and smooth? But now it was veined, twisted and

blotched with brown, as an old woman's hands are.)

'My Dowsabel,' I said, 'when I first met you, I could no longer trust any woman. But I trust you now and always will'

She drew in her breath sharply, as between delight and pain, and stood for a moment searching my eyes. Then she said,

'But if I were young and lovely, would you trust me then?'

'I don't know,' I answered slowly, for I was trying hard to be honest. 'That would be different. I don't know.'

At that she drew her hand roughly away from me, and turned abruptly, and went into the inner part of the cave. There I heard her weeping bitterly, but I did not dare to go to her.

On the twelfth day after I had fallen sick, being the middle day of January or thereabouts, she said we might take the road again on the day following; I was stronger, but she wanted to push on to some convent or abbey where I could rest in better comfort for a time, till the weather was more reliable and I had gathered strength; after which we would make for King Arthur's court at Chester. As to her sister's daughter in Sarum, Dowsabel said she might wait.

Dowsabel was resolved to stay with me and do all the offices of a squire as well as a nurse, and for my part I felt I could not do without her.

So the day before we were to set out, she went to the village as before, to get provisions, and while she was gone, the messenger came.

It was a young monk, and I saw him from far off as I looked down from the mouth of the cave, over the snowy slopes. That was the first time I had seen anyone on that path except Dowsabel. He wore a brown habit with the hood drawn up over his head; as he came up to where I stood he put the hood back halfway, and I saw a pale young man, not ill-looking, with dark brows, a shaven chin and a tonsure; he kept his eyes lowered as he spoke to me.

'You are Sir Gawain?'

'I am he, good brother.'

'I bring a message from King Arthur.'

You can imagine how my heart leapt at that. So Arthur knew where I was, and how I had sped! He must know I had fulfilled my trust with the Green Knight, and done what I was sent to do; but – and here my heart sank again – he must also know of my failure. But I must not shrink from whatever my payment was to be, good or ill.

‘Give me the King’s message.’

‘King Arthur says: To my trusty and well-beloved Gawain. If thou hast fulfilled thy geste, I bid thee come to me at Candlemass, no later, in the City of Sarum. And thereof fail not as you love me.’

He recited all this as a lesson learnt by heart.

‘At Candlemass!’ I said. ‘That is fourteen days from now, is it not?’ The monk nodded, his eyes still on the ground.

‘Do you bring any token from Arthur?’ I asked. For answer he withdrew his left hand from his sleeve, and I saw on his finger a ring of rubies and emeralds, wrought like a winged dragon. Such a ring I was sure I had seen on Arthur’s hand. So I knelt and kissed the ring.

‘Say to King Arthur,’ I said, ‘that I his knight will obey his command, and will be in the City of Sarum on the day of Candlemass.’ Then I rose to my feet, and dropping the courtly speech, said, ‘And now, brother, won’t you come in and rest? This is a poor place, but the best I can do.’

‘I thank thee, no,’ he replied, for his part never leaving the courtly speech. ‘Gramercy for thy courtesy, but I must needs haste on my way, Benedicite—’ and he raised his hand

in blessing, and paced rapidly away round the corner of the hill and out of sight.

When I told Dowsabel, I thought she would be pleased that we should go to her niece's place; I was quite unprepared for the harsh look of suspicion that came into her face.

'A monk – what kind of monk?'

'Oh, young – brown-habited, tonsured, what else would he be?'

'What cloister was he from?'

'I never asked him. He came from Arthur, that was all.'

'How do you know he came from Arthur?'

'He showed me Arthur's ring.'

'You mean, he showed you a ring you thought was Arthur's.'

'Heavens, Dowsabel! Must I doubt the evidence of my own eyes? He was a messenger from Arthur – Arthur himself – should I have put him through his catechism?'

She persisted: 'Did he wear a cross about his neck?'

'I couldn't see.'

'Did he give you his blessing?'

'Of course.'

'In what words – what sign?'

'Why, I suppose the usual ones. I remember he said "Benedicite", and held up his hand—'

‘But did he invoke the Father, Son and Holy Ghost? Did he speak the name of God? Did he make the sign of the Cross?’

‘Really, good dame,’ I said, ‘when a man brings a message from the King, and a knight receives it, do they stand upon ceremony – even if I could remember exactly the words of his blessing—’

‘I wouldn’t trust him,’ she said.

‘Maybe you wouldn’t,’ I said, rather acidly I admit. (I was peevish in my convalescence, I think, and her questions had put me out of patience.) ‘This was a man, and it is a matter between men, and between me and the King. I have received orders from the King to go to Sarum, and to Sarum I will go; and I will thank you, my dear dame, not to hinder me.’

I knew that I had hurt her, but fool that I was, I didn’t care.

So next day we packed our belongings and started away south and east.

I had very little strength for the first day’s travelling, although my wound was well healed; but by evening we reached a nunnery, and there Dowsabel arranged for us to stay three days. I’ll admit that I was glad of a decent bed in a decent dry room, and it did me a great deal of good. I was, of course,

lodged in the infirmary, while Dowsabel was with the sisters inside the cloister, so I hardly saw her at all till we came to take our departure; which was perhaps as well, for we were not friends. We had, I think, worn off the edge of our mutual anger when we set out again, and of course I was feeling better and therefore more cheerful; so we talked civilly enough, as we rode along, on indifferent subjects; but there was a constraint between us.

We took the road south and east, towards Sarum – at that time it was not hard to find one's way, for the great roads the Romans made were still there, and directions marked upon them at the crossways; and although the ways might be open and lonely, they were not quite so lonely as those in the wild north which we were leaving behind. Each night one could be reasonably sure of a monastery or a nunnery, or an inn, or at least a farm or a cottage to give lodgings to a knight and a pilgrim. So we journeyed on, and became more at ease with each other, and almost forgot our discord. Then within two days of Candlemass, we came out of Savernake Forest, and reached the edge of the great plain.

We had spent the night at a lonely farmhouse, and were preparing to set off in

the morning – a damp, windy, black morning, with the gleam of bleak light in the east like a glimmer under a black roof. I was standing outside the brick archway of the farmhouse wall, tightening my saddle-girths, while Dowsabel was still in the house settling our reckoning with the housewife; when I looked up, and there, suddenly, was the monk.

I started at the sight of him, and my first thought was to call Dowsabel that she might speak with him for herself; but he said, quickly and quietly, 'Do not call your nurse. This is between men. King Arthur bids you go to the great circle of Stonehenge, and there on Candlemass Day to meet with Merlin. Hereof fail not on your love and obedience.' He held out Arthur's ring – it gleamed in the dim light by the wall, and I knelt and kissed it.

'I will be there,' I said. 'Will you not come in?'

'No, I must go. Farewell,' and abruptly he was gone, round the turn of the dim road.

In a few minutes Dowsabel came out.

'Dowsabel,' I said as she mounted her donkey, 'the monk has been here again. He says I am to go to Stonehenge, to meet with Merlin.'

'What?' she cried. 'That monk? Why didn't you call me? Where did he go?'

‘I don’t know where he went,’ I said frowning, ‘and he spoke to me alone. You understand – he is Arthur’s messenger, and I must obey.’

‘I don’t trust him,’ she said, her old face paler than before, and her papery eyelids fluttering. ‘I don’t like it. Why must he call you to Stonehenge? First was to Sarum, and now it’s changed. He brings no token—’

‘He brings Arthur’s ring.’

‘I say he brings no token I can trust. There’s nothing to show what he is. He might be a demon, or a shape of magic—’

‘Dowsabel,’ I said, ‘no one asks *you* to trust this monk. It was to me the message was sent.’ And then, for I was mad with irritation and impatience, ‘No one asks you to go to Stonehenge. Go on to your niece at Sarum, and God be wi’ye. It is I who must go to Stonehenge.’

She reeled in her saddle, and pulled her donkey to a standstill. The reins dropped from her hands.

‘Is that what you wish?’ she said in a small faint voice.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I am under a man’s orders now, not a woman’s, and I think it best we should part here.’ She gave a sudden dry sob, and said, ‘Very well,’ and immediately

turned her donkey, and rode away quickly down the other fork of the road. I stared after her – I knew that I had been boorish, and that at least I should have thanked her for all she had done – but I was still angry and proud, and she had gone very quickly. While I was still doubting as to what I should have said, she was out of sight.

The loneliness of the great plain beyond Sarum is something no man can imagine who has not been there. The wild country of the north is savage enough, with its crags and forests; but here there are no crags, no mountains, no trees – nothing but wide barren land going on and on, over distant slopes and long undulations, as if for ever; blackened ling and shrivelled juniper bushes, and yellow grass faded to beaten straw from last year's growth, are all that clothes the earth. Not even the white thorn grows here – only in some places the gorse shows a faint gleam of yellow, and the scars in the ground, far off, show the white flints gleaming in unlikely shapes; and away on the skyline loom the burial mounds of forgotten kings. Through this country my road lay, and I was alone, alone and beyond all loneliness.

I tried to talk to my horse – good old Trojan, whom I still had – but my voice

mocked me, and made me afraid. Over and over I told myself that I should not regret Dowsabel – God's pity, hadn't I ridden alone before? Was I a child, to need a nurse? While she was with me, what was she but an encumbrance – a frail old woman, who would have to be protected if we ran into any danger? Wasn't I better off without her?

The day was short, and the rain fell pitilessly. No trace of a farm, or an inn, or a convent, not even a shepherd's hut; and I knew there could be no riding by night in such a time and place. Darkness came upon me rapidly – so (by God's mercy, or how would I have fared?) I found, by the roadside, the only clump of trees within miles, and decided to make camp there.

It was a dark, ill-omened spot, but better than the open plain. The trees were black twisted pines, and below them were hollies. I was in luck, for the largest of the hollies made a green bower within, under its leaves, and the rain had not penetrated there, so there was a dry sheltered place for me like a little tent. So I tethered my horse outside, and before the light had quite failed, gathered sticks and made a small fire in the heart of my leafy shelter. But by the time I had really got the fire going, it was pitch dark; and far off I heard a sound that made me

shiver – the howl of a wolf. Trojan heard it too, and started whinnying and plunging. I couldn't leave him outside the holly-bush to be eaten by the wolves; so I untied him, and throwing my cloak over his head to shield his eyes and muzzle from the prickly leaves, somehow coaxed him in under the holly boughs, to my cramped little circle of firelight, and made him lie down. Then I laid myself down against his warm belly. It was not the first time Trojan and I had slept so – I had taught him the trick of lying down and letting me rest against him during my year's wanderings, for it was useful to have that resource, and we had slept so under haystacks and in woods, but never before in such cramped quarters. For I could not make my fire too close to the stem of the holly for fear of setting it alight; neither could I bring Trojan too close to the fire; but the circle of the green holly leaves confined us closely, and outside was rain, discomfort and danger. I had to talk to Trojan all the time I was arranging him, and maybe it saved my sanity that night, for here was at least a living creature, though dumb, able to understand some of what I said to him. His big eyes, when I uncovered them, met mine and we exchanged our fear and loneliness and unhappiness.

So we lay and waited for the long night to pass; a very long night, for at that time the night is far longer than the day. And my thoughts turned to Dowsabel – I hoped that by now she was comfortably bestowed in some safe lodging, or perhaps already with her niece in Sarum; and certainly this was no place for her – it wasn't like the cave. I could not wish her with me – but I did realize how desperately I missed her.

The rain continued to fall, black and dismal; far off I could hear that howling, and nearer at hand there were noises that were harder to define – rustlings and cracking of twigs, a soft footfall round and round outside the holly, and sometimes a sound of breathing. I could feel the hair rise on Trojan's neck; he twitched and snorted, but I spoke to him quietly and bade him lie still, though I myself was tense in every limb. Then I began to know a worse thing. Nothing that I could see or hear, but I could feel it with my inward sense and see it against my eyelids whenever weariness made me shut my eyes. It was a thing like a net or veil of mist, drawing up from the earth, one and unbroken for miles around, for it *was* the earth of that land – but strong and stinging like a spider's web, and pulling itself up in a thousand places at once into a thousand

heads, a thousand mouths, open, hungry and eyeless. It gaped and sucked with all its mouths – immensely old, and cruel, and greedy. It was thin and barren and craving. Mile upon mile it stretched away, heaving up, wave upon wave into the darkness, blindly searching with those starved mouths. And somewhere out there a small helpless living creature, a little animal, or worse, a child, was being chased to and fro, running from one horrible mouth to another, whimpering in terror – and that helpless creature, I began to feel, was I. It was a nightmare without sleep I was drifting into. Trojan recalled me, by plunging and struggling and trying to rise; I held him down and quietened him, and made myself think of him instead of that thing outside; and I sat and fed the fire with twigs, and tried to pray to God and Our Lady till the light came.

At last it came, a sad and watery daybreak, parting the heavy clouds, but as welcome to me as good news. I struggled out of my cramped den, and seeing the desolate country at least free from wolves and nightmares, I helped Trojan out, once more covering his eyes against the prickles; he shook himself vigorously and snorted and stamped and then searched the ground for such small thin grass as there was. I had

some corn in a bag, which I fed to him. For myself I found some bread and cheese in my pouch, and a flask of wine, which put a little courage in me, and so we went on. The rain had ceased at last, and the grey light of the second day of February grew clearer, and showed a wan streak of blue. Candlemass Day had come.

I could tell I was approaching Stonehenge, for soon I came upon a long, wide road, bordered with solemn great stones, standing like grim men in grey, ranged in two lines to watch me go past. The sound of Trojan's hoofs echoed against them, and intensified the silence in which we rode.

This awesome avenue led straight before me, over a hill and down into a valley, and then as I breasted the next slope upwards I saw it – Stonehenge. Tall, stark and beyond all words solemn it stood, dark against the pale gleam of the sky. The huge stones stood round in a perfect circle, the lintels above them joining stone to stone, regular and straight; over the heads of the lintels five taller trilithons loomed; but the oldest circle of all, the foreign blue stones, lay within, hidden like the secrets of that place. Yet on the outside of the great round temple stood, right in my path, a still older thing – one tall stone, like a pillar, standing alone, and

behind it, another stone flat on the ground, like an altar. And in front of the standing stone, waiting for me, was a man.

He was so wrapped in thick black robes that at first sight I took him for a woman; but as I came nearer I saw that it was a man, old but vigorous, with a pointed grey beard that retained a tinge of red, and raking reddish eyebrows; his eyes, beneath fair well-shaped brows, I should have expected to be blue and benign, but they were black and keen, and glittered like a snake's. But his lips smiled, and his voice when he spoke was musical, and slow as if clogged with honey.

'All hail,' he said, 'Chosen of the Stars.'

I drew rein, and stared at him, for at his words a cold hand was laid on my heart.

'Hail to you, good father,' I said, and I hoped my voice did not shake. 'And who are you that hail me, and for what end?'

'For your own end,' he said, with his sweet smile. 'I am Merlin, and I hail you who must give your life for Arthur the King.'

A fight at last! I thought, and my hand sought the sword-hilt.

'Willingly – and whom must I fight?'

He shook his head, still with that smile.

'Put up your sword, brave knight. You are required not to fight, but to lay down

your life willingly, here upon the Stone of Sacrifice.'

'No!' I cried. 'Not that way! Let me fight, but not—'

'No?' he said. 'You do not understand.'

He moved his feet, and took up an easy stance, leaning on his tall staff, and began as if instructing a pupil.

'Listen now and learn. It is the law of ancient custom, time out of mind, in this our land of Britain, that once in every seventh year of the King's reign, one must be offered in sacrifice for the King's life, or else the King must die. This we know from our fathers before us. You should have known, when you undertook the aventure of the Green Knight, that you were the one chosen to die in place of the King. You know when and where the sacrifice should have been made – and you know that it was not made, and you know *why* it was not made.'

He looked strongly at me, and I was desolate with shame, feeling that green baldric burning into my shoulders. He continued.

'And now it is the fourteenth year of the King's reign, and he lies grievously sick. The holy time of the sacrifice is from Yule to Candlemass. This is the time and the place. But it must be with the victim's consent. Do

you therefore consent to give your life, here and now, in exchange for your King's?'

To say that my mind was in a turmoil is to say little of what I felt. I cried.

'I would do all I could to save or serve my liege lord, as I am sworn – but must it be this way?'

'This way, and no other.'

'But this is a heathen thing! What have I to do with it, since I am a Christian knight and serve God and His Mother?'

The old man smiled, as from deep wisdom.

'Oh, my son, here we are among the older things. What do you know of gods and their mothers? What you profess to serve will avail you little here.'

I drew my sword and held it crosswise before my face.

'Avaunt, then, Satan and all heathennesse!'

He put my sword easily aside with his hand.

'Put that away. This is not the time nor the place for such. Here are things far older. I tell you, my son – pray what prayers you like, to whom you like, but unless you give your life, willingly consenting, here and now, Arthur will die.'

'Is that true? 'I sighed.

‘True it is. He will die this night, and you, Gawain, will be to blame. It will be because you willed it so. Oh, I cannot compel you. Have no fear of violence from me,’ and he smoothed his bristling brows – ‘I will lay no hand on you against your will. You can ride away from here free – and go to Camelot for Arthur’s funeral, with Arthur’s death upon your soul.’

I could not stand against his words.

‘Well and good, then,’ I cried. ‘I am Arthur’s knight, and for his sake I will give my life. But be quick, and despatch me before my heart cools,’

‘Not so fast,’ said he. ‘Here comes one who has a part to play.’ And he drew aside so that I could see the curve of the stone circle.

Round the circle came riding Dowsabel on her donkey – she halted and dismounted, and ran towards us over the short grass, but as she ran she was changed – I saw, as I should have known long before, that it was the lovely lady Vivian herself.

And in that instant I understood how great a humiliation she had undergone for my sake, laying aside her youth and beauty and all her pride, that I might learn to trust her. Without a word I held out both hands to her, and without a word she came to my arms.

The old man stood looking at us, his black eyes twinkling.

‘So,’ he said ‘do you love this lady?’

‘With my life,’ I said.

‘With my life, says he about to die,’ he mocked me. ‘And you, lady, do you love him?’

‘Utterly and for ever.’

‘That is good,’ said the old man.

‘Oh sir,’ I cried, ‘if you are a priest as well as a magician, do us this last charity – let us be wedded before I die!’

‘I will do better than that,’ said he. ‘She is to be your executioner.’

‘What!’ we exclaimed together, and turned to face him, yet she never left my embrace.

‘It is for you, lady, to drive the sword through his heart. Only so can the sacrifice be made perfect.’

‘I cannot do it,’ she cried.

‘You must, or Arthur dies.’

‘Rather will I die with him. I beg you to let me die with him.’

The old man seemed to consider for a moment, then he lifted from beside the recumbent stone a long, thin sword of steel, exceedingly bright and sharp.

‘So be it, then,’ he said, and his voice was caressing. ‘Thus it shall be done. You,

Sir Gawain, will lie upon the stone of sacrifice, and your lady shall lie upon your breast, with her face to the sky. Then with my hand to give the thrust, her hand shall guide the sword to pierce first through her breast and then through yours. So you shall die united.'

I felt my dear Vivian tremble in my arms, but her face was resolute.

'Death is an ecstasy,' the old man was saying. 'No more than the consummation of love. It will be very beautiful' And his voice was like soft music as he talked calmly of our death.

Desperately I tried to recall the comforts of my faith, but they seemed far away from this dark ancient place. I could only make an inward act of devotion and commend my soul to God as I might on a battlefield. I looked deep into the eyes of my dear lady.

'My love, I have only just found you,' I said, 'and must I lose you so soon? There was so much to say—'

'There will be time in Paradise,' she answered. 'Lead on, magician.'

So, in the dimness and coldness, with the lapwings crying overhead, and the clouds racing, he divested me of my armour and my leather doublet, and laid me down on the great flat stone. And then he laid my dear

love on my breast, and I closed my arms round her to give her what comfort I might. Her red hair flowed over my face and partly covered my eyes. The old man towered over us, throwing back his hood – I heard him chant some strange form of words, that echoed far away over that still plain. He stooped and placed the sword to Vivian's breast, clasping her hands on it—

Then suddenly she gave a great cry, and struggled to be free—

'Stop, stop – *this is not Merlin!*'

But it was too late.

5 • Melior

I am called Melior, the disciple of Merlin. The name Melior means 'honey-mouth', and has been given me because I have a sweet voice by the grace of God, both for singing and speaking; and also some small skill in words. So it falls to me, according to this same gift of words, to set down the last record of these things, as I saw them; as I sit here in my cell in Amesbury, with a blind man by my side who was once a knight.

I was Merlin's close companion for more than five years, and lived with him in his little cottage outside Marlborough. I am setting out now in writing the tale of the last days of his life, but if I should try to tell his whole life-story, I could never worthily portray his greatness, his wisdom and his kindness. For he was the Mage of Britain, and there was never any like him, nor shall there be again.

In looks he was a short, broad man, powerfully built – he must have been a

formidable man in his youth, and handsome too, for he was still comely even in his oldest age, and no one knew how old that was, His skin was fresh and without blemish, his snow-white hair parted smoothly over his brows, and hung in curls on the nape of his neck, and his great wide beard, equally white, swept down over his broad chest like a cataract on a mountain. His eyes were large and blue and clear, and looking into them was like opening a window on a bright and frosty morning, Such was Merlin, my friend and teacher. I was his clerk and pupil of his hermitage, but neither he nor I were ordained priests of the Church. Yet I always thought of him as a great priest of an older fashion. Nonetheless we were not heathens. We were true servants of our Blessed Lord, who once walked in Glastonbury, and of His dear Mother, who ended her days there. And may I, when my time comes, be laid in Glastonbury's holy earth, as I know Arthur will be, and our poor Guinevere by his side.

Since the time I came to him (being then a young lad of fifteen) Merlin had gone very seldom to Arthur's court, and for the last three years not at all. He would make excuses, saying he was growing old, and that Arthur must rule for himself now

and not lean on another. But each Christmas he used to set out, two days before the feast, and journey slowly along the wintry roads to Avebury. There, where the great solemn stones stand, he would go before daybreak in his white robes, bearing the mistletoe bough, and take his place in front of the Ring Stone, bidding me place a vessel of water on the flat stone below it, on one certain spot. When the sun of Christmas Day rose, small and red and low in the southeast, its rays would shine through the Ring Stone and strike upon the vessel of water; and gazing on its reflection, he would prophesy.

And now Christmas was drawing near again, and it was time for him to think of our journey. I came in to him on the morning of St Thomas's Day, in his little bedroom at the back of our cottage, where he lay in his curtained bed. It was snowing outside.

'No, Melior,' he said, 'I don't want to go to Avebury this year. Why should I? I'm too old.' And he coughed – but I, who had known him a long time now, knew that it was no true cough. Sometimes, wonderful man though he was, he could be as trying and awkward as any other old man.

'You have always gone, up to now, Master,' I said.

‘I know, I know – but times change, times change, Melior, and perhaps the world doesn’t need me any more.’

‘Never say that, Master,’ I said.

‘Oh, ay, but I do say it. Arthur doesn’t need me, his court doesn’t need me. They want a younger magician.’ And he humped himself up in his bedclothes.

‘Are you sick, Master?’ I inquired.

‘Yes – no – well, yes. Sick enough, and old, old, old. It’s snowing – what’s an old chap like me to do with trudging about the country in the snow? It’s cold, and I’m comfortable here. Bring me a bowl of broth and my Plato, and leave me alone.’

‘Is the rite at the Ring of Stone no longer important, then?’ I ventured to ask.

‘Not important? Yes, yes, of course it’s important – but I can’t go this year, I tell you, and I won’t go. Certainly it’s important, but this age doesn’t value magic any more. Let them do without it.’

‘Will you not send someone in your place, then, Master?’

‘Who is there to send, in God’s name? Don’t be a fool, Melior,’ and he picked up the three-legged stool from beside the bed and threatened to throw it at me. He hardly looked either sick or old, I thought. But I

also thought it advisable to let him have his own way. So I brought his broth and his Plato, and left him alone.

The snow fell thickly all the day, and when I went in to settle him to sleep for the night – for he still played the invalid – he frowned and muttered and cursed, and insisted that he wouldn't go, though I no longer argued with him. He seemed to be arguing with himself. Every small cause of offence, every grievance that he might have had against Arthur and his knights, every fancied slight, he dragged up and commented on. This was unlike him, for never before had I known him to harbour grudges or bear malice. But he seemed anxious to prove to himself that he was no longer wanted at Arthur's court.

'I'm an old man, old, old, old,' he insisted. 'Time I was dead. I've lived too long. Let me go away and join my Nimue – how long before she comes to fetch me?'

I had never heard him speak of Nimue before, and I wondered who she was.

'So – blow out the light and leave me,' he concluded. 'I will – not – go.' And on the last word he pulled his curtains to.

But before the light had glimmered into the sky the next morning, in the dark and

the cold, I was wakened with a start, and there was Merlin standing over me with a lantern.

'Get up, Melior – get up, boy, and don't delay. We must be off.'

'Eh – where, Master?' I stammered, bewildered with sleep and astonishment.

'To Avebury, of course. We haven't a moment to lose.'

I struggled from my bed and dressed myself in a clumsy huddle, my hands shaking with the cold. But he was not shaking – rather his eyes were blazing with excitement.

'Don't be so surprised, my dear Melior,' he said. 'Oh yes, I know I said I wasn't going, but there is something – it came to me in the night. Perhaps from this,' and he touched the mystical snake-stone that hung round his neck. 'I don't know what it is, but I know I must go. Come, let's start as soon as we can.'

The journey on foot to Avebury usually took us the best part of two days, but this time we had started late and had to press on hard. The snow fell thickly, and a cold wind drifted it against us, as if it were trying to push us back; and although Merlin had started out full of purpose and new energy, I did indeed wonder if he were not sick after all, for he struggled and staggered, and

leant hard on me. Part of the time he rode on our pack-donkey, and I carried its load; and I began to wonder if he ought not to have stayed behind after all. We spent the night in a shepherd's cottage, and next day the cold wind had dropped and the snow fell no longer, but lay thick and gleaming under the cold sky; it was Christmas Eve, and Merlin hastened on, begrudging every moment's pause, hardly speaking, his eyes fixed far ahead. That evening we reached Avebury and were received by the two old Culdees who lived there – hermits, the people called them, but like Merlin, they were priests of an older order. They welcomed us kindly, and lodged us for the night, and in the morning they accompanied us to the place of the Great Stones.

We set out before dawn, one of the Culdees holding a lantern before us, but the glare of the snow lighted us in the dark and in the east a faint glimmer broke the clouds. Merlin was dressed in his white robe, as we all were, with the white hood over each one's head; but on Merlin's hood, over his forehead, was placed the symbol of the Three Bars of Light, and on his breast, below his beard, gleamed the snake-stone. In his hand he held the shepherd's crook, and on it he carried the bunch of sacred mistletoe.

In silence we threaded our way along the great stone avenue – very black the gigantic stones looked against the snow. We came at last to the place within the Circle of the Sun and Moon, where the Ring Stone stands, pierced with a circular hole through which the sun's rays shine. I carried a pitcher of water and a bowl, and the other Culdee carried incense; so when we had made purification by water and fire, and offered the mistletoe as by the old custom, I filled the bowl with water and laid it on the low stone, and we all waited.

At last the sun's face came up, like a burning ember, and a long red ray shone through the hole of the Ring Stone upon the mirror of water in the bowl; and Merlin gazed there earnestly. Then the clouds obscured the sun, the faint gleam had gone, and Merlin sprang back as if suddenly released from looking. His face was pale.

'Finish the rite,' he said in a low voice, and so we went on and completed the rite according to ancient custom, leaving nothing out. Only then, when we had left the circle in proper processional order and were outside the holy ground, he seized my arm and turned to our kind hosts.

'I knew it – there's trouble, and I must go at once. Brothers, I'm sorry – I would have shared your feast, but we must go at once.

There is danger – I saw danger in the light on the water. Danger to Arthur and all the Round Table, and to all of Britain now and to come. I must go at once to be there in time.'

'Where will you go, reverend father?' one of the Culdees asked. Merlin looked to and fro in some bewilderment.

'Why – why– I can't tell where the danger lies at this moment, for one stands in the way of my sight, and hides the place from me. But if we don't know, there is only one place to go from which we can act as in every place.'

'To Camelot, Master?' I said.

'No, no – to the centre of magic – to Stonehenge.'

So that very morning, waiting only for a hasty breakfast, we set out for Stonehenge, and should have reached it easily in three days.

That night we stayed at a little rustic inn, comfortable enough. And as we got ready in the morning to take the road again, up the track towards us came a tall, swarthy man in the black robes of a scholar.

'Greetings, good sirs,' he said, bowing sweepingly to the ground. 'Am I in the

presence of Merlin the great Seer of Britain, called Ambrosius? For if so I am greatly honoured.'

My master had his staff in his hand, and had taken the first step on the road, and I was behind him with the pack donkey; but he halted at this salutation, and returned it, though hardly so sweepingly.

'I am Merlin Ambrosius of Britain, courteous sir. May I know your name?'

'Names,' said the stranger, 'are a deep matter of philosophy. I might tell you many names, but if they were not the truth, would they profit you? Yet if I were to tell you that I were Pythagoras of Massila, or Empedocles of Sicily, or Plato of Athens, or even that Abares of Gaul who journeyed from Britain even to Constantinople – what would you say?'

'I would say, are you real?' said my master.

'You would say, are you real?' the other exclaimed, with his eyes lighting up. 'But who is real? What is real? What, indeed, is reality? Nothing that we can apprehend with our five dull senses.'

'True,' said Merlin, resting on his staff, 'and yet reality, being beyond apprehension, needs the mediation of the senses before human intellect can conceive it—'

‘Master,’ I interrupted, ‘we have to be on our way.’

‘In a minute, good Melior— but, sir, if our senses be not the channels of apprehension of reality—’

‘Not so,’ the other said, smiling, ‘for how can the fallible be the channels of the perfect and eternal? For reality, you will grant, is that which is perfect and eternal; therefore if you ask me, am I real, I can but answer no, clothed in flesh as I am; neither are you, clothed in flesh as you are.’

‘Master—’ I ventured, but he shook me off.

‘My good sir, come back here into the inn for a moment. Melior, wait a little – Come now, sir—’

And before I could stop him, he was swept away into deep argument with this stranger, whose eloquence and subtlety held him spellbound. At noon the innkeeper brought them meat and drink, which they ate without looking at it – at least Merlin ate, but the strange man ate nothing. The short afternoon went, and I unpacked the ass’s load and sat back in the chimney corner. All night they talked – and all the next day too – and all the next day. Three days had passed since Christmas, and on the morning of the fourth day I thrust myself, rudely I fear, in front of my master. I had the saddlebags

packed and loaded, the reckoning paid, and my staff in my hand.

'Master,' I pleaded, 'we must be going.'

He looked up, bleary-eyed, from the chimney corner, where he and the stranger had been huddled together, pointing fingers and hammering fists at each other.

'Eh? What's this?' he said, like a sleepwalker, as I led him by the arm out to the door. The stranger followed us.

'Master – is your errand of no more importance, then?'

'My errand? What errand?'

'Why,' I burst out, 'you said it was something of such importance that you must not delay for a minute – something you saw at Avebury—'

He blinked in the sunlight at the door. 'I don't remember.' Then passing his hand over his forehead, 'What is the time?'

'What is the time?' cried the stranger, coming up behind us. 'Say rather, What *is* Time? Do *you* know, Master Merlin? No. Do I? Perhaps.'

Merlin turned back to him, and the stranger laid hold on his sleeve.

'For Time is not what you think. Oh, do not go. Listen – give me ten minutes more – bah! why do we talk of minutes? what

are they? – only wait, and I will tell you what Time is—'

I knew that I would never get him away now unless I did something drastic; so (may I be forgiven for the cruelty, for I never do such things willingly) I picked up a sharp nail that had fallen in the road, and drove it hard into our poor beast's backside.

The ass gave a screaming bray, and was off down the road, and off the road, and into the heather, and out of sight. I dragged at Merlin's other sleeve and pointed.

'The ass, Master, the ass!' I shouted.

'Let it go,' he replied. 'We can buy another.'

'But it's got your Plato in the saddlebags!' I yelled at him. *That* worked.

'My Plato! Oh, my precious Plato!' And he plucked his robe from the stranger's clutch, and pelted away down the road after the ass, and I after him. About ten minutes' hard running across the heather tussocks brought us up with the ass, poor beast, now forgetful of its fright and quietly cropping the strawy grass. Merlin hastened to make sure the Plato was safe in the saddlebag, patted the poor ass, and sat down in the heather to get his breath. The inn, and the stranger, were far out of sight, and the spell was broken. I let him breathe, and then I said,

‘And now, Master, it really is time to hasten on our journey.’

‘Eh? What journey? . . . Oh yes, I begin to remember. Why, were we talking very long?’

‘Three whole days,’ I said. His eyes grew round.

‘No? I honestly thought it was half an hour. And all that time without meat or drink?’

‘Not quite. I and the innkeeper fed you, but you never seemed to notice.’

‘No more I did – and the stranger?’

‘He neither ate nor drank.’

‘Didn’t he? Now that’s very strange.’ He grew thoughtful. ‘Do you suppose he was real?’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake,’ I cried, ‘don’t start talking about reality again. But Master – you have an errand. Or at least you said you had. One of such importance that not one minute could be lost – and now you’ve lost three days.’

‘Oh, heavens!’ he said. ‘That man made me forget everything – Melior, Melior, think of it – he made me forget everything, three days passed in his company in half an hour, and he neither ate nor drank – What if he were a deceit of the Enemy?’

‘What, indeed?’ I said. ‘Oh Master, let us hasten on our journey.’

‘But I don’t know where we were to go,’ he said helplessly.

‘To Stonehenge,’ I reminded him.

‘To Stonehenge? But what to do there?’

‘I don’t know,’ I replied. ‘You did not tell me.’

He gave a cry of pain, and bowed his head, beating his forehead with his palms.

‘Miserable old man that I am! I have forgotten it all, all – but I know it was a thing of deepest peril, and that the whole future of Britain hung upon it – and now, now, now it’s all gone from me. Gone, like a dream one can’t remember. Gone, stolen from me by the deceit of the Deceiver.’ He laid his head on his knees, and for a moment he wept. Then he looked up bleakly at me.

‘Melior, my son – what are we to do now?’

‘Why not look in the snake-stone, Master?’ I said. His face cleared a little.

‘Ah, of course, the snake-stone. How could I forget? This man has upset me badly – I doubt I could repeat the Greek alphabet, let alone the Hebrew.’ He laughed shakily.

‘Don’t try, Master,’ I said, helping him up. ‘Let us find a sheltered dell somewhere

and make a fire, and then you shall consult the snake-stone.'

'I will indeed,' he said, 'and this time I will tell you everything, so that you can remember for me.'

After some casting around we found a dell, with a few birch-trees, which gave us a little shelter; I found enough wood and gorse to light a fire, and we took our noon-meat of bread and cheese and ale; then, when I had made Merlin as comfortable as I could by the fire, I sat down by him in silence. He drew the snake-stone from his bosom, released the cord that held it round his neck and laid it in his palm. I looked sideways down upon it. It was a large glass bead, between the size of a pigeon's egg and a pullet's, and quite round, of a cloudy green colour, with whirling threads of white and blue inside the glass. He stared at it a long, long time. Then he began the low, monotonous chant of the Wise Men, repeating one word over and over. Then the chanting ceased, as if he had fallen asleep, but his eyes were open.

'I can see now,' he said slowly. 'A man and a woman – a knight and a lady. He rides before and she follows after – why does he never look at her? She is veiled, and I cannot see her face. Why is she veiled? She is not a widow, nor a nun. She is a young

maiden, fair and lovely, but I cannot see her face. I know *him*, but who is she? – They are riding into danger. They are riding to their death. I see a sword in the way they are going, a long sharp sword to pierce both hearts at once – and worse than that, worse than that—' His voice, that had been spellbound and monotonous, now quickened with excitement – 'Oh, much worse – the sword is to pierce far, far down into our land – not for this time only, but far ahead . . . Ah, the lady turns, she lifts her veil. I shall see who she is – Oh God!' His sudden sharp cry rang out, and then he moaned as if he had been wounded.

'Oh Vivian, Blaisine, Nimue – Oh my lost darlings!'

He let the stone drop from his hand, and leaned back; I supported him, or he would have fallen. His eyes were red-rimmed, and he trembled. After a while he recovered himself, picked up the stone, replaced it round his neck, and sat nearer the fire, which I was mending with twigs. Then at last he began to talk to me.

'I said I must tell you what I saw, Melior, so that if I forget again you may remind me. As you said, we are to go to Stonehenge and there meet this man and this woman I saw in the stone, who are going there into

danger. The man is one of the best of King Arthur's knights of the second generation, his champion for those days; but the lady—

'Consider this, Melior. We men give our names to our line, and reckon it from father to son. We take a woman's name from her, and give her ours instead, and her name, and her lineage, are forgotten in history. And if a man has no son – and I have no son, Melior – the name dies out, and the line fails. But the mother-line, ah! the mother-line! *That* runs on, underground, hidden and forgotten – having three threads to the father's one, thus: mother to daughter, father to daughter, mother to son. So it spreads and spreads unnoticed, carrying with it all the treasures of the mother's blood, when the father's line that bears the name has dropped away and failed.

'It is a matter, now, of genealogy; and it is given to me to see the genealogies that may yet be, and also those that may not be, and the point at which a knife-edge divides "shall" from "shall not". Arthur has no lawful son, and I know that he will not have any – and God forbid that his inheritance should pass to Mordred. But he has a daughter, and no one will remember her name in years to come, or know that he had a daughter – yet the son that should be born to those two I saw

in my vision should wed her, and from them should come no kings, but queens a few, and commoners without number, down through the ages passing through the motherline, to be the nerves and sinews of this our land of Britain in long ages to be. All of them – I see them running like a silver network through the body of our land – all of them with some gift, some light within them, some high calling, that shall make this Britain what she is meant to be. But only if these two are allowed to live and love.

'For Melior, I have not told you who the lady is. I will tell you, and – and if I fail in any way, and you survive, you must go to her and aid her with your life. She is Vivian, the child of Blaisine my daughter, the child of Nimue whom I loved. She is my grandchild, Melior.

'So you see,' he said, with a brisk change of tone, getting up off the ground, 'I must go to her at once. Pack up the things and let us go, and let nobody stop us this time.'

I began to put the things together as quickly as I could.

'But tell me, Master,' I said, while my hands worked, 'who is the adversary who threatens the lady and the knight?'

He looked at me as if I ought to have known.

‘Why, the Deceiver herself – Morgan le Fay, the queen of all deceivers. She would be throned in Britain herself, and would root out now, in the acorn, the oak of Arthur that ages will not destroy, if only – if only – oh, let us hasten on.’

So, under the darkening January sky, we took up our staves, and I held the donkey’s bridle, and we pressed on. But our flight from the inn door had led us far out of our way, and there seemed to be no tracks across the moor at all. Merlin guessed our position by the faint gleam of the setting sun, and bore southwards; but though we found some devious tracks of sheep and goats, we found no path of men, and the tracks we followed led us into terrifying quagmires, where our staves, as we thrust them in before us, sank and were sucked at by the hungry slough beneath, and we could hardly pull them out. We had to go round and about, further and further off our course, till at last when it was dark we saw lights, and stumbled into a lonely farmhouse which proved to be further off than where we started. There was nothing for it but to stay the night in the farmer’s chimney corner. He told us we were lucky not to have been swallowed up in the quaking quagmire.

The next morning we pressed on, and the farmer set us on a firm track once more; and we ought to have reached Stonehenge by nightfall. But before noon we came to a village, and as we drew near a stench came out to meet us – not only loathsome but terrifying, for it spoke to the nostrils of danger – the smell of pestilence.

I said to Merlin, 'I think, Master, we would do well to go round this place and keep clear of it,' but at that moment a half-dozen people came running out from the wall that encircled the village – chiefly women, with ragged clothes huddled thickly around them, their hair hanging dank and loose, some with children clasped in their arms and moaning. One of the women, with a year-old child in her arms, fell at Merlin's feet.

'Oh, sir, sir,' she cried, 'I think you are a healer by your dress. Help us, for God's sake! It's the plague – three children are dead already, and five men, and we don't know what we shall do – my baby here is sick, and oh! dear healer, for the love of Our Lady—' The tears ran down her pale tragic face, and the baby in her arms coughed.

Merlin drew back the clothes and looked at the baby.

'What kind of sickness is it?'

‘Oh, Master,’ I said, ‘we mustn’t stop. You said so yourself.’ He shook off my hand. ‘It seems I am needed here.’

‘But if this should be another device to delay us?’

He turned and faced me sternly.

‘There are children dying,’ he said, and would say no more. He went into the village with the woman, and I could do nothing but follow him.

The plague was not the very worst kind – not the black swellings, but only the sweating sickness – but any sickness is bad enough if it means the death of a man, and the death of children is the worst of all. There were perhaps two hundred souls in the village, and over half of those were sick, and the rest like to be; not only those the woman had spoken of, but ten more died that very night, and the whole village was in panic fear. Merlin took charge at once and did what was needed. Really it was no hard sickness to cure, if the folk would nurse each other with care and good sense; but if they went running to and fro with the fever on them, eating no meals because there was none to feed them, and becoming weary and chilled and overwatched – why then they died easily, sometimes dropping down dead by the bedside of those they were trying to

tend. The place was filthy, and no wonder, and the filth spread the pestilence. Merlin's first action was to muster all those who were still well, and give them their orders to care for the sick, marshalling them like a small army, and bidding them clean and wash and cook and nurse. For though at times he was an arrant old dreamer, yet at a pinch like this he would bestir himself and plan and command like a chieftain; and always men would obey him. He did not use much magic, for there was no need to. All the people needed, really, was someone to tell them what to do. He sent some of them to collect herbs on the moor, and made herbal medicines; and perhaps he put a little of his magic into them. But sometimes he would stand by a sick one's bedside, especially if it were a child, and let the power run out of his fingers into his patient's body; this was a strong healing, but it made Merlin himself very tired, and in time it took disastrous effect on him.

Ten whole days went by; after that first night no more children died, and only one more old woman; everyone in the village had the sickness in their turn, but they recovered from it, taking heart when they saw that others had recovered before them. But when it seemed that the plague was abating, on

the eleventh day after our arrival, I went into the little hut the people had allotted to us, and found Merlin crouched on his bed, shivering and clenching his teeth.

'I have taken it,' he said. 'No use. I'm a wreck now, Melior, but never mind about me. You must go on to Stonehenge.' He paused while a paroxysm of shivering ran over him. 'Don't you realize it's the fifteenth day of the month, and we should be there by Candlemass? Pack your things and go at once.'

'And leave you like this?' I said. 'Never!'

'Ah, don't be a fool. The village wives will nurse me – Gwennath, or Huw's wife.'

'I don't trust Gwennath or Huw's wife or any of them,' I said. 'Much good they did before you came. I'm sorry, and I know I'm disobeying you, my dear Master, but I'm staying here.'

He was really too ill to argue with me, and he said nothing more, but seemed to doze for the time. I sent for the village wives, and gave them orders as he might have done, to get me what I needed for him, but I tended him myself, and watched him through the fever day and night for five days. Then on the fifth morning, when he had woken cheerful and hungry but still very weak, what must I do, as I stood by his

bedside, but drop the bowl I was holding, as I felt the hut spin round me and I sank down on the floor. Presently I found myself in bed, with Merlin's face above me.

'Go on now, Master,' I whispered hoarsely, for I could hardly breathe. 'Don't wait for me. Time is running out – you must get to Stonehenge. Leave me here.'

'And what kind of master would I be to do that?' he said.

So there I lay, and dimly knew that he nursed me as I had nursed him. In the first horrible night of the fever when I did not seem to be able to sleep but was assuredly not awake, I thought I saw a tall dark woman, proud and of devilish beauty, looking at us both, and laughing and laughing. In her hand, I remembered, she held a mask as of an old man.

Then at last I came up out of the cloud. I found Merlin beside me, in the grey light of the morning, and his hand held mine and poured strength into me.

'Master!' I cried. 'The time passes – we must go. What day is it?'

'The twentieth of the month,' he said, pressing me back as I tried to rise. 'No, stay there, my boy. You are too weak yet, and I'm really none too brisk myself. Five days more will give us time enough.'

‘Five days?’ I answered wildly. ‘I thought there was no time to spare—’

‘Hurrying won’t help us if we both drop down by the way,’ he said. ‘Lie there and get your strength back, and try not to be anxious.’

There was nothing for it but to do as he said.

The villagers overwhelmed us with gratitude and kindness; but I was horrified to think that our enemy might have sent this plague upon them just to delay us, and I could not bear to pass by the graves of those that had died. But the rest of the village came slowly back to health; and on the twentyeighth day of January Merlin and I set out again.

We had wandered far from our road, and since we went into the plague-village there had been heavy rains, and places where we could have passed before were flooded, so we were told, and we would have to go a long way round yet. Nonetheless, we should not need to take more than two days to cross the plain.

‘We shall be there by tomorrow night if nothing stops us,’ said Merlin.

‘If nothing stops us!’ I echoed.

For almost as I spoke, down from the north came the blackest and most towering

of clouds, piled up in the sky like a castle and trailing below over the hills – slate-coloured, and blotting out all behind it; it swept over us like black wings, and out of it came snow, large and driving, pressing into our faces until we could hardly breathe. We clutched our garments round us, and made them as secure as we could, for the wind pierced into every loophole, and the snow found its way into every fold. The poor donkey stood with its head lowered and its feet braced, and it was all that we could do to urge it on, or our own bodies either for that matter. We could not talk, could not see where we were going. We pressed on into the snow and wind as if boring our way into something solid.

'Master!' I yelled into Merlin's ear at last, 'couldn't you use a little magic to help us?'

'What?' he shouted back.

'Magic – help us – possible?'

'Possible but not permissible,' he yelled.

'Oh, but why?'

He shook his head, and it was useless to try and carry on an argument. We pressed on as best we could, and presently to my dismay I found that the light was fading – the short day was over already. Then suddenly the wind dropped, the snow stopped falling and there we were in the dark on the bare downs, with drifts of pathless snow all round us, and

no means of knowing which way to go. Just two lost human particles in the vast snowy night, out of touch of all life and help.

But Merlin seized my arm with his firm comforting grip and pointed. There below us were moving lights, and a sound came up of tinkling bells, and sheep bleating, and someone playing a bagpipe. Shepherds! It was lambing time, and down there were the lambing folds. Taking heart, we plucked our heavy feet out of the snow and forced ourselves to stumble on towards the lights.

There was a square enclosure of wattles, partly roofed over, and piled with straw to a depth of three or four feet; into this the sheep were nested with their lambs, and the shepherds too. There were two of them, with one small lantern; they had no fire, but the warmth of their bodies, men and sheep together, kept them snug in the midst of the snow. The men sat burrowed in, packed close against their sheep, hidden up to their heads in the straw; one of them from time to time creeping out to see to a ewe as she gave birth. When nothing was happening they would play the bagpipe to pass the time.

They were kindly men, as they all are, and welcomed us in with great concern for our plight. We soon found ourselves nestled in

the warm straw, each of us back to back with a great woolly ewe who was as comforting as a feather-bed. The shepherds had a flask of a most marvellous cordial, made, they said, of eggs, cream, lemons, honey and strong waters.

'Tis called King Arthur's Ambrosia,' they said, as we supped it gratefully. 'They say it will bring the dead to life and make barren women conceive.'

'Whether King Arthur knows of it or not,' said Merlin smiling, 'it's a noble brew, and I never was more glad of anything in my life.' And almost as he spoke he was fast asleep, and in a few minutes so was I.

When we woke it was still dark, so we thought we had only been asleep a couple of hours. The moon shone over the sheepcote, and the shepherds were moving quietly about. Merlin sat up and called to them.

'We must be going now, friends. A thousand thanks for your hospitality. I don't doubt you've saved our lives. We've slept well.'

'Ay, that 'ee have,' said one of the shepherds coming in under the thatch. 'Well and long. Reckon you needed it.'

'And now I think we have strength enough to get to Stonehenge before Candlemass Day.'

‘Candlemass Day?’ said the shepherd. ‘Why, you’ll have to make haste, then. This *is* Candlemass Day, or will be when the sun has risen.

‘What?’ said Merlin wildly. ‘But it can’t be – man, it’s the last day of January still, isn’t it?’

‘It *was* the last day of January when you came to us,’ said the shepherd, grinning in the light of his lantern. ‘But you’ve slept the day round, you see, right through the first of February – Tuesday – and now it’s growing towards Wednesday morning, second of February, Candlemass Day as us reckons—’

‘Oh, dear God above!’ Merlin cried. ‘We shall be too late – quick, Melior, quick—’

He staggered out into the snow, and I followed him. While I groped around for the donkey, and collected up our few things, he pressed money into the shepherd’s hand.

‘Not a penny, sir, not a penny. Why, I might need shelter myself on a cold night. We’ll take nothing but your blessing, for I see you’re a holy man.’ And so Merlin gladly gave him his blessing, and having made sure of the road, we tottered out together through the snow, under the uncertain moon, only half awake, but driven on by a terrible fear lest we should be too late.

And now, as we were out of sight of the shepherds, a cloud came over the moon, and a white mist came up, steaming from the ground, until the air was all white and thick, and we were lost in a blank of whiteness. We stared into nothingness, holding tight to each other and the donkey for fear we should lose touch. We came to a standstill, for we could not tell which way to go.

'Oh Master, we're lost!' I exclaimed, and an uncanny echo threw back at me: 'Lost, lost, lost.'

'Nonsense, we're not lost,' he almost snapped, but the echoes mocked him again, 'Lost, lost, lost.' Then, as we tried to step forward, we were conscious of a strange thing – the mist seemed to become solid like a wall, and to press us back. Something resisted us.

'Well, now it must be magic,' said Merlin, but he said it low, so as not to wake those echoes. 'Turn the donkey loose – he will go back to the shepherds and be safe enough there.' He raised his staff with both hands and touched it to his lips – I knew that that action, and the word he said made it no longer just his walking-staff, but a rod of power – and then with that staff he drew a great circle round us in the snow, and within

the circle a pentagram. Then he raised his voice, loud and awesome.

'Who are you, that thrust us back from our way?'

And a voice came out of the solid mist, a voice deep and harsh and horrible.

'I am called Bertilak, and my name is a name of violence.'

'Whence come you?'

'I come from the lowest parts of That Which Is, out of the depths of Annwn, through the lower circles of Abred. I try to rise, from the beast of the slime to the beast of the hills, to the lower man and to the higher man, but always I am drawn back into Annwn.'

'Who draws you back?'

'She whom I obey.'

'Who is she?'

'You know her name, but I may not speak it.'

I could not hear the words that Merlin spoke now, but the white mist grew black around us, and a coldness that was not of the winter air, but something far more dread, crept through my body and raised my hair upright.

Merlin stretched out his right arm with his staff to its fullest extent, and traced out a pentagram in the air, and behold! as he

traced it a line of light was visible against the blackening mist.

‘I command you,’ he cried, and uttered great Names of Power, ‘Bertilak, unhappy soul, come forth, and appear before me in the shape you now wear.’

Then I heard heavy, shuffling footsteps, and out of the mist came looming a shape so terrible that I could hardly stand and face it.

It was like a bear, upright on its hind legs, but taller than any bear – perhaps three times the height of a man; black and hairy, with its great paws extended showing the claws tipped with fire. But the head was more hideous than a bear’s, for it was horned like a bull, and the jaws and snout were those of a boar with yellow, foam-flecked tusks; and the eyes, slit like a goat’s, glared with bestial malice as it shambled down upon us.

Merlin’s voice spoke quietly in my ear.

‘Show no fear, Melior. You must not move.’

I forced myself to obey, though the thing came on, closer and closer. Words came from it, though it did not seem to speak with its mouth.

‘If you come one step nearer I will tear you with my teeth and claws.’

I stood rigid, but turned my eyes from the horror, and looked towards Merlin. He stood unmoved, with his staff still stretched out before him. His hood had fallen back, and his white hair gleamed; and his brow was like an immovable granite cliff, facing towards the beast.

'Bertilak,' he cried, 'unhappy Bertilak, look at me.'

And the tiger-glaring eyes of the beast met his, and were held. Merlin's great invocation rang out, and the echoes took it up.

'In the Name of the Light of Lights, in the Name of the Sun of Suns, in the Name of the Flame Within, Bertilak, I command you to yield to His Compassion and Mercy.'

And behold! the terrible eyes clouded over, and red tears dropped from them; the menacing paws dropped to the beast's sides, and it fell on all fours. Down went the horned head, and laid itself in the snow at Merlin's feet; and the whole great terrible creature lay prostrate and subdued, and I thought I heard a sound like weeping.

'Come,' Merlin said, 'this beast will aid us now, and lend us his strength.' He seemed to have something like a bridle in his hand, and he stooped and placed it over the beast's head and set it in its grisly

mouth, gently, and caressing its head as he did so.

'Come, poor creature,' he said, and I have never known his voice so sweet and loving, 'your redemption is begun.'

Terror rose in me, for I saw that Merlin meant me to ride upon that beast.

'You must not be afraid,' he said sternly to me. 'Mount and ride. Do not hesitate, lest we come too late.'

So, trembling in every fibre of me, I mounted that hideous creature behind Merlin, clinging to its coarse black fur – and in a moment, dreamlike, we were borne along through the darkness at incredible speed.

When I could look around me, day had come, grey and sad, and we were approaching Stonehenge. Somehow I had dismounted from the terrifying beast, and Merlin and I were walking up the long avenue of stones – Merlin was almost running, dragging me with him. As we went, suddenly a woman's scream rent the air, and as suddenly was still. Merlin gave an exclamation and rushed on.

As we breasted the slope, there was the great circle, pale against the black clouds, and before it stood the great upright stone; behind the upright stone stood a tall veiled

figure in black, with arms upraised as in invocation; and between that figure and the upright stone, on the flat stone, a knight and a lady lay dead, with one long sword piercing through the hearts of both of them.

I could not see the knight's face, for the lady's hair, redgold, lay spread across it, veiling his eyes; but her face, white in death, was frozen in terror and agony. Her hands were clasped upon the sword that had united while it slew them, and their blood was all about the stone and streaming down to the earth.

I recoiled in horror, but my master strode forward with staff uplifted against that black-robed figure. I had thought it an old man with a red beard – but as Merlin approached it, the figure became that of a tall woman, of bold aspect – and I trembled, for it was the same woman I had seen in my fevered dream, and once again she was laughing. She laughed as Merlin approached her.

'So, my old friend and kinsman Ambrosius, you come too late. The ancient sacrifice is accomplished.'

'So I see,' he said, with his face stony and his eyes dry.

'You should be glad,' she went on, taunting him, 'if you are any true liege of

King Arthur. For Arthur's life is saved, and his strength renewed for another seven years.'

'Yes,' he flung the words at her, 'and you could proclaim me to all the world as disloyal if I wished the Old Sacrifice *not* to be made, and Arthur to die this year? That would be treason, would it not? – And for what have you saved Arthur's life? Tell me – for what? You know well enough.'

He was close to her now, and facing her across those two pitiful, blood-soaked bodies.

'I tell you, if Arthur had died this year, the rule of the Table Round would have passed to Galahad, the saintly knight, and England would have had such a king as she shall not have again till the holy Edward comes. Mordred is not yet come to full strength, and the love between Lancelot and Guinevere is not yet become a danger. But in seven years' time Galahad will have achieved the Grail and departed, and sore trouble will have fallen upon Arthur and Guinevere and Lancelot, and Mordred will have grown to be Arthur's bane, and the Table Round will pass and be lost to men – for this Arthur is to be kept alive another seven years.'

'I know,' said that dark woman, tossing her head. 'Arthur shall indeed reign another

seven years, while his kingdom breaks up; but I shall be the true Queen of the land – I, Morgan le Fay, the mistress of magic.'

'And for this,' said Merlin, looking down in wrathful sorrow at the two victims, 'for this, these lives have been taken— Do you know what you have done here?'

'Yes, I know,' she said smiling.

'Hear this, Melior,' he said, half turning to me. 'Here has died the root of the best part of Britain's race – the beginnings of that line that would carry the spirit of Arthur through ages yet to come.'

'My line will inherit in their place,' said the dark witchqueen.

'*Your* line, Morgan?'

'Yes, why not my line – Come here, Bertilak.'

And hearing that name I looked behind me in fear; the beast that had carried us was gone, but in its place stood a man, a knight in green armour – a man bluff and burly and grizzled, but certainly no beast. He stood looking at Morgan with eyes of fear, as if he struggled within himself.

'Come here, Bertilak!' she repeated – but he did not move. She shrugged her shoulders.

'No matter for one faithless lover. I shall find another – there will always be some to

love the Mistress of the Night— What say you, Merlin? Is this not my victory?'

He gave a deep sigh, as if forced to some decision against his will.

'No. I cannot yield it to you like that. Arthur's destiny must go as the die is cast – the sacrifice is made and his life is prolonged to his sorrow – but I will not accept the death of these.'

'What else can you do, my good Merlin, unless the dead can be raised?'

He looked piercingly at her.

'Even that may be done, if the price is paid.' He waved her aside and strode past her. 'I act now in magic stronger than yours, Queen of Deceits, and you know it. So stand aside and do not hinder me. Melior and Bertilak, carry these bodies inside the Circle, and lay them on the altar-stone.'

*

Then began a strange and solemn thing. Bertilak and I, we took up the bodies, and having washed the blood from them as best we could, and composed their limbs and garments decently, we laid them side by side on the great altar-stone within the Circle, with their feet towards the east.

There was only Merlin, and myself, and that strange heavy-built, humble-eyed man

who was called Bertilak and had been the beast; he now moved quietly hither and thither doing as Merlin directed him. The witch-queen made no move to hinder us; she had withdrawn, still proud and scornful, but from the time we entered the Circle we thought no more of her. Merlin stood in the eastern part of the Circle, towards the place of the sun-rising – he seemed to be taller, and the grey mantle in which he had journeyed was now white. On the forefront of his hood gleamed the *tribann*, the jewel of three bars of light descending; and on his breast the snake stone shone resplendent.

The cold light of the morning, by which we had arrived at that bloody scene, crept into the Circle between the tall stones, but now it had become strangely red, and behind us in the west great thunderclouds were mounting up. The air was still, over miles of snowfields – no breath of wind was stirring, and from far, far off I could hear the trivial sounds of life in distant homesteads, as remote from us as in another world. The rising cloud came up, and the silence and tension grew, as if one stretched a bowstring. Merlin beckoned us to him, and in swift quiet words told us what we must do.

So we took up the rhythm of a great ritual; I had known parts of it before, but never the

whole great powerful solemnity. Circles of protection we made, and purifications, and invocations of the Four Angelic Powers, and of the Three that are above all; but more than this I may not say. And all the while the thundercloud in the west came nearer and nearer, and the stillness deepened.

Then Merlin began to chant, one single low humming note that did not vary, but vibrated on and on; and Bertilak moved into place behind him, holding that same long bright sword that had been used for the death of those two. He held it point downwards, unsheathed, resting his hands on it; then he raised it, and held it with both hands high above his head. At the same moment Merlin uttered a great cry, and bending forward took the hands of the knight and the lady each into one of his.

Then the lightning split the sky, and the earth shook with the crash – all down the sword in Bertilak's hands the white light ran, and poured over us for a dazzling second.

And then it was gone – and who can tell how long after, with the thunder reverberating away under the earth, I dared to open my eyes.

The two who had lain dead upon the altar were risen, and stood clasped in each other's arms, and looking into each other's

eyes with a gaze of unutterable happiness. Merlin stood before them still on his feet, but swaying. I ran and caught him before he fell.

'The sunrise is accomplished,' I heard him say.

I laid him with his back propped against one of the standing stones; he still held his staff, and was powerful for a few moments more.

'They shall live,' he said, though he spoke with difficulty. 'They shall live and fulfil their destiny.'

And as the knight and the lady stepped forward from the altar-stone, I saw with fear and doubt that prone in their path, stretched out before them, lay the form of the witch-queen.

'Look, Master!' I whispered to him, 'Morganle Fay! What shall be done with her? Will you not bid the knight to slay her and make an end of her wickedness?'

My master turned his great blue eyes on me.

'No Melior. By no means slay her. For she is Dream and Fantasy and Shaping, and without her the world would be poor indeed. She must live, for we shall always need her. But do you, Gawain, set your foot upon her head, and you shall draw power and wisdom

from her, so long as she is beneath your feet.'

And Gawain, the tall knight, with his lady's hand still clinging to his arm, set his foot upon the head of the conquered witch-queen. And a light, and a power, seemed to flow upwards from her, through his feet and throughout his body, and flamed on his forehead, and crowned his head; and most strangely the thing on which he had set his foot shrivelled, and shrank to a skull and a few bones, and melted away into the grass, and sank out of sight in the earth.

I turned my eyes back to my master, for the shadow of death was over his face.

'I have paid the price, Melior,' he whispered. 'I am going. Nimue calls me, and I go with her into Broceliande. Some day I return . . . '

And the light went out of his eyes, and he was gone. So passed Merlin, the Mage of Britain.

The knight and the lady looked down on him with sorrowful eyes; and I laid him on the ground, and went back to where Bertilak lay unheeded. The sword in his hand was burnt and melted to the hilt, but he was alive. The eyes he opened were blank and lightless, and he stretched out his hands to me.