

King Arthur's Daughter

VERA CHAPMAN

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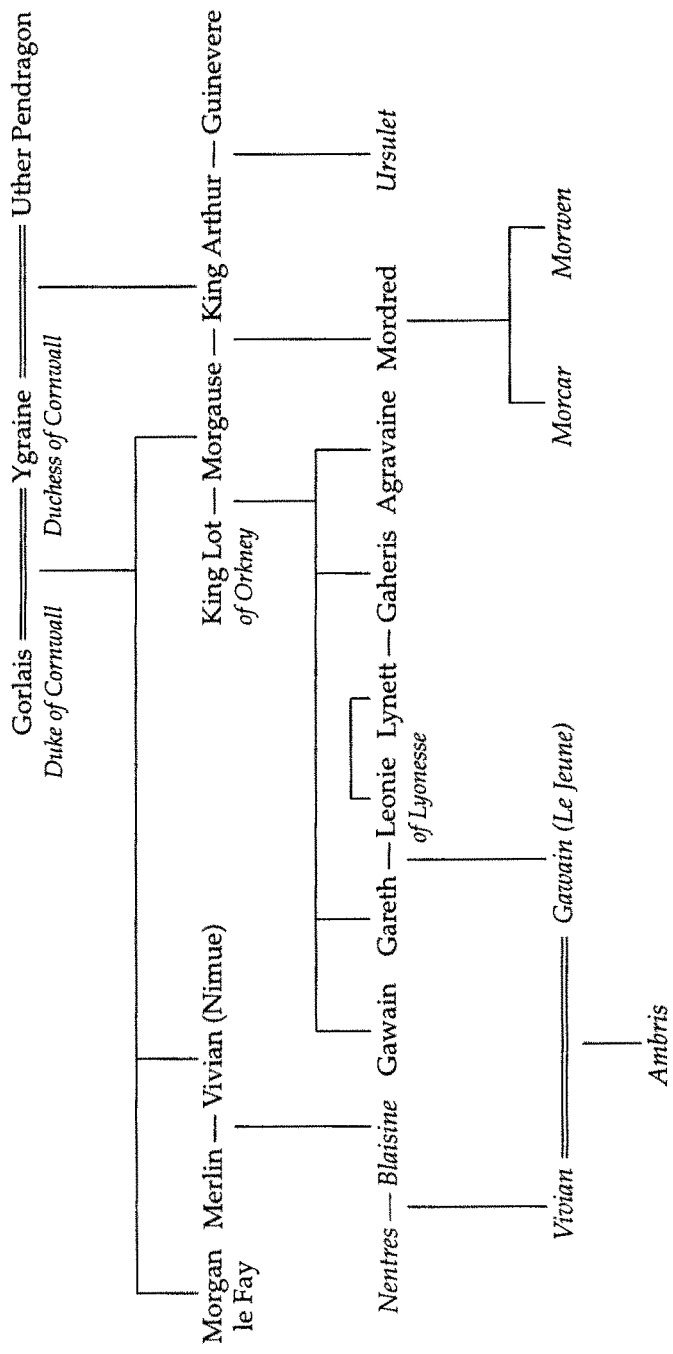
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[Author's note: Those in italics are my own invention. The rest are according to Malory.]

Note from the Author

The chronology of King Arthur is at the foot of the rainbow. The more we try to approach him by scholarly research, the further away he recedes. He was, we are told, perhaps a Bronze Age warrior; perhaps the last leader of the Romano-British resistance against the Saxons; perhaps an old god of the British, or the eidolon, ikon or egregore of the British people and land, later projected as Saint George. Or perhaps he never existed at all, but was a pious invention of such writers as Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerald of Wales, to fill a political need.

Yet there were ages when he was devoutly believed in; generation after generation has built up the shining figure, and from Malory onwards he, and all his company and environment, have become as solid and detailed as our admired Professor Tolkien's 'Middle Earth'. Milton considered 'The Matter of Britain' as a serious subject, Tennyson and many others, culminating in the late T. H. White, have made Arthur and his Round

Table more real to us than much of history. But no one can say, of course, what is or is not 'true' about Arthur. The old romancers took the story as free for all, to retell it, elaborate it or add to it. I have therefore ventured to do no more than any jongleur would have done.

Nobody can say that Arthur did *not* have a daughter. Kings' daughters, unless they make dynastic marriages, are apt to slip out of history and be ignored. So I present my invention of Ursulet, daughter of Arthur and Guinevere – Ursa Minor.

As to period, I have followed Malory's lead, with something from Geoffrey of Monmouth; that is, a civilization more or less that of the twelfth century (with pardonable overtones from the fourteenth) but with the political situation as about the sixth century – the Romans not long gone, the Jutes and Angles settled here and there, the old Celtic kingdom broken up and struggling for survival, and the Saxons about to descend in an avalanche.

So I present my tale, with no more pretensions to historical accuracy than were made by that good knight Sir Thomas Malory, on whose soul be peace.

V.C. 1976

1 • *The Heiress and the Witch*

The stars of the summer night, with the Great Bear, constellation of Arthur, conspicuous among them, shone down on the walls and battlements of Camelot, and into the great hall where King Arthur sat lonely upon his dais.

There were two winding staircases in the extreme corners of the hall, and a screen masked the entrances to both. One led up to Arthur's own chamber, and the other to the Queen's. In the stillness, he could hear footsteps going up one of the stairways. Lancelot, going up to Guinevere's room. Well, let him go, then.

Pain squeezed Arthur's heart. That it should come to this! Lancelot, his friend, and Guinevere, his beloved. But he would not break in upon them. Better to swallow his bitter jealousy, and hide his humiliation, as long as he could – as long as Mordred would let him.

Mordred! That coarse-grained, swaggering youth, with the loud mouth and the dirty mind – his bastard son by the woman Morgause, the Queen of Orkney, his own half-sister. Why, oh God, why had he ever let her have her way with him? It *must* have been enchantment – and God wot, he hadn't known at the time that she was his half-sister. Why should he be punished with a son like that? Never, oh never let the rule of Britain fall into Mordred's hands. Mordred's only care for any people he ruled would be to get all he could out of them for his own pleasures, to oppress and persecute them so that he could enjoy the sense of power. He, Arthur, 'the Bear of Britain', had built up and unified his country in the face of the encroaching barbarians; churches and monasteries and the arts of peace had flourished under him; the common men had lived in safety and happiness; and his chosen knights had learnt to aspire to such holiness as to reach out to the Holy Grail. But Mordred would ruin all this. Mordred, if it suited his plan, would let the heathen in. Even now, he knew, Mordred was only waiting to force his hand about Guinevere, and precipitate the break-up of the kingdom in scandal and faction and civil war. Rather than that, he would shut his ears, for many

nights yet, to those footsteps going up to Guinevere's room.

If only he and Guinevere had had a son – but there was only their little daughter – his beloved little daughter Ursulet, his 'little bear', with her hair as white as Guinevere's. A woman could not rule in her own right – or could she? Some of the older races of the land held that the true inheritance was through the mother, not the father – and even that he himself held their allegiance by right of marrying Guinevere, the descendant of a long line of queens.

He roused himself. 'Bedivere!'

'My lord?' He was not quite alone in the great hall; Sir Bedivere, who seldom was far from him these days, had been sitting quietly beside the fire.

'Bedivere, is my scribe there?'

Bedivere called quietly for the scribe, a monk, who came with deep obeisance and stood ready to write.

'Good scribe, I want you to write this, and to have seven copies made, and send six to Chester, York, Winchester, London, Lincoln and Canterbury. Thus: I, Arthur, King of the Britons, do desire that at my death the crown shall pass to the Lady Ursulet, who is my lawful issue by Guinevere my

Queen, and let no man deny this. Mordred my natural son is unlawfully born, being the son of Morgause, the Queen of Orkney, she being my mother's daughter. Let him not succeed to the throne of Britain, nor any of his issue. Let him be an Earl, and hold the feoff of Maiden Castle in Dorset, but let him after my death hold the same in homage to Ursulet my aforementioned daughter, or else depart this realm. And let all men know that though I die, *I shall come again* – write that last in large letters, scribe: I SHALL COME AGAIN!

The scribe carefully wrote the words down.

‘Now have copies made,’ said Arthur, ‘and when all are made, bring me wax and my great seal, and I will seal them. You, Bedivere, shall keep the chief copy.’

In one of the bedchambers of the castle, Mordred lay tossing on his bed, biting his nails, eaten up with desire. Not desire for any woman – he could have such as he desired easily enough – but worse, far worse. Desire for a crown and a throne. Desire for wealth. Desire for power. Desire for the name of a King.

So great was the power of his passion that it hung in the air around him like a cloud. It

bristled and crackled with sudden spurts of hatred and cruelty. It reached out claws. And it called, called, called across the darkness for such powers as were of like kind with itself. Impossible that something should not hear and answer.

Out across marshes and plains, white vapours streaming from below the ground sent up a spurt of more solid vapour that hovered, took direction, and sailed across the sky, like smoke drawn by the draught of a chimney. In the white cloud of vapour was something that laughed to itself, exulted in its own freedom and sense of power, rejoiced to break free from the earth where it had been hidden, and to feel its substance hardening again into the fine shapely limbs of a woman. The draught that had pulled it up from the ground pulled it straight towards the narrow window of Mordred's room and inside.

He had not been quite asleep, but he jumped into full wake-fulness to see a tall, pale, handsome lady, with jet-black hair and cat-like eyes, standing by his bedside.

'Who are you?' he exclaimed. 'I don't remember having sent for you.'

'You didn't.' She smiled, a cold and rather eerie smile. 'I'm not for your bed, my lad. I'm your aunt.'

‘My aunt?’

‘Yes, your mother’s sister. Morgause, Nimue and I were three sisters, and Arthur was our brother. You know? Then you know that I am Morgan le Fay.’

‘My aunt Morgan – but they told me you were dead.’

‘Such as I don’t die so easily. Now, now, my lad, no ceremony of welcome. I know what you want, and maybe I want the same. Oh yes, it was the power of your desire that drew me here. You want many things, but one thing more than all – you want to be King.’

‘Oh, I do, dear lady, I do.’

‘Why then, we may work together. I believe. But are you prepared to swear allegiance to me?’

‘By all means, if you’ll give me what I desire. I’ll swear anything to any man—’

‘I know you will,’ said she, again smiling coldly, ‘and be forsworn again as readily. But this oath you will not forswear. Look in my eyes and you will see why you dare not.’

And he looked in her eyes and knew.

So, trembling (although he was a bold man), he placed his hands between hers, and repeated.

'I, Mordred, swear to thee, Morgan le Fay, to be your liege man in word and deed, to my life's end and in the world to come.'

Then she kissed him on his forehead, and it was like a red-hot coal.

'You will hear from me,' she said, and went quietly out through the door, walking on golden sandals with her white robe swirling around her feet.

In another castle, miles away, a four-year-old boy, whose name was Ambris, started up from his sleep and screamed, **'The Princess! The Princess! Save her! Save her!'**

His mother stood beside him, tall and white in the dark, with her red hair over her shoulders.

'Hush, my love – no, wake up, there's nothing to be afraid of.' She gathered him into her arms, and by degrees his terror subsided, he stopped trembling and opened his eyes.

'You were dreaming, my dear. There now, it's gone.'

He drew a long breath, looking up at her. **'But I saw it,'** he said. **'A battle, and there's the Princess. I had to save her.'**

His mother made the sign of the Cross over him. **'So you shall in due time, my little one,'** she said. **'So you shall. But go to sleep now.'**

After a minute's thought, she traced a pentagram in the air around him, the point upwards; and seeing that he was quiet now, she tiptoed away.

Her aunt-in-law, the stiff-backed, leather-faced Lynett, met her in the stony corridor.

'That child knows too much,' she said.

Playing in the sunshine around the castle grounds, Ambris soon forgot the terrors of the night. It was a very pleasant castle, in sea-girt Lyonesse – the south wall had a grassy slope outside, where his mother's little garden stood, full of flowers. The castle gates were never shut by day, for there were no enemies here in Lyonesse – no matter what might be in other parts of the world not so happy. King Arthur had put down the robbers, and kept the heathen Angles and Saxons at a distance. The grand glittering knights of Arthur's court, of whom Ambris was born to be one, rode to and fro about the country, redressing all wrongs. His father, Gawain the Younger, was one of these, and so were his grandfather Gareth and his great-uncles Gawain the Elder, Gaheris and Agravaine. They all rode out on adventures by the King's command, but Gawain his father was

very often at home, with his mother Vivian, and his grandmother, the proud and dainty Leonie of Lyonesse, and his great-aunt, the tough old eccentric Lynett.

But the next night the dream came again, though differently.

He was standing by her bedside, where a small taper, like his own, gave a soft light; she was asleep and he could not see her face clearly, but she seemed only a little older than he was. A tall dark-haired woman came into the room and opened a little box; and from the box a spider crawled out, such as he had never seen – huge, as big as a man's hand, black and hairy. The woman let it drop on the floor, and it crawled towards the Princess's bed.

It crawled rapidly, leg by horrible leg, over the rushes and the skin rug at the side of the bed, up the bedhanging towards the sleeping child. A black cat crouched by the child's pillow, as if to protect her, but though its green eyes were fixed on the crawling spider, and its hair was stiff on its back, it seemed powerless to move. Ambris could not move either. He tried to cry out a warning, to rush forward, but his body would not answer him. Then his terror for the helpless Princess, and his determination

to save her, broke through whatever it was that held him, and he thrust out his hand with a huge effort, and pushed one of the tall unlit candlesticks that stood by the bed – it fell, missing the spider, but shaking it down on the floor – in the same instant the cat, as if released, sprang and crunched the spider's horny back in its teeth. He heard the cat's hoarse snarl as the dream broke, and he found himself awake in his own bed, sweating with remembered terror. But this time he did not cry out.

In Camelot at that same hour, Guinevere started up in bed, in her lover's arms. He too started.

‘What was that? I heard a noise—’

‘It's the turret room above – shall I go?’

‘No, no—’

‘Who sleeps above?’

‘Ursulet and her nurse. It was the cat I heard. The cat guards her. If the nurse wakes she might come in here. Keep quiet – no, stay here, and I'll go.’ The very white lady slipped softly out of bed and threw a robe round her; so, carefully closing the door behind her, she went up the winding stair to the next room of the turret.

All was quiet and safe; Ursulet, her little daughter, slept undisturbed, only one of

the great candlesticks had fallen over and in the corner the black cat was devouring something. Guinevere looked at her sleeping child – Arthur's 'little bear' — and for a moment her heart misgave her. She had such a look of Arthur as she slept. Poor Arthur . . . The white lady stooped and kissed the child's soft cheek. Then she went back to Lancelot.

'All's well,' she said. 'Black Gib caught a mouse, I think.'