

The Green Knight

VERA CHAPMAN

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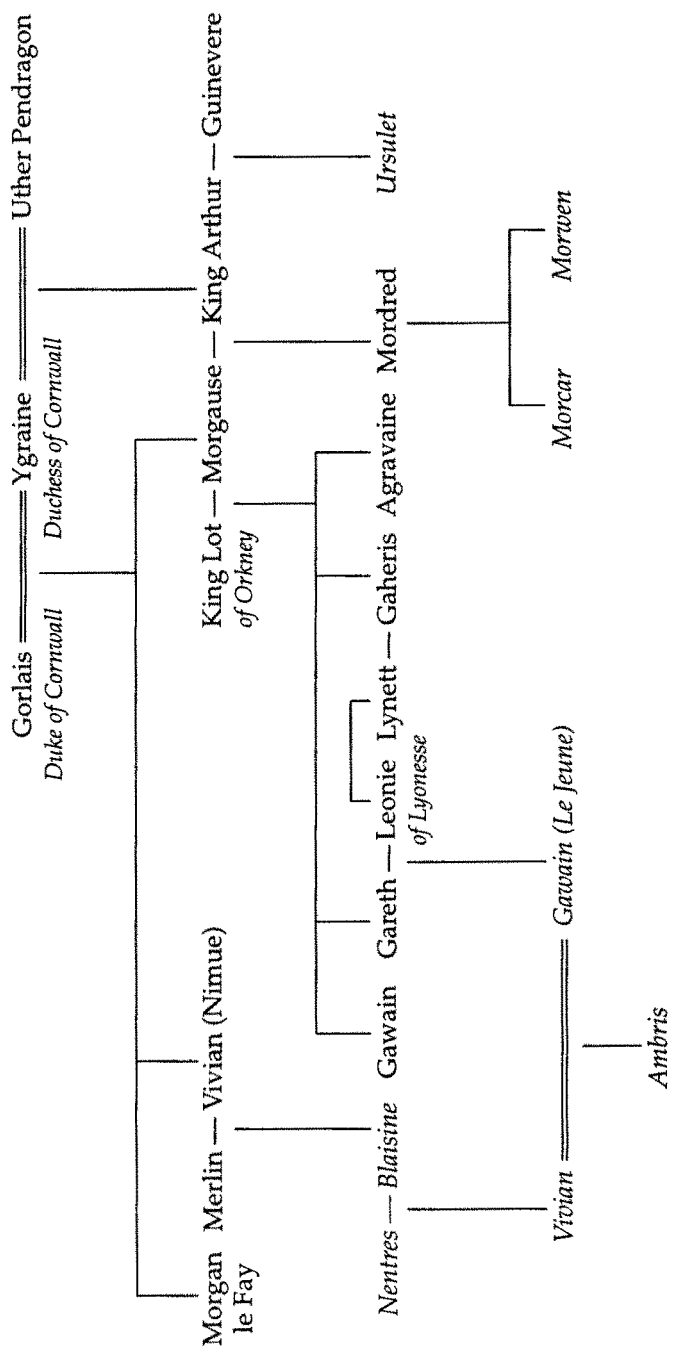
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[Author's note: Those in italics are my own invention. The rest are according to Malory.]

Note from the Author

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 groomsman. 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.