

The King's Damosel

VERA CHAPMAN

p

**PIP
POLLINGER IN PRINT**

**Pollinger Limited
9 Staple Inn
Holborn
LONDON
WC1V 7QH**

www.pollingerltd.com

**First published by Rex Collings Ltd 1975, 1976
This large print edition published by Pollinger in Print 2007**

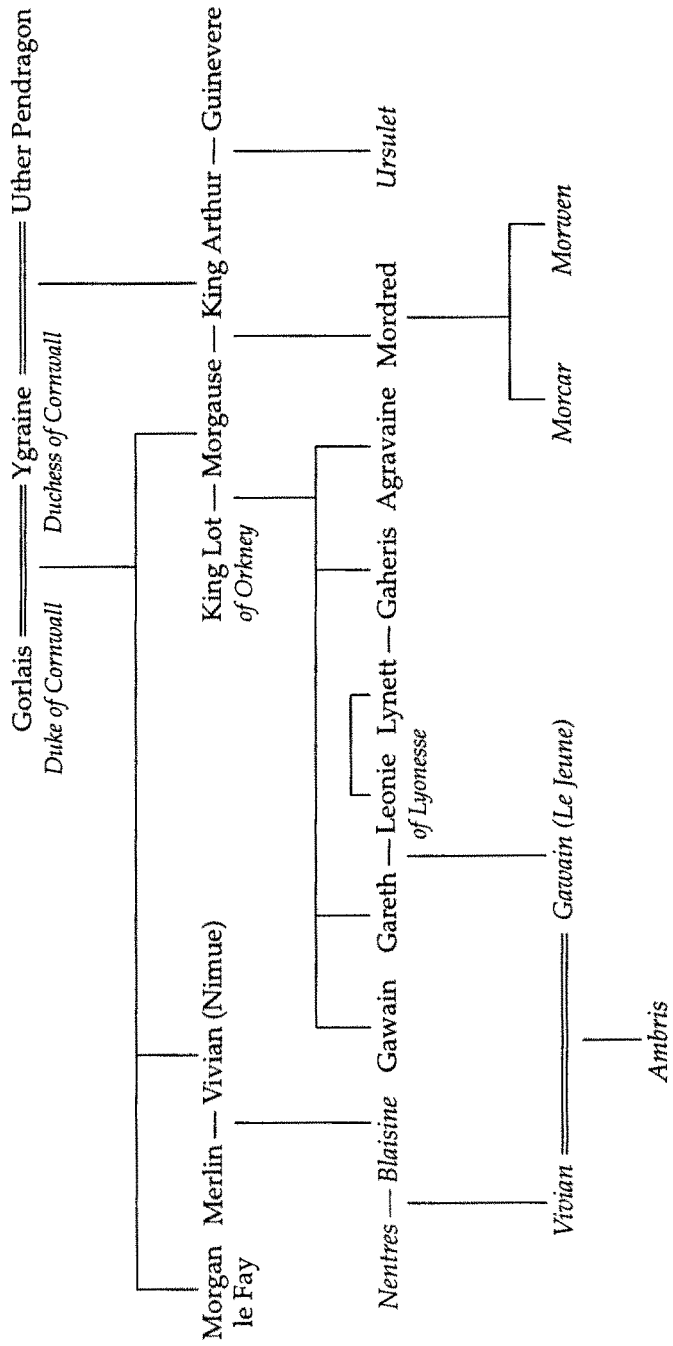
**Copyright © Vera Chapman 1975, 1976
All rights reserved**

The moral right of the author has been asserted

A CIP catalogue record is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-905665-32-7

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical or otherwise, without prior written permission from Pollinger Limited



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

Note from the Author

Many years ago, Edith Ditmas, who was at Oxford with me, published a novel, *Gareth of Orkney*. This gave me the idea, long in germinating, of treating the Arthurian stories from a more human and modern point of view than Tennyson or William Morris. In particular I became interested in the previous and subsequent adventures of the Damosel Lynett.

If Edith Ditmas reads this, I hope she will remember me (as 'Molly' Fogerty) and accept my thanks, and acquit me of any charge of plagiarism.

V.C. 1976

1 • How Two Brothers Married Two Sisters

The flags on the great towers of Camelot fluttered, the roof-tiles glittered in the sun – every window was garlanded with flowers or spread with carpets and gay draperies – bells pealed, and the shrill note of trumpets wafted up towards the blue skies. For this was a wedding day, a double wedding, two brothers marrying two sisters, as was meet and right, the brides being given by King Arthur himself.

In their tower bedroom the two brides were dressing. The elder sister, whom one might have thought was the younger, all pink and white and golden – in tissue of gold, with her hair loose and flowing to signify her virginity, spread like fine gold thread over her shoulders, crowned only with a circlet of pink roses worked into a light diadem of goldsmith's work. The other bride, in silver, was less happy. Her hair, black as night and straight as rain, was spread out, like her

sister's, over the silver dress, and crowned with white roses – but it only made her face seem the browner and plainer (for she disdained to plaster it with red and white paint) and her figure the more gaunt and angular. Her great brown eyes were hidden under her eyelids, and her lips were pressed together.

Leonie, the fair bride, stepped across to her sister with a rustle of silk and clasped a jewel round her neck.

‘Be happy, Lynett darling,’ she said, and kissed her. Lynett drew a long breath, clenched her fists at her sides, and returned the kiss.

‘Oh yes, I’m happy, Leonie dear – of course,’ she said.

The attendant maidens gathered round them – it was time to start the procession. Oh, God, thought Lynett, now it begins.

Down the small twisting stair in single file, because you couldn’t go any other way, her train-bearer fussing behind her and gathering her train in a bundle. Then into a room large enough to spread themselves and form up, two by two – Lynett and Leonie hand in hand, their train-bearers behind, the rest of the ladies following, all with posies and garlands – and so down the great double staircase, to the thrum of the lute-player

behind them – out into the courtyard, and there the procession of the two bridegrooms met them.

This was the moment Lynett had dreaded – or the first of many moments to come. There they stood, the two brothers, side by side – Gareth and Gaheris. Gareth – her heart turned over as she looked at him. The man of all men. Gareth, the gentlest of the Orkney brothers – his tall figure, moving with the grace of strength, his blue eyes that stole her heart – Gareth, the adorable, and her sister's bridegroom. And beside him, Gaheris, to whom she had been given instead. Gaheris, tall enough, strong enough, fair like Gareth and blue-eyed – but his blue eyes were dull protuberant pebbles, his skin coarse, his mouth drooping – as brutal as his brothers, Gawain and Agravaine, and stupider. This one – for her! And Gareth, whom she had brought through miles of forest to rescue her sister – she not liking him at first, and then drawn to him by a love she had tried hard to deny – now, after all this, taking her sister as the reward of his exertions, as one would choose the prize for a game – the first prize, and she the second prize to be kindly bestowed on his brother.

The two processions met, a rainbow of colour between the grey walls, and the two

couples were brought face to face. Leonie, dimpling, mincing, from her small stature looking up confidently at Gareth, placing her hand in his with an altogether womanly smile; he taking it, proud and happy. Lynett and Gaheris confronting each other, stiff and hostile, drawing back – then, as was required of them, joining cold hands. And so, Sir Kay the Seneschal in his black velvet and silver lace marshalling them, they turned together and went up the steps into the chapel. Lynett was dimly conscious of all the company there – King Arthur himself, the young king, not so much older than herself – Lynett was eighteen and her sister nineteen. Arthur was about twenty, and had already been king some five years, since he pulled the Sword from the Stone, and already he was a renowned fighter and leader of men. By his side the Queen, the pale, moonlight-haired Guinevere, not long married to him. There was Merlin, whitebearded and eerie – Merlin knew too much, and at the sight of his frosty blue eyes Lynett's heart missed a beat – but there was no betrayal in those eyes. Merlin showed no uneasiness in a holy building – he had a kind of holiness of his own; but there were three women, withdrawn into the back of the church, who looked too much like witches to be there – the three

sisters, Morgan le Fay, Vivian called Nimue, and the Queen of Orkney. Surely the Queen of Orkney looked too young to be the mother of those four young men? But then witches could make themselves look what age they pleased . . . The Queen of Orkney was coming forward now, florid, red-haired, overdressed – as of course she must come forward as mother of the two bridegrooms.

Now, Lynett, you must remember where you are and what you are going to do – and oh, my God! Lynett replied to herself, would it were otherwise.

The solemn pageantry of the wedding went forward.

‘Wilt thou, Lynett, take Gaheris—’

No, no, no! she was shrieking inwardly. Not Gaheris – not Gaheris, but Gareth, Gareth, Gareth. But Gareth had taken Leonie, and Leonie had taken Gareth – *taken* him, taken him away, carried him off from Lynett for ever. And now Gaheris had taken Lynett, for better or worse, and God knew what that might mean.

The jubilant voices of the choristers shattered the silence, with the flutes and viols and tabors, and the clouds of incense rose against the blue and gold painted ceiling. The priest was joining their hands, winding his stole around them. Now the

procession led out. This was the end – or the beginning.

The endless tedium of the wedding feast had at last come to an end. From the gallery that ran around the great hall of the castle, two large rooms opened out, and these had been prepared as the two nuptial chambers. In each one was a vast bed, enveloped in curtains, with a pile of feather mattresses one could drown in – all garlanded with flowers and green leaves, strewn with rose petals and scented herbs. Now for it . . .

The two processions led their two brides to their respective chambers, and undressed the victims with a mixture of ceremony and play. Lynett was at least free from Leonie's embarrassing presence for the moment. Though she could not see Leonie, Lynett was sure that she was reacting with giggles and dimples.

She for her own part tried her best not to wince and shrink too perceptibly from the bridesmaids' playfully rough hands, not to mind when they pinched her cheeks and pulled her hair.

They were all so nice to her, after all, kissing her and patting her head, and singing just the same songs as were being sung to Leonie in the next room. She roused herself to take part with a good grace in

their games, threw the garter for them to scramble for, laughed and applauded when some girl, whom she didn't know from Eve and didn't care to know, caught it and held it up. At least they didn't make her get into bed naked, like so many brides; both she and Leonie had insisted on bedgowns, silken and fur-edged, so she wrapped hers round her and lay tense and tight, like a worm in a cocoon, while the girls withdrew to Leonie's room to bring in the first bridegroom.

And now Lynett could lie and think. Gaheris was coming now, and she would have to endure him, and the first thing he would discover would be that she was not a virgin.