

THE CHATELAINE

AN IRREVERENT LOOK AT THE MATTER OF BRITAIN

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1

Morgana – Morgan le Fay – was not a planner. Mostly, things around her were chaotic, though no more than nature itself is chaotic; and she did have fairy blood in her, which means blood far closer to nature and to the earth than human blood is.

Nevertheless, for years now one great scheme had filled her mind and dominated her life.

It was to see her son crowned High King of Britain.

To this end – and to fulfil an ancient prophecy – she had created Modred. She had done so by lying with Arthur, the High King, who was her own half-brother, and securing his seed and in due course bearing his son.

And when that son grew and was recognised by Arthur as his son, though not yet his heir – there was another bastard (how she loved that word!) not to mention a legitimate nephew – Morgana began to wonder who her son should marry, which of the many aristocratic

maidens at present on offer would best reinforce his claim to the throne.

There were Guenevere's nieces, of course, but Morgana did not want Guenevere involved. On the contrary, she wanted Guenevere right out of it.

She wanted *all* White Ladies and water nymphs right out of it, despite the prestige value attached to them in the best families. Next best would be one of the Ornum family. She would have to visit them, *all* of them, to see *which* one. And she would have to do so that very summer, for Modred would be sixteen in July.

She had left it too late.

On May Day, he informed her blithely that he had inquired of a gypsy and been told that he would both fall in love with, and marry, the Chatelaine of Beau-Regard.

Beau-Regard?

But that was Sir Hugue's daughter, Fleur.

Impossible.

Fleur's mother, Fleur-Elaine (now dead, fortunately) had been not only a White Lady, but one of the Damosels of the Lake, those from whom the Lady herself is chosen. She had also been first cousin to Guenevere.

There was no brother – the White Ladies never gave birth to sons – so Fleur would naturally become the Chatelaine. It had to be her.

Morgana followed the track right up to her favourite peak and gazed out to sea. The sea and the sky were better than any magic mirror.

She looked back to that day nearly seventeen years earlier when she had determined to lie with Arthur. She had gone down to the sea and swum for hours deep in the cold green water among the fish and the rocks and thought and wondered and planned. She could pass as one of the White Ladies, of course. Her raven black hair she could bleach and dye till it was carrot red or blonde like theirs; her white skin she could make coppery, even add a freckle or two; her eyes though, she could do nothing about, for theirs were light hazel or green while hers seemed sometimes midnight blue, sometimes a deep, dark brown. She could wear a veil, and if anyone other than the King himself challenged her to lift it, he would regret it. The King she could handle.

Finally, she had decided not to dress up and *pretend* to be Guenevere, even though that was more amusing. No, she would go *as* Guenevere. In the same way that Arthur's father Uther had come to

her mother Igraine on the night of Arthur's conception: come *as* her father. It was just.

She came to him at night, a night when *she* knew – indeed the whole court apart from Arthur himself knew – that Guenevere was otherwise engaged. Arthur, poor fool, believed she had one of the headaches she suffered from more and more frequently. Indeed (and ironically) he had consulted Morgana about it. Was she not a famous healer? Morgana had said she would give Guenevere a potion, and had done so, but Guenevere had not taken it. They said of Guenevere that she was "the fairest woman in all the land"; she was certainly not the brightest. Even she knew, though, that when Morgana gave her a potion it would cure her permanently, like a smoked herring.

And of Morgana, they said she was "as lovely as the night". Not bad, but not the same, not Number One; and no mention, of course, of her Number One intelligence.

The guards at the entrance to the King's Tower looked up, amazed, then snapped to attention.

They had seen the fairest woman in all the land.

The page-boy sleeping across the threshold of Arthur's room opened his eyes as she was about to step over him. He gazed up at her, still half-asleep, then peered suddenly – and jumped to his feet. He too had seen the fairest woman in all the land. She opened her mouth to say 'Remind me to have you flogged tomorrow,' which is what she would have said to any page at home caught sleeping while on guard duty, but what came out was: 'It's all right, don't worry, you go back to sleep, Finn.' Ridiculous, she thought – but none of her affair. She stepped past him and into the room.

Arthur was stretched out face down on top of a huge sheepskin bedspread. Did no one open the bed for him? If *she* was his wife ... She smiled. She was, now.

She ran her fingers down his spine, and over his buttocks, firm and round even in sleep. Then down over his legs ... and back up. He was hers, all hers, for one night.

She licked her middle finger, eased it between the buttocks, gently, not wishing to wake him yet, just to arouse him. She slid it up and down, pulled it out again, sniffed it – it was clean, he was a fastidious man – put it into her mouth, sucked it, put it back in his bottom, this time pressing firmly on the tight hole with the ball of her finger. Guenevere's nails were predictably long and sharp, but even with her own nails she would have been unable to work the finger up inside

him without hurting him, waking him. He was responding, though, beginning to writhe as she pressed.

'Guen?' He peered round, suddenly, tried to turn over. 'Is it you?'

'Who else?' She laughed. She pushed him back down on his face with her other hand.

'Ah, no one, no one else, of course. I am as faithful as I know you are.'

'More so, my lord.'

'Ah, no, that cannot be. But I meant only that I was not expecting you ... May I turn over?'

'No.' She slid her fingers deeper down between his legs, letting her nails scrape gently against his skin, till she felt one, then both, of the royal testicles. She fondled them. They were big, they were nice. She'd known bigger, but she couldn't remember any warmer, softer, nicer, more welcoming. You wanted to hold them for ever.

'You've never approached me like this before, Guen.'

'I've never before come to you in the night and found you fast asleep on your front with your butt all exposed and on display to whoever –'

'No one could have got past those guards but you, Guen.'

'No?'

He peered round again, saw she was fully clothed. 'At least let me undress you.'

'Not yet. Lie still – as still as you can.' She smiled to herself. She had her right hand on his back, her left between his legs, her left thumb pushing into his anus, pulling it towards his scrotum, the balls she held cupped in her fingers.

But lie still he could not: he was writhing faster and faster. Could she make him ejaculate like this? If she could, it would prove there was something a little effeminate about him – as she had long suspected.

Ah, yes – here he came, *now* ... He convulsed, throwing her off him.

Like an animal, she thought. A farm animal.

She lay beside him, waiting.

In a sense, all men were like farm animals. But then so were women, with their breeding and their milk. He was at stud and she was there to gather his seed.

She would make him come twice more. The first time had been to clear the system, of course. The second she would drink. It was the third ejaculation, she knew, that contained her son.

He raised himself on his elbow, looked down at her. For a second she wondered if her eyes really were, really could be, simple Guenevere's eyes; then relaxed as he gazed at her in adoration.

'What was *that*, Guen ...?'

She smiled back up at him. 'Has no one ever done that to you before?'

'No. Well ... not you.'

'Ah ha! So you are not as faithful as ... '

'As you? No, no, that I could never be, for unlike you, before we met, I ...'

'Yes? You ...?'

'I ... It was little Borre's mother. Lisanor. She did things to me that ...'

'That I have never done. That only a whore would do. That only a whore would know about. Well, she is a whore, so –'

'Oh no, Guen. How can you say that?'

'You expect me to welcome her? Welcome *her* son?'

'Of course not, if you put it that way, but –'

'What way should I put it?'

'"Should"? I don't know, Guen. I'm partial. But –'

'You keep saying "but". But what? But I'm a White Lady, and you have heard that I may not be able to give you a son?'

'*May* Guen? Is that really so? I thought no White Lady *could* bear a son.'

She almost laughed out loud. But it was not time for laughter, it was time for tears. She let the great tears well up in "Guen's" glorious eyes, watched, through a blur, *his* eyes cloud over with misery and shame.

'It *is* that,' she sobbed.

He took her head to his chest, ran his fingers through her hair.

After a moment, she licked a nipple that was right before her. Then the other one. Then she ran her tongue down his over his stomach, down, slowly, to the base of his cock and round it and up it till she was licking the tip, savouring the drops of semen left from when he had jetted out a few minutes earlier.

It was rearing up hard and proud again.

She took it in her mouth. Guenevere's teeth were bigger than hers and less sharp, her tongue was shorter; with her own tongue Morgana could touch either eye, could lick the back of a man's balls while his cock was in her throat, and her own sharp little teeth would chew at the edge of his glans each time he withdrew – but even with

Guenevere's teeth and tongue she drove him mad, and she had to admit that Guenevere's lips were the best she had ever seen, let alone used – kissed with, massaged a penis with ... Could she do something to her own lips? Make them more like these? He was coming! He grabbed her head and thrust it against him, twisting and bruising her nose – Guenevere's nose, she thought happily – as she let the cock slide right down her gullet, let the sperm gush down into her stomach. The art lay in not fighting it, not attempting to swallow, just letting it ...come ... He withdrew a little. She gulped down what was in her throat, then held him with her teeth, teasing him, while she licked at the little eye through which the sperm was still welling rhythmically.

They rested for a while.

Then he said, 'Guen?'

'Yes, my lord?'

There was another long pause, then: 'You haven't called me "my lord" since that first day, in the meadow outside your father's castle.'

In her desire, her need, to impose her will on their love-making, she had begun to impose her words, too, on Guenevere – which was dangerous. Arthur was a fool but he was no fool. She relaxed, let "Guen" emerge. 'That's not true, my lord. I often call you my lord, my lord, when I'm in the mood. When I'm not, I might as easily give you orders, call you "boy", at least when we're alone.'

He laughed, lifted himself up on his elbow, looked down into her eyes. 'That's true.'

My God! Had he been testing me? she thought – and heard Guenevere's voice say: 'Make love to me, my lord.'

'Oh, Guen, I thought I'd never hear those words again.' He leant down, kissed her eyes gently, brushing the eyelashes with his lips, making them flutter. 'No one can do that with her lashes like you can, Guen.'

'So you keep telling me.'

'Yes. I'm sorry. But you know how they all keep fluttering their eyelashes at me.'

'And you can't help making comparisons. They all keep pushing their breasts under your nose, too, and pouting their lips at you, but I don't see you turning away.'

Oh, Guenevere, Morgana thought. How could Arthur possibly manage a third time with her moaning at him like that? She would have to intervene. 'Prove it!' she groaned. 'Show me that it's *my* breasts, *my* lips, you find irresistible!' She groaned again. Moaning was one thing, groaning another.

In response – to her challenge – or to that second groan, which would have aroused a dead man – he started kissing her lips and her throat so hard he was bruising them, then ploughed his way down to her breasts with his chin and beard and after a second's hesitation chose the right nipple to lick at and bite, the left to pinch and pull; and he hurt! She wanted to scream, then let herself go again, realising Guenevere might well already *be* screaming.

She squealed.

She struggled.

'When did I last spank you, Guen?'

My God. Don't interfere! If *she* was Arthur, "Guen" would be spanked till she howled every day.

'Never, my lord. You have never spanked me.'

'Then now might be a very appropriate time to start.'

Now could not be a less appropriate time to start! I'd get the spanking, and Guenevere wouldn't even know!

She gave her groan again, even deeper and throatier, a wildcat in rut, and lifted her legs up over his arms, over his shoulders. Simultaneously, she slid both hands down between them, clasped his cock and his balls. His cock reared up like a lance, long and strong and straight and ready for the fray, like a brachet rearing to go, and she showed it the hole and let it go. In to the hilt it shot, straight and true, thrusting and questing, plunging and roaring – *what was that roaring?* Was it *her* – Guenevere? Or was it Arthur?

It was both, in unison.

Suddenly she wanted to laugh, thinking of poor silly Guenevere's beautiful face when Arthur mentioned this night to her – as he would, he surely would. He was going to want to do it again, and again.

And she wanted to laugh, too, because the seed was there inside her, even now her son was being formed. The son who would be the downfall of his father: Arthur's Bane – as foretold by Merlin so long ago, and reiterated by Nimuë, Merlin's damosel of the Lake (Merlin's Bane – she did laugh, now) not a month since.

'Why are you laughing?'

'Because I am happy.'

He should have listened – to Merlin, to Nimuë. Overconfidence was then, and would be at the end, his downfall.

Her son was simply the implement the gods would use to defeat him.

Now, seventeen years later, up on top of the hill, she knew a thing she had not known then. The future was never sure. It could always be changed if one went about it the right way. And one way was to take literally the letter of the prophecy, rather than its spirit. So her son was to marry the Chatelaine of Beau-Regard. But what if someone else (*her* candidate) were to become the Chatelaine of Beau-Regard? Someone totally unconnected with Guenevere and the White Ladies. Someone capable of bearing a *son* to Modred, as she herself had to his father. There were several nubile Ornuma maidens who might do; all directly descended from the old Roman royal family ... All well bred, but *not* all well provided for; and that need, that lack, might serve her purpose very well.

By the time the sun set over the sea, Morgana had the fresh plan all laid out both in her mind and across the country as far as her mind could reach.

She descended through the darkness to her castle well satisfied.

2

Fleur was ten years old. Although her mother had been a White Lady, with the light red hair and green eyes typical of her kin, her father, Sir Hugue of Beau-Regard, was of Romano-British stock, and Fleur had blue eyes. But only in that did she take after him, for he resembled a bull while she was slender and lightly built and had a sweet, kind nature.

Fleur's great (great-great-?) -grandmother was the nearest thing to a mother the child had ever known. She always had a nanny who looked after her, of course, but the nannies came and went (literally: Sir Hugue had them, then got rid of them; or they fled, she never knew) but it was her grandmother who represented the opposite pole in her life from her father. She had arrived with Fleur's mother, who was then hardly more than a child herself, and been sent straight to the tower when she attempted to interfere between them. She had lived in the tower ever since.

Sir Hugue, as one of the Knights of the Round Table, was often away for months at a time and had discovered that the apparently dotty old lady was far better at running things in his absence than his erstwhile (late and unlamented) bailiff had been. (People who crossed Sir Hugue soon became late, Fleur noticed. She was often late herself, and in trouble for it, and had a recurrent nightmare in which she was LATE AGAIN and was chucked into a large hole full of decomposing bodies, including those of all her late nannies.)

So Sir Hugue now left the old lady in charge when he was away on his travels. On that fateful day, however, he was at home.

It started early, when the old lady had a visitor. She arrived before dawn, emerging from the Great Forest in a dark cloak and hood, and flitting from shadow to shadow as she crossed the yard. One of the great dogs awoke and looked at her, blinked and decided it had been mistaken, and went back to sleep again. She came at last to the door at the foot of the tower. She touched it, it opened, and she ran lightly up the spiral staircase.

The old lady was awake, and expecting her. 'Vivian!'

They kissed, embraced, kissed again.

Then paused.

They both knew something dreadful was about to happen.

'Can nothing be done to prevent it?' asked the old lady.

The Lady of the Lake, swathed all in white as always when she appeared on dry land, shook her head. 'Nothing. Unless, that is, you are prepared to take on Morgan le Fay.'

'I am not. But *you* might.'

'I cannot intervene. I might do more harm than good.'

'You can warn.'

'Warnings do not constitute intervention. It may be her destiny.'

'It is the child then.'

'Oh, yes. One day, years from now, I, as her fay will be able to undo some part of it. But that is all.'

'It is something.'

'It is. And I want you to remember it, and to recognise the moment when it comes.'

Sometime in the morning, Fleur glanced into the kitchen to say that she was going for a walk.

'In the Forest?' asked Nanny, who, as usual with this particular nanny, was in the kitchen gossiping and watching Cook thrash the scullion-boy. 'Your father, Sir Hugue, said –'

'Don't go far and don't stay long, damosel,' Cook interrupted her. 'You know it's dangerous in the Forest.'

'And don't you beat poor Will too long or too hard.'

'Damosel Soft-heart. It does him good.'

Fleur laughed and left them to it, thanking heaven that she was not a scullion-boy. Little did she know, for she was only a child, and a very spoilt one (even her brutal father, who laid hands on everyone else with impunity, had never laid a finger on her) that to the gods such thoughts seem not so much gratitude as self-delight, taking them and *their* world for granted.

She slipped through the gap in the Great Hedge that kept out the Great Forest.

Suddenly all was different. Silent. Not without sound, but so quiet one could hear every sound quite distinctly. Outside the Forest, in the World, at least during the day, there was a continuous hum that drowned the sounds of nature as the sun drowned the sight of the moon and stars. She sighed with pleasure, then stooped and took off her shoes – she preferred to walk barefoot – and her dress, too, for the weather was warm and she preferred to wear only her short smock – and hid them in the secret hiding-place where a fallen alder bridged the stream they called the Brook, then followed the Brook down to a bigger stream she thought of as the River. This flowed from a

beautiful lake (she had been there once with her father and Sir Gawain), and came eventually, long after it had passed her by, to the Great River that led to the distant sea. She had never seen the sea, but she had heard about it and she dreamt of it sometimes at night.

When she reached the River, she stripped off her smock and hid that in her other secret hiding-place. Then she sat down on the bank – and giggled at the memory of poor Will's face when he had slipped away for an hour to do some fishing and seen her lying there on the bank. At first he hadn't realised it was her, had taken her for a water nymph. 'But Will, I *am* a water nymph.' 'You're b-b-beautiful,' he had stammered, eyes averted.

Suddenly, she wished she was by the sea, that it was the green-grey sea she was about to slide into, not the rushing leaf-green and mud-brown water that usually she so loved.

Did the gods once again take note?

Or was it simply that what Morgan le Fay had written *was* written, and affected everything?

Fleur slid down the wet grass and mud into the water and disappeared.

But the woman who had been sitting on a rock watching her continued to watch her. Fleur had not seen her even in the open in broad daylight, but she could see Fleur even after Fleur had passed under the lily-pads and headed upstream.

The woman glanced over her shoulder. Behind the rock, on the grass, was another Fleur. The body of a maiden who had *died* recently at Morgan's husband's castle in Gore, a girl of similar size and shape to Fleur. Morgan had changed it into the body of Fleur herself.

She turned back to the river and waited.

The live Fleur surfaced, looked round, saw no one, duck-dived and disappeared again.

She's like a fish, thought Morgan, a full-blown water-nymph already. She could easily get away if she sensed danger.

Next time she would allow herself to be seen. But not as herself, as Guenevere.

Her raven-dark hair grew slowly auburn, then light red, then honey blonde. She grew taller. Her face changed.

Ah. The girl's head emerged from the water, the eyes lit on the figure of Guenevere, grew wide.

Would she go under again? It didn't matter, she would have to come out eventually, and Guenevere was sitting close to where the smock was hidden.

Yes, here she came – not shy at all.

She stood in front of Guenevere, said 'Hello', and brushed the wet hair out of her eyes.

Guenevere smiled. 'Hello. You must be Fleur.'

The girl nodded.

'I'm a friend of your father's ... Well, not really. I was a friend of your mother's. I can't say I'm particularly fond of your father.'

Fleur laughed. 'Nobody is. He's a brute. Cook says *most* men are – probably *all* men – it's just that Papa has more to be a brute *with*. What do you think?'

'I think she's probably right, your cook.'

Morgan had to admit the child was delightful – but that was precisely why she was dangerous. Modred *would* one day be smitten with love for her. She must disappear completely, must no longer exist. Not *die* (in the practice of sorcery, to kill is always a mistake – deaths come back at you – especially the death of one such as this) but ... *cease to be*.

'I have known one or two men who are not entirely brutes.'

'Really? Oh! King Arthur, I suppose.'

'King Arthur can be a brute, believe me. No, I was thinking more of ... Merlin.'

'*Merlin*? You know *Merlin*?'

Guenevere nodded, smiling.

'Oh! Tell me about him. I thought – I'd heard – that he'd been imprisoned beneath some huge stone by the Damosel Nimuë.'

'Yes, that's true. And he had not been a brute to her at all, in any way. Other than wanting to fuck her, of course. But he never attempted to force her.'

Fleur looked a little shocked. Was it the use of the word "fuck"? But all she said was 'I don't understand. How did she do it? How *could* she? Against *Merlin*?'

'A man in love is weak. The woman he worships has great power over him.'

'Even if he is a wizard?'

'Especially if he is a wizard.'

'I still don't understand ... not really.'

Neither do I, she thought. Merlin must have lost it completely at the end there. But it was time to stop talking nonsense and do what she had come to do. She took out an apple ... started eating it ... watched the girl watching her ... then almost as an afterthought, said 'Would you like one?'

'Yes, *please*. I'm starving, and I love apples.'

Guenevere took out the beautiful red shiny apple prepared for Fleur – then patted the rock where she was sitting.

Fleur sat down beside her, and was given the apple. She took a bite. 'Mm! Nice!' And another bite. And another.

Guenevere watched her chew each mouthful, watched her swallow. Soon, it would begin ...

'I feel funny,' Fleur said suddenly. 'I – I – will you – c-could you – take me – take me – take me ... home ...?'

'Of course, my dear.'

A few more seconds and she was sliding down the rock, unconscious.

Guenevere gazed down at the limp, naked body, glanced round at the other body. They were identical.

She concentrated on herself for a moment. Her hair grew dark once more, and she was Morgan.

She sighed, smiled to herself. *That* would do nothing for Guenevere's reputation. But "Guen" needed no help from anyone in that respect. Her reputation was in such tatters already that Arthur was going to *have* to stop watching in idiotic delight, and *do* something.

She took out some ragged boy's clothes and dressed the unconscious child in them. Then she proceeded to cut the child's hair off – all of it. She packed the hair away in the big bag where the clothes had been.

Then she whistled.

Two men on horseback rode out from among the trees. They had her horse with them.

She pointed to the unconscious boy – not a boy yet, but he would be, within a few hours – certainly by the time they made their first stop. 'Take this boy to the Castle of Maidens. If I am not there before you, hand him over to Damosel Lisanor. Tell her he is a simpleton, he may even think he's a girl, but I feel pity for him. He is to be given a place as a scullion or spit-boy or some such thing.'

'Yes, your highness. How shall we ...?'

'Throw him over your horse, behind you, and tie him there ... And listen, if I am not at the castle, wait for me. I shall have other tasks for you to perform before you return to Gore. Now go.'

When they had gone, she dressed the dead Fleur in the smock and pushed her out into the river. The body hesitated, then turned, then the current took hold of it and it began to float away towards the fall and the pool that lay less than a mile downstream.

She mounted her horse – and as she did so, changed her mind about going to Beau-Regard as a guest and witnessing with a secret smile the anxiety, the frantic search, the lamentations over the child's dead body, and the execution of the nanny. Better if no one ever knew she had been in the vicinity that day.

3

Sir Hugue, out questing for damsels in distress, had passed the first night at a monastery – a strict one, and not at all to his liking, but he was one of its patrons and he always stopped there when he rode north from Beau-Regard.

Then he had spent three days riding through the forest, with nowhere to lay his head but the hard ground beside a stream or among the roots of a tree.

Now, though, he had found companionship with a hermit who lived in a cave beside a small waterfall. His name, he said, was Goose, for though he had once been a knight himself he had fallen from grace and was now the least of men. He lived under a penitent's vow which involved daily flagellation, usually self-inflicted, though there was a witch in the forest who sometimes obliged and a nymph who lived in the stream whom he was trying to persuade to lend a hand. Perhaps before he left in the morning, Sir Hugue would ...?

Sir Hugue promised, then watched as the old fool set about lighting a fire for his guest to roast the fawn he had brought with him.

Nymph, eh? Thought Sir Hugue. 'Is that where the nymph lives? In that pool?'

'Oh no. Though sometimes she comes upstream and you see her there. It's such a pity she won't do my business for me. She'd be good at it, I know she would. Much better than old Dame Melisande. That's the witch. Smelly Melly, I call her.'

The knight laughed. 'Not to her face, I hope.'

'Oh, I did, once. And that day she certainly whipped me soundly enough.'

'Perhaps if you provoked her every time, she'd make a better job of it.'

'I thought of that. But she said if ever I dared call her by that name again, she'd turn *me* into a smelly old woman ... She makes me address her as mistress ...' He peered at his guest, evaluating him. 'Should I address you as master?'

'I think you should address *everyone* as master or mistress. Tell me about the nymph.'

'She won't say her name, master. A full nymph rarely will.'

'Will I be able to see her? Talk to her?' *Fuck her*, he meant, they both knew.

'She's hard to spot, even when she is there – unless she wants to be spotted.'

Evasive, eh. The very word aroused him. 'What do you look for? I mean what do you see first? Her hair? What colour's her hair?'

'Dark, for a water-nymph. Chestnut. Not easy to spot. And her eyes are dark green. No, what caught my eye first was her skin. It's very pale – like snow. I saw her once in the moonlight, sitting up on the river bank. Silver, she was. Shining. But of course she's usually underwater, and when she does come up it's only her head.'

'Hm. And you know of no tricks? No bait?'

'For water-nymphs, master? No. Only – I heard tell that like most women they – well, they ...'

'Yes? They ...?'

'Can't resist the sound of music. A song.'

'*Music? A song?* Am I a *minstrel*, oaf?'

He boxed the old man's ears in disgust and pushed him away from the fire and from the spit he had been patiently turning while they talked.

By the time the meat was ready, it was dusk.

They sat outside the cave with the water rushing down into the pool, Sir Hugue eating the baby roe-deer that had not run away from him but had nuzzled at his feet. He laughed as he ripped the flesh off the bones with the great teeth that were his pride (one of his prides; another was his huge penis which some said could not possibly be natural and must once have belonged to a horse) and regaled poor old Goose, who was still holding his ears (Sir Hugue's hands, too, were huge, heavy and hard), with the story of how the fawn's mother had come charging out of the trees straight at him. There had been nothing he could do except brace himself for the shock. And what a shock it had been – for her – when her head hit his mail. She had looked up at him in wonder and awe, then her forelegs had buckled and she had fallen to the ground, unconscious.

'That's amazing,' said the hermit, who was eating a soup of boiled leaves and roots, and some crusts of bread that Sir Hugue threw to him.

Sir Hugue would rather have shared the meat – he had very little bread left in his saddle-bag – but the hermit would not, could not, under his vow.

'Not amazing, not really. The speed of her charge was no greater than that of a charging knight on horseback, and her weight much less.'

'True. And you are a big man, master. But you were lucky it was a she and you saw her coming. I once had a buck come at me from behind while I was bent over a fawn –'

'And one of its horns shot straight up your arse, and you squealed like a stuck maid!' Sir Hugue laughed uproariously.

'Aye, and I was only fondling the baby, I wasn't going to harm it ...Did you kill her, master?'

'The mother? No. My knife was out ready to cut the little one's throat, so that's what I did. It was bleating, making a noise. I left the mother there. She'll remember Sir Hugue when she wakes up.' He chortled.

At dawn he whipped the hermit half to death, and satisfied that he had done his duty to God and man, and that old Goose too would remember good Sir Hugue when he came round, he mounted his great warhorse and set off.

He didn't go down by the stream. It flowed west and would take him right out of his way. Not that he was giving up on Damsel Elusive. Oh, no. He had plans for her. Now though he was heading north.

He hadn't been riding long when he came to a cottage standing alone in a clearing. He paused, wondering whether behind that door lay some nubile wench; and his question, though not his prayers, was answered when the door flew open and an old hag who looked as though she should be hobbling not striding, strode out.

'You, sir! Yes, you!' she shouted, as the knight, unaccustomed to being spoken to in such tones, glanced round to see who, '*You* – on the horse! Get down and come here.'

'Are you addressing me?' he managed to get out, but not the 'Old Cesspot' with which he meant to follow it. Fortunately for him, as it turned out.

'I said *Get down!*'

There was no disobeying. He dismounted. He was dealing with a witch, he realised too late. This must be Smelly Melly.

'You looking for damsels in distress? Look no further. I am a woman in need. Next best thing.'

The smell was appalling.

'Well, come on. Get the mail off and your pantaloons down.'

'But I – I couldn't. I couldn't!'

'You couldn't? You mean you *can't*?' She was aghast.

'No! No, not that. I –'

'Ah ... Don't worry, you don't have to do it with *me*, to do it *to me*. When I said I was a woman in need, I meant in need of seed – and it must be the very best human seed – for various spells I am casting. So get it out.'

He got it out. And she was duly impressed.

She stripped him naked ('Do I have to be stripped?' 'Oh yes') and tied him to a tree ('Do I have to be tied?' 'Oh yes, indeed you do, for this unguent I am about to apply to it will make it bigger and harder than it has ever been, will make it come and come, but it will drive you mad.')

And even as she applied it he felt his mighty rod soar up and his hips and buttocks soar up after it and his whole body and he knew that if she hadn't tied him down he would have flown away and she had it bent down and he was coming, coming, coming – why was she bending it down like that? No, she had let it spring up again, was applying more unguent to it, and then his whole body sprang like a trapped wildcat again and he heard himself screeching as she bent him down and milked him once more ...

She milked him thirteen times, or so she told him later; hours later, when he recovered consciousness. And he was far too good to waste. She was going to keep him, milk him again and again. He would last months if she was careful with him and gave him two or three days to recover after each session rather than just one.

'Do you know who I am?' he croaked.

She chortled – much as he himself had chortled with mirth a few hours earlier.

'I am Sir Hugue de Beau-Regard.'

To his astonishment, she gaped at him, mouth open, broken black stubs of teeth on display: old, old teeth but the long pink flickering tongue of a teenage lamia.

'Fleur's father?'

Now he gawped at her. *Fleur*? Oh, Fleur ... 'Fleur's dead. She drowned. Three years ago.'

The witch gazed at him incredulously. Did he not realise that Fleur was a water nymph? She shook her head. 'And where were you heading?'

'North. Bound for the Castle of Maidens on official business for King Arthur.'

'The Castle of Maidens? I see. In that case, I don't think I should delay you any longer, after all.' She released him. 'Can you support yourself?'

He shook his head, and slid down the trunk till he was sitting on the bare ground, his huge member standing up in front of him, still turgid, and swinging and swaying like a birch sapling.

'Why is it still up like this?' he wailed.

'It's the unguent. I'll milk it again, shall I, a couple of times, without rubbing in any more. It'll soon droop.'

'No! No, please ...'

A few hours later, he had revived, at least sufficiently to be able to don his armour – with her help – and was ready to leave.

He sat on his horse and gazed down at her.

She saw the softness in his eyes. What fools men are, she thought. Especially knights. She said, 'If you should happen to ride back this way ...'

'And if I should happen to feel in need of milking ...' He smiled. 'I just might do that. By the way, you have my name, but do I have yours?'

'Ah. No.'

'But I do believe you must be Dame Melisande ...' This time he had caught her out. He grinned. 'I met a crazy old hermit who told me your name – though he himself calls you something a great deal less courteous.'

'Ah, he does, does he. No, don't repeat it. I know what he said. He will wish he hadn't. Why don't you spend the night here.'

It was true, evening was coming on, but he didn't trust her. Next morning she might decide she was a woman in need again.

'You could come with me, witness your friend Goose's transmutation.'

'I'm sure that would be most amusing. But no, I'm afraid that too will have to wait until I pass this way again.'

The track he followed grew wider and wider, and he was able to follow it without difficulty once the moon rose.

After a few hours, he slept under a tree. And dreamt that Old Melly had followed him, and had his cock out and, while chanting 'Mustn't waste you, mustn't waste you,' was busily sucking the last remaining drops out of him. And woke with a start – but not screaming. He laughed and got up and drank some water from a stream and rode on through the night and into the dawn.

It took him many days to reach the Castle of Maidens, but when he got there it all seemed worth it. The first thing he saw was the yellow tresses and cornflower-blue eyes of Damosel Lisanor, who had come out to him with the cup of welcome.

This beauty was the mother of the King's eldest bastard, Prince Borre, and rumour had it that she had been passed on to Princess Morgana, mother of the King's other bastard, Prince Modred, the moment Guenevere, newly affianced to Arthur, laid eyes on her.

At the same time, the King gave Morgana the Castle of Maidens. Sir Hugue knew that story. He himself had been involved. Arthur had sent him and two other knights to investigate rumours to the effect that the Castle of Maidens was no longer the sanctuary and training-ground for young bards and home to the muses that it once had been, but was now little more than a whore-house.

The three knights investigated diligently, and enjoyed every moment, for the rumours were true. As was the legend of the existence of a Pool of Revirgination. They then supervised the revirgination of five of the maidens, replaced the other four (who seemed past it) by authentic virgins obtained from a convent whose patronne was also, by coincidence, Morgan le Fay, and put to the sword the two brothers who had hitherto ruled the castle and its environs. Sir Hugue left one of the knights, the better man of the two, to train the four neophytes, and the other to hold stewardship of the castle and estate until he received further orders from Princess Morgana or her representative. He himself rode back to Camelot to report to Arthur, and then home to Beau-Regard.

Now he was back again because Arthur wanted to know what Morgana was up to. A dangerous assignment, fatal even, if the princess had been there, but she wasn't, she was down in Cornwall, at Tintagel, and Lisanor, who shared Morgana's hatred of Guenevere and might be party to her plots, was not in the least dangerous. He laughed. She was like Guenevere – just for decoration.

The arrival of this huge knight in shining armour on the great roan war-horse had been witnessed by everyone in the castle, including all nine maidens and the bel-dames responsible for their welfare and behaviour.

Everyone except the boy who swept the chimneys.

Sir Hugue was brought in by Damosel Lisanor. They stood in the Great Hall and she gave him a second cup of their best chablis. He questioned her about Morgan le Fay's comings and goings, ostensibly so that when he returned he could do so at a time when she would be there to meet him. He also gazed at Lisanor's hair and into her eyes and down at her breasts, and thanked heaven his cock had at last recovered from Smelly Melly's ministrations.

'You will be wanting to check all the maidens, no doubt, Sir Hugue. How would you prefer to do this? One at a time ...? In pairs ...?' Her eyes twinkled.

'One at a time, then all nine together.'

Her mouth fell open.

'As for the bel-dames ...' he continued.

'You *know* about our bel-dames?'

'Indeed I do. They were my idea.'

'*Your* idea, Sir Hugue? Ah, but of course! You were one of the knights who "reformed" the – ah – institution, weren't you – shortly before the king sent me here?'

'I was. And I said that, from now on, every maiden should have her own bel-dame to supervise her and keep her on her uppers.'

There was a noise from the fireplace, a muffled cry, more noise – then a black avalanche poured from the chimney. Sir Hugue whirled round, saw a boy land in the heap of soot, and bounce, soot flying everywhere. The boy howled, then suddenly stopped howling and peered at them, big white eyes in his coal-black face.

'Leave him to me,' barked Sir Hugue. He strode towards the boy, who saw him coming and turned and tried to jump back up into the chimney but couldn't get hold of it.

Giving up, the boy cowered down into the soot.

The man put out a hand, like when you are calling a cat: puss, puss, puss. Only he didn't say puss, puss, puss, he said 'Come here, boy.'

He waited. Then: 'I said, *Come here, boy*. Don't make me say it again, or it will be the worse for you.'

Trembling now, the boy shuffled forward, pushing the soot with his bare feet.

He came within reach, then suddenly, as the man's arm shot out, broke and ran – straight out of the hall, through the kitchen, out through the yard and past the pigs and the geese and into the trees – and was gone.

Lisanor had no time for brats who broke rules, especially the rule that they should stay out of sight, but even she felt a twinge of sympathy for the boy. He was nigh on fourteen years old according to Princess Morgan le Fay, who owned him, yet so small was he kept (to permit him to slither up and down the chimneys) that he seemed a child still.

'Find him and scrub him and bring to me!' Sir Hugue roared along the passage that led to the kitchen.

'Don't concern yourself with him, Sir Hugue. He's just some foundling brat of Princess Morgana's. The girls call him Cinders because he does the fires and is always black.' She laughed. 'And Morgana herself calls him Flower. I don't know why. He spends most of his time in the kitchen, turning the spit.'

'He *disobeyed* me, damosel.'

They came from the kitchen to report that the boy had disappeared but would be scrubbed and brought to him as soon as he was found.

He dismissed them with a wave of his hand. He turned back to her. 'Come on.'

'Come on where, Sir Knight?'

'Where would you suggest? Your boudoir?'

She had little choice, she knew. He would want to "inspect" her, too. It was natural. And it might be fun. He was probably built like a bull in every respect. But she must be careful, he was a bully, too. If she didn't handle him right, the same – or worse – could happen to her.

Indeed, the whole performance with Cinders might have been for her benefit.

She felt a frisson of excitement – and a flood of wetness between her legs that she hadn't known since Arthur.

She took him by the hand and led him up the stairs.

To her surprise, he stood aside for her to enter the room first – but as she did so, gave her bottom such a slap it snapped her head back.

She flew forward. When she landed, her feet caught in her skirt, so she tripped and sprawled over the edge of the bed, hurting her ribs badly.

She was suddenly furious. 'Is that how you treat your King's mistress?'

'A one-night mistress who happened nine months later to give birth to a milk-sop son no use to Arthur even as a bastard and fighter, let alone as an heir.'

'Oh!!!' She threw herself at him, claws out, but he laughed and caught her and smothered her in his great arms, then sat on the edge of the bed and bent her over his lap, her face to his boot, her hair on the floor. His leather-covered thigh was pressing into her ribs and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, she could do about it.

'The King himself gave me my orders. I was to check up on you.'

'Among others!' She tried to jerk her head up, to twist away from him, but could only kick her feet like a petulant child.

'On you particularly, damosel.'

He lifted her skirt, draped it over her head, blinding her.

So now they both knew that she was wearing nothing underneath it. And they both knew that her juices had been flowing for him – though they had stopped, she was sure, with that blow to her ribs.

He stroked her bottom tenderly: almost lovingly, it seemed.

Perhaps after all he was not going to give her the spanking she'd been dreading since she first stood on tiptoe beside his horse to offer him the welcome-cup and saw the size of his hands, the gleam in his eye?

She felt his finger ... fingers ... slip between her sex-lips. Gasped. Felt them withdrawn again. Heard him sniff.

He was sniffing her juices, sucking his fingers, tasting her.

Would she pass? What would he tell Arthur? Oh, she would never understand men, no matter how much she tried to please them.

Then the hand came down on her bare bottom with a loud smack and pain shot through her. And again. And again – but she was proud, she was managing to keep still and stay silent – almost silent – after four ... five ... six. That was harder. That hurt. No, not like that one again. The she heard herself screaming, and she was thrashing about, and he was laughing, and the great hand was coming down again and again and again, harder and harder and harder ...

It had stopped.

She felt herself lifted up by her hair, and – oh, she couldn't believe this – one hand, the hand that had been beating her, was thrust

between her legs, was lifting her up by her mons veneris. She was dropped on the bed.

She looked at him. He was undoing the plate armour he was still wearing over his chest and back. He didn't need help. He was wearing the new easy-release armour that knights who travelled alone preferred these days. She hastily began to disrobe herself, which just meant releasing the bodice and pulling the frock up over her head. It was that or have him rip it off her, and she loved that frock, an old one of Morgan's that fitted her perfectly: indeed, it looked much better on her than it ever had on Morgan.

Naked, she lay on her side, facing away from him so he could see her bottom, see his handiwork, and be satisfied. She stroked the top buttock and hip gently, exploring the flesh with her finger-tips. How had he produced those ridges without using a rod of some kind?

'Those are hand-marks, damosel. Each finger leaves a welt and the palm leaves a great circular bruise.'

She twisted round, looked at her hip and the side of her bottom. It was true. She would be a mass of bruises tomorrow.

And then she caught sight of his cock and forgot all else.

No. No! If he pushed that right in to the hilt it would come out of her mouth!

'No!' she screamed – then wished she hadn't as his hand shot out and took her lips between his fingers and thumb in a grip that could crush bone, she knew, would reduce lips to a mush, a jelly. She went completely limp, offering no resistance, no provocation. She was petrified. Being beaten to a jelly was nothing, nothing at all. But if he squeezed her lips, if he destroyed *them*, that would destroy *her*. Morgan would cast her out and she would spend the rest of her days as a beggar, a vagabond, unable to function even as a whore.

Still holding her by her lips, he pushed her down on her back. Then he let go of them. His face was so close to hers their noses touched, they saw into each other's souls. She beheld a laughing devil, a face out of her nightmares, when she dreamt she had died and was in the hell that awaited her: they all told her, those priest and friars and pardoners, and she richly deserved it, but how did it help when no sooner had they given her absolution than they wanted to fuck her themselves? In lieu of money, they said – and she had no money. 'In lieu of a whore,' Morgan had laughed when she mentioned it to her one day. 'Or at least in lieu of paying a whore. Get one free.'

But worse was the devil she had on top of her now, leering down into her face, taking her poor sore lips between his teeth, chewing and sucking them till they were – 'Open!' he barked.

She thrust her legs out from under him and forced them wide apart. 'Your mouth, fool! Down there comes afterwards.'

She opened her mouth as wide as it would go ... knew he was peering into it and down her throat. What was he looking for?

His tongue was in her mouth now, a huge tongue, filling it. Licking it Tasting it?

What had Arthur told him to do? What would happen to her if she wasn't – wasn't ... all right?

He forced her mouth further open with his fingers and thumbs, thrust his own mouth further and further in. What was he doing? Then she knew: his tongue snaked its way down her throat, into her gullet. If she gagged, she was dead, or as good as. And in a minute she would have to swallow that monstrous cock.

Suddenly, he swung over onto his back, swinging her with him as if she were a child, and holding her up at arm's length above him.

'You have a good throat. A whore's throat.' He was smiling now, smiling up at her. 'And good ripe lips and a fine big mouth. I'd make them better still if you were mine. I *will* make them better still. I'll be here for days. Weeks.'

Oh, God, no, she thought. No!

Then he dropped her to his chest with a bang that nearly broke her nose and jarred all her ribs again but only made him laugh, and took her head in his hands. He pushed down, and she felt the head of his cock like a spear pressing up under her chin. He laughed and thrust harder, holding her head tight so she couldn't struggle though it was crushing her throat and her Adam's apple.

Then he said, 'All right, let's see what you can do, whore. Open your mouth.'

Between them they manoeuvred his cock into her mouth and she played with the glans for a while, with the tip of her tongue and the little front teeth she kept so white, then he straightened her head and pushed in further, and further, and she adjusted her neck till her throat was straight but – it was too big! It was impossible!

She heard him say, 'Listen, whore. Arthur's not at all sure that Borre *is* his. He doesn't seem like the kind of boy Arthur would sire. You can tell. A son of mine would be ...'

A son of yours would be like no one I would wish to meet!

'A son of mine would be a *man* ... And listen, no one knows who you slept with the other nights, before and after the night with Arthur ... What do you want me to tell him?'

That – that I love him, I will always love him ... He wants me to take it down inside me, she thought. But that would prove I was a whore, wouldn't it? Oh, I don't understand!

All she knew was that she must please him. She gobbled and gulped and swallowed and pushed, and he thrust and thrust as if he wanted to spit her on it – and she had a wild dream of the spit-boy, Cinders, turning and turning her while everyone cheered and jeered and mocked her, even the women. Especially the women.

It was sliding into her.

For a second, she panicked, then panicked at the thought of what would happen to her if she panicked ... and breathed calmly in and out through her nose as she had been taught. 'At least you won't have to swallow it, that way!' her old mistress used to laugh, trying to encourage her, when she wasn't encouraging her with the switch she carried at all times. But she'd never minded drinking the sperm ...

What would they say if they knew she really had been a whore once, when she was hardly more than a child? Perhaps they did know. Perhaps malicious tongues had been wagging in Arthur's ear, and now, this was how they were checking up on her?

He was coming!

The great hard length of it thrust even further into her, she was smothered as his coarse frizzy animal hair crushed against her mouth and nose but there was nothing she could do, he was holding her head in his hands and she was holding him but not pushing away from him, simply letting him control everything, letting him use her, as she had been taught.

After all, he was Sir Hugue of Beau-Regard, a great knight, and the King's lifelong friend; she was Damosel Lisanor, a whore, and the King's plaything for a few short hours.

He convulsed repeatedly, then relaxed.

She waited, then drew back a little, sliding her lips up the cock, letting it slide out until she was holding the glans between her lips and licking at it, cleaning it. In a minute, he would fuck her properly.

She waited, her tongue still on his glans.

And waited. Was he expecting *her* to take the lead?

His breathing ... He was asleep!

The nine maidens were Whin, Cherry and Holly, Rowan, Silver Birch, Rose and Columbine, Heather and Honeysuckle.

Whin was prickly, Cherry was sweet, Holly was prickly too, but not as prickly as Whin, and she had been sweet as well as prickly. Rowan spoke Irish, though she had never been to Ireland. Silver Birch took a lot of beating. Rose had the rose of all the world between her legs, Columbine had long, long legs and lissom arms. Heather was white and cool and stand-offish. Spoiling for a fight, he suspected. He gave her one. She lost, and was the better for it. He spent longer on her than on any of the others – and sent her first to be revirginised. Honeysuckle, the last and the least and the slightest, had the sweetest honeypot of all. And she was the only one he didn't need to beat.

Then came the day when he was to have all nine at once.

'How will you organise it?' asked Lisanor.

He looked at her. He had been working on her mouth again for the tenth consecutive day. He found her even more beautiful as she was now, with her mouth so much wider, her lips so much fuller, her tongue so much longer. Indeed, he was tempted to take her with him, but that would need Morgana's consent as well as a *nihil obstat* from Arthur. Lisanor herself had been horrified at first, but had grown used to the changes (he watched her staring at herself in the mirror each day) and finally came to like them. Especially when a passing knight, Sir Tor, told her how much lovelier she looked than she had when she was young, or even than she had six months ago, the last time he rode by.

'Sir Tor? What did he want?'

'He was chasing a brachet that was chasing a hart that had run through the Great Hall at Camelot and out the other side.'

A brachet, the vicious little female hunting-dogs that never gave up. He loved them. 'So he won't be staying to dinner – or to assist me with the Nine.'

'No. I asked him, but he couldn't.'

'What? Dinner? Or the Nine?'

'Dinner. I thought you wished to handle all Nine at once, and alone – though I'm sure he would have been delighted to help. He is a very lusty knight.'

He stared at her, and she blushed.

'Whore. Listen: I shall use only their honeypots. I shall have my cock in one and my fingers in each of two others.'

'That's three.'

'Thank you. My thumbs in two others –'

'Your finger in one, your thumb in another? But -'

'*Fingers* in one, three, four fingers, thumb in another. Two girls to each hand. They will have to clasp each other tightly, belly to belly, but I have large hands, as you should know by now. My great toe – as many of my toes as she'll hold – in each of two others. My tongue in the eighth, my nose in the ninth. Those two will really have to sit close to each other.'

She gazed at him. 'And me?'

He laughed. 'You'll supervise. I want them all to come at the same time: and I mean at the same time as *me*. Then they will all shuffle round and we'll start again, till finally each damsel has been in every position, I should say, has *come* in every position, and I myself have come nine times.'

'That's ninety orgasms,' she breathed.

He grinned. 'And if anything goes wrong, you know what will happen to *you*.'

Astonishingly, nothing did go wrong. It was the most beautiful sight, the most beautiful *thing*, she had ever seen. And afterwards she wanted to tell him that there had been ninety-one orgasms: she herself had come just watching! But he was asleep again, and snoring like the pig (the great hairy half-wild champion stud boar) he was.

She sighed, and went to supervise the ablutions of the nine maidens. When they were clean, they would all have to be tied up, there was no other way they would fast and remain chaste for the next forty-eight hours, and be purified.

And if they weren't purified, ready for revirginisation, who would get the blame?

When Sir Hugue awoke, he was hungry.

He pulled the rope that rang the bell somewhere in the bowels of the building.

Nothing happened.

He pulled on his clothes and made his way down to the Hall.

A smell of cooking was coming, presumably, from the kitchen. He followed his nose.

Where was everyone?

Ah, the boy was here, turning a spit on which were roasting two fine big capons and a duck.

It was the boy who had run away from him the day he arrived, he was sure of it.

He went closer, slapped the boy on the shoulder, nearly knocking him into the fire, and inspected the capons.

'Those chicken legs done, boy?'

'Y-yes, sir, I think they must be, sir.'

'Then stop turning for a moment while I ...' He broke off a leg, switched it quick to the other hand and sucked at his burnt, juicy fingers.

'Shall I go on t-turning, sir?'

He nodded, his mouth full of chicken. Chewed. Swallowed. 'Is there any bread here, boy?'

'Yes, sir.' The boy fetched a round loaf, freshly baked that morning, handed it to him, and returned to the spit.

He ate some bread, helped himself to the rest of the chicken.

'Who are your parents, boy? Do you know?'

'No, sir.'

'Foundling, eh ... You remind me of someone, though. Stand still and let me look at you. Don't be frightened. I'm not going to beat you, not for that, not now. It's been too long. Though if there's another reason why you should be beaten ...?'

'Oh no, sir, no!'

He laughed. 'Hmm ... It's your eyes that ...' He finished the chicken, put the rest of the bread in his mouth.

Sir Hugue felt a frisson of excitement. He had realised what it was about the boy.

'Bend over, boy. Here.'

'But you said ... ! And I haven't ...'

'I'm not going to hit you – though I *will*, if you don't stop ... Here, closer to me. Right.' He put out his hand and lifted the boy's tunic right up off his bottom. There, in the small of his back, was the birthmark.

It was The Mark, the mark of the wulboar, exactly the same as the mark he himself bore, and every member of his family for generations had borne, and in exactly the same place.

'Boy, you are one of us,' he announced. He took his robe off, pulled up his shirt and turned round to show an identical, if far larger, mark. 'And that probably means you are one of mine,' he grinned. 'There must be many about, but you are the first I've come across, apart from a runt in the village back home who died before I recognised him officially. *Stop turning that thing and listen to me!*'

The boy stopped.

'Didn't you hear? I said you must be *my son*. Come.'

'But – but the ...'

'Come, I said.'

He took the boy's hand and led him through to the Hall. There, he stood and shouted: 'Lisanor! *Lisanor*, damn your eyes!!'

She appeared at the bannister above them. 'Sir Hugue?'

'Come down here. Now!'

She came running down, took in the scene. 'Oh, no. Is he in trouble again?'

He shook his head. 'No – though you may be. He, on the contrary, is *out* of trouble. I have recognised him as my son.'

'Your *son*? But –'

'My bastard. We shall be leaving within the hour.'

'But what about – ?'

'I'm quite finished here.'

'But what shall I tell Princess Morgan?'

'Do you want to tell her I gave you a good thrashing before I left?'

'No!'

'If I know Morgan, she will like that.'

'No. *Please*.'

'Then stay very quiet and keep right out of my way. Only ensure that my horse is made ready – and one for the boy. And some clothes and a cloak for him.'

Sir Hugue decided to take the boy to the home of his cousin, the Lady Bel-Linda of Lindis. There was no one at Beau-Regard to care for the boy at the moment, whereas Bel-Linda had a large family around her. Lindis was on his way, and he had to get back to Camelot as quickly as possible.

Sir Hugue was anxious. The boy, he explained to Bel-Linda, seemed very girlish: a sissy, to put it bluntly. Perhaps it was the way he had been brought up. The Castle of *Maidens* was hardly ... Anyway, from now on, he was to be encouraged to take part in *manly* pursuits, fighting, hunting and so on.

Glad to be rid of the boy for the moment, he "borrowed" a minstrel from Bel-Linda and rode south with him en route not for Camelot but for Old Goose and his cave, and the nymph who could only be lured into his arms with music.

He had decided not to pay Smelly Melly a visit. He would need his cock in tip-top condition if the minstrel succeeded in his mission – which he had better, or the nymph would find him there, bound and weighted down and waiting for her at the bottom of her pool next time she came along.

Goose hid in the back of his cave and refused to come out.

'Come out, man.'

'No.'

'Come out, I'm telling you!'

'No! And don't call me man.'

In the end, Sir Hugue, who needed Goose to show them exactly what part of the stream the nymph frequented, stormed through to the back of the cave and carried him out. And found he was no longer *him* but *her*.

Ah ha.

'Now you see why I didn't want to come out, why I didn't want you to see me,' wailed Old Goose. 'Why I didn't want you to call me "man".'

Sir Hugue laughed. 'Listen, old – woman – I don't care how you piss, and apart from that I can't see that it makes much difference –'

'It does to me!'

'Weren't you supposed to address me as "master"?''

'Ah. Yes. Yes, master.'

'Good. So, it makes no difference ...'

'No, master – not to you.'

'You will come with us and show us where she is.'

'She isn't. She's gone.'

'She is. She's somewhere near. I feel her in the air, in my bones. The scent of a woman – but not just any woman.'

'It's probably me you can smell.'

'*You?*' Sir Hugue cuffed him – *her* – sent her flying over backwards and sliding along the ground.

She stayed where she landed, wrapping her raggety skirts round her skinny old legs and peering up at him.

'You smell worse than the witch!'

'That was *it*, that was the spell. To be a smellier old woman than her. I can't help it.'

'And what do we call *you* now?'

'Some children came up from the hamlet the other day and they called me (don't laugh) Mother Goose.'

Sir Hugue guffawed. 'Well, Old Mother Goose, you'd better make sure this nymph does appear, or when I give you your whipping in the morning I'll skin you alive.'

'I'm not having whippings any more, master: that penance is finished. Being a – being like this is penance enough in itself, Dame Melisande said.'

'I'm sure it is, but while I'm here, if I say you get a whipping, you get a whipping.'

'Yes, master.'

The Chatelaine
Serialised version – chapters 1-5
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