

Guigemar

Marie de France

a mid-twelfth century Breton lai

Abridged and retold by

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This story has been abridged and retold from: Glyn S Burgess and Keith Busby, 1999. *The Lais of Marie de France*, Second Edition. Penguin Books Limited. From British Library MS Harley 978, dating to the thirteenth century.

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Guigemar

Marie de France

originally twelfth century Anglo-Norman French

In Brittany, once, there lived a baron who had a fine young son named Guigemar. He was a sturdy lad, and as soon as he was old enough, he was sent to a royal court to be brought up, as was the custom in those days. The youth grew to be loved by everybody, and when he had gained all his strength and was ready to be knighted, he received the finest armour from his lord and rode into Flanders, where there was always conflict to be found. He intended to make a name for himself as a warrior. There was none his equal, in Lorraine, Burgundy, Anjou nor in Gascony.

But Nature had done him one disservice, and one only – he could find no inclination at all to fall in love. There was not a woman in the land who would not willingly have taken him into her bed, had he wooed her properly, and many beautiful women had tried to give him every opportunity of doing so, but he always rebuffed them. He seemed to have no interest in love whatsoever.

Guigemar returned to Brittany for a few weeks, to visit his parents and his sister, and the desire came upon him one day to go hunting. Knights were gathered and they all went off into the forest where they were very soon able to unleash their dogs at a large deer. In the ensuing tumult, Guigemar found himself left behind when suddenly, he came across a snow-white hind in a thicket. Letting the rest of the hunt go on ahead, he shot an arrow towards the animal as it bolted, having been startled from its refuge. The shaft flew through the air and hit the creature on the front of the head, knocking it to the forest floor where it lay very badly hurt; but incredibly, the arrow bounced off the deer's skull, flew back through the air as though from another bow and transfixing Guigemar through the thigh, pinning his leg to his horse. Guigemar dismounted and, bleeding profusely, limped and fell beside the creature which lay fatally injured on the ground. The deer spoke:

The tale of Guigemar is included amongst a collection of Breton 'lais' preserved from oral minstrel tradition and written down in the twelfth century by a 'Marie' whom we now know as Marie de France. Twelve of these extraordinary tales are preserved in MS Harley 978 in the British Library, a volume dating to the thirteenth century. In addition to the present volume and MS Harley 978 the tale of Guigemar appears in two other medieval manuscripts, both in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

Depending upon your point of view, this tale is either an astonishingly enigmatic one or an astoundingly clever one. If you dare to contemplate the latter, then look upon it as the journey of a single life, beginning with a deer killed by an arrow, whose soul then journeys on a magical boat with lighted candelabra at the prow to the castle of a woman whom Christianity has incarcerated behind a stone wall. This soul falls in love with the woman and, when forced to do so, makes a return journey in the solitary boat to begin a new life as a man; a man who cannot fall in love with any lady because he is already in love. When she can do so, the lady then takes a similar voyage to find him; but of course, it will take a magical device for them to know one another again.

The twist in the tale of all this is that the thread of this extended life has doubled back upon itself. The deer was killed by Guigemar. The deer and Guigemar are one and the same.

‘Alas! you have wounded me terribly,’ it cried, ‘and you will receive no cure for your own injury until you are healed by a woman whom you must learn to love with the same intensity as she loves you. Now go, and let me die in peace.’

Guigemar lifted himself from the ground and asked his squire to go and fetch all his companions. Then he bound his wound with his shirt as best he could, limped with great difficulty back to his horse, mounted, and rode off through the forest. Desiring suddenly to be alone, and not wishing his companions to find him, he followed a path that came out at last onto an open plain. A distant mountain fed a stream that ran down to a harbour, and in the harbour was a single ship lying as though ready to sail. Approaching this ship, Guigemar saw that it was made of ebony; it was black, and the sail was of silk.



Guigemar was deeply worried, for he had no idea that such a plain existed beside the forest and there should be no harbour, to his knowledge, anywhere within the district. Nevertheless, he got down from his horse and made his way up the gangplank onto the vessel, expecting to find men on deck who might be able to help him. But there was no one to be found. All he could see in the boat was a large bed, very richly made and adorned with drapes and covers of silk and gold thread. As to the pillow, anyone who lay his head on it would not get any older, and that is the truth! At the prow of the ship were two candelabra filled with lighted candles. Guigemar was intrigued and in such pain from his wound that he lay upon the bed in order to rest for a few moments.

When he came to again, he found to his dismay that the ship was underway and far from land. The wind was blowing fair and the sea glided swiftly by, although there was not a soul on board but himself. Guigemar knew that there was no possibility of going back, and he could only try to take his mind from the pain of his wound and to put his trust in God to bring him to a safe landing. He lay down again to sleep. But there is no need for him to worry. Ahead lies the place where he will be healed of his wound.

The city to which Guigemar was bound was an ancient one, ruled by a jealous old man with white hair who kept his young wife incarcerated behind the stonework of his castle. She was of high birth, noble, courteous and wise, but was allowed no contact with the people of her city; instead, she was forced to live her days behind a wall of marble, whose only entrance was guarded night and day, and whose only other access was from a little harbour on the side of her prison that faced the sea. Here she lived with a maiden, her husband's niece, who loved her dearly, and an old priest who guarded the key to the gate. He conducted services in the chapel for her and waited upon her at the dining table.

On this particular day the lady came into a small garden that lay beside her harbour. Looking out to sea, she and her maiden saw approaching them the vessel carrying the

young knight. It was not at all clear that anyone was at the helm, but it came safely enough into the haven and, casting her anxieties aside, and urged by her maiden who could see nothing at all to fear, the lady went down to find out what was going on. The damsel stepped aboard and found the rich vessel to be deserted except for a man lying upon a bed. Seeing his pallor, the maiden concluded that he must be dead, and she went back to her lady with this sad news.



‘Since he is dead, we must bury him, with our priest’s help,’ insisted the lady, and they both boarded the ship. The knight looked very handsome, and it grieved this lady very much to see him lying there. She greatly lamented the loss of his young life.

She put her hand upon Guigemar’s chest and he at once awoke. The sleeping knight opened his eyes, raised himself from the bed and greeted her joyfully, knowing that he had reached land. The lady asked how it was that he came to be on a boat that sailed by itself, with candles at its prow, and whether it was

through war that he had been forced to make this journey. And in reply, Guigemar explained that he had been hunting in Brittany when an arrow that he had shot at a white hind had injured him in the thigh. ‘My only chance of healing, I have been told,’ he said, ‘is to find a lady whom I will learn to love as much as she loves me, but I have no idea where to find her, nor have I any idea how to guide this ship. Please help me!’

The lady replied: ‘I shall willingly help you. This is my husband’s land, both the city and all the surrounding countryside, and he has imprisoned me in this stonework. There is only one way out and it is guarded by a horrible old priest; I am allowed out only at his discretion, or if my husband calls for me. My bedroom and my chapel are all that I have, except for this maiden. Should you desire to stay with us until you are strong enough to walk again and your wound is healed, I would be happy to shelter and feed you.’

Guigemar thanked her and she and her maiden helped him to their room, where he was set down upon the maiden’s bed, concealed by a curtain. Clean water was fetched to wash his injured thigh, and the wound was then wrapped tightly in white linen. They nursed him tenderly and when the evening meal was brought in, they kept enough back to give to their patient.

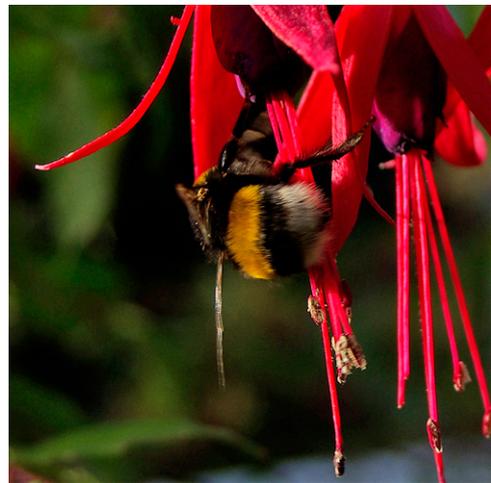
But within Guigemar’s breast soon stirred something new. Love had taken hold of his heart. He gave no thought to his homeland; it was entirely forgotten. His thigh was as painless as though the injury had already healed, and yet he sighed with pain. The maiden, having been sent away by Guigemar, returned to her mistress, only to find her in equal turmoil.

Guigemar could not guess the cause of his anguish, but he knew that if the lady forsook him, he would die for certain. 'Alas!' he said to himself. 'I must tell her how I feel, and perhaps she will have mercy on me. But if she cannot, then I will die of sorrow and my wound will never heal.' Then he considered that there may be no way to avoid suffering, that suffering was the way of the world; and with these thoughts spinning around in his head, he spent a restless night, reliving every gesture, every word that she had spoken to him in the short hours that he had known her. If only he was aware how she herself was feeling, he would be greatly comforted!

The lady rose the next morning, having had, herself, no sleep at all. The damsel could see what the matter was; she guessed the truth and went immediately to where the knight lay awake. As soon as she entered, Guigemar demanded of her: 'Where is my lady? Why has she left her bed before sunrise?

'I advise you not to keep your feelings to yourself for very much longer,' cautioned the maiden. 'By revealing your true thoughts you may be able to help my lady as much as she is able to help you. By keeping her in your heart at all times, you will not be acting improperly. You seem both of you to be very suited to one another.'

When the lady returned from her chapel, she went immediately to see how her guest had spent the night, since she felt it a duty to be by his side. The damsel beckoned her in. She and Guigemar greeted one another and then they both hesitated, not daring to reveal the true extent of their feelings. Guigemar felt that as a guest and as a stranger, he had no right to impose any further upon the lady's generosity. He worried that if he revealed the depth of his love for her, she would refuse to look after him any more. But if he tries to keep his pain to himself, how can he hope to find relief? Love is a hidden wound lying deep within the body, and being so deep-seated, it is difficult to get rid of.



Guigemar found courage. 'My lady,' he said, 'I cannot live without you; the pain in my heart prevents it. If you cannot help me, then my death is assured. I ask for nothing less than your love. Dear, sweet lady, please offer me this.'

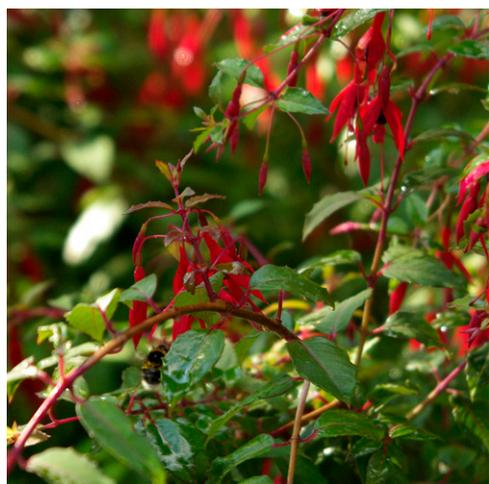
When Guigemar had poured out his heart to her, his lady replied: 'Friend, this is very sudden, and I must have time to consider what you have said.' But before very long, they were kissing and holding each other in their arms. May the consummation of their love, that others take pleasure in, soon be pleasing to them also.

Guigemar stayed for a year and a half, as the story tells us, and it was a very happy time for both of them. But Fortune's wheel cannot be prevented from turning, and a person must fall as another rises. So their happiness could not last forever.

One morning in summer, as they lay together, the lady said: 'I feel that we are about to part. You are going to be found with me. And if you die, I shall die also, and if you leave me, you will find someone else to love and my heart will be broken.'

'I will never love another woman,' said Guigemar, 'so lay these foolish thoughts aside.' But the lady would not be consoled, and she reached for his shirt.

'If I tie a knot in this shirt tail, you may safely love any woman who can first untie it,' she said, and then she made a knot in the shirt that was impossible for anyone to untie, except for herself. Then she handed the garment back to him, and took a belt that she



said she would wear against her skin, and Guigemar gave her leave to love any man who could undo the buckle without forcing it or using a knife. Then they forgot about it and went back to their lovemaking.

Later that day, they were spied upon by a chamberlain who was trying to deliver a message to the lady from her husband. He peered through a window, saw them lying together, and ran off to reveal what he had seen. Then all hell broke loose! The old man, her husband, angry and distraught, had the door to her rooms forced open by three armed men, and there he found Guigemar. He ordered that the knight be slain. Guigemar seized a wooden pole, intending to defend himself with it as vigorously as he could, but the old man ordered the armed men aside for a moment and questioned Guigemar. Guigemar was at the lord's mercy and could do nothing to save himself. Fearlessly, he explained how he had been wounded in the forest, how he had received a prophesy from an injured hind and had been carried by a mysterious boat to the harbour below. The old man said that he was lying, but that if he could find the boat again, he would gladly allow him to lie once more upon its bed! They went down to the harbour and there was the boat. Guigemar was forced to embark and it was a sorrowful man indeed who reflected upon his lady as the ship passed smoothly once more across the silent water. Guigemar prayed that he might die before reaching his own country if he was never to see his lady again. And so he cried and grieved, until the ship arrived at the very harbour from which he had first set sail.

Guigemar landed and came almost at once upon a young squire, who was leading a horse for his lord who was riding on ahead. Greeting this young man, whom he had fostered since he was a small boy, Guigemar mounted the spare horse and the two rode off together. It seemed that many years had passed since he had left, and he was now the lord of this land. Everybody was delighted to see him return from his trip in good health. But Guigemar remained unable to fall in love. There was great pressure on him to marry. But he refused to consider any lady who was not able to untie the knot in his shirt without tearing or cutting it. A great many beautiful women tried, but none were able to.

The lady whom Guigemar loved, meanwhile, had been imprisoned in a tower of black marble. For two long years she endured the most unimaginable grief at her separation from Guigemar.

‘My love!’ she cried, ‘I would rather quickly die than languish here in this misery! If I could find a way of escaping I would go and drown myself in the harbour where you were forced to embark for your home.’ And trying the door, she found that it was unlocked. It was all so easy. She walked down to the harbour and there was the boat, at the very place where she meant to throw herself into the water. In it was a bed draped with silk and at its prow were two candelabra with lighted candles. She climbed aboard, telling herself that it was in this place that Guigemar had drowned. The boat was soon underway, although there was nobody aboard but her, and at length it came to a harbour beneath a castle in Brittany.

The castle belonged to a man named Meriaduc, who was at war with a neighbour. Seeing the boat arrive from his window, he went down to the water and boarded the vessel, where he found the lady, who seemed to him to be as beautiful as any creature of the Otherworld. He carried her into his castle, where he gave her into the safekeeping of his sister, and soon there grew within his heart a great love. And here she lived, with fine clothes to wear and with much honour given to her. But although this lord went to see her and to speak to her as often as he could, she gained no happiness from his visits. Even when he openly declared his love for her, she could not find it in her heart to respond. She revealed the belt to him and told him that she could only love the man who could



undo the buckle without forcing it or cutting it. He became angry, and replied that there was another fool in Brittany, a man who was otherwise a highly respected knight with lands and title, who possessed a similarly ridiculous garment, and that perhaps she ought to try to untie the knot in it for him. ‘It was you who tied that knot in his shirttail, wasn’t it!’ he chided. Then he grabbed her roughly, uncovered the belt and tried to unclasp it, but without success. He could find no way of undoing it.

At length, it happened that a tournament was arranged between Meriaduc and his neighbour, who was his enemy, and Guigemar was summoned as Meriaduc’s friend and ally, to join in the fighting. Guigemar arrived with a retinue of one hundred knights. Meriaduc gave him a room in his castle, and instructed his sister to put on her finest clothes and to greet his friend when he arrived, bringing the lady with her. The lady entered the chamber with Meriaduc’s sister, and when Guigemar’s name was mentioned, she almost fainted. Guigemar himself hesitated, feeling that he knew this lady, sensing that it was she whom he sought, but recognition did not come easily to him. He kissed her politely and asked her to sit by his side. Meriaduc looked on uneasily. Feigning light-heartedness, he called out: ‘Lord, why don’t you ask this maiden

to try to untie your shirt?’

‘I think that this is a good idea,’ replied Guigemar, and he sent a chamberlain to bring the item of clothing. When he arrived with the garment, the lady hesitated, for although the shirt looked familiar to her she could not find the courage to untie the knot in it. Meriaduc saw this and despite the pain in his heart, he urged her: ‘Lady, you must attempt to untie this knot at once!’ She complied, and it came undone easily to her touch.

Guigemar was amazed, but he still did not properly recognise her and his doubts remained. ‘Lady,’ he asked, ‘please let me see the belt that you wear about your waist.’ She uncovered her hips for him and there indeed was the belt. Without any difficulty at all, he undid the buckle and removed it.

‘How do you come to be here?’ he asked, joyfully, and she told him about the prison in which she had been incarcerated, how she had discovered a way out, meaning to throw herself into the water and how she had found the boat in the harbour that had taken her into this land and to this castle in which Guigemar now saw her. She explained how well Meriaduc had looked after her: ‘But please, my lover, take me away with you!’ Guigemar replied: ‘My lords, this lady is an old friend of mine whom I thought I would never, ever, see again. I ask Meriaduc, in his generosity, to give her to me, so that we may once more be together. In return, Meriaduc, I offer you my services, for two years, or for three, with a hundred knights.’

‘Guigemar,’ replied Meriaduc. ‘My needs do not extend to requiring the services of a hundred knights, from you nor from anybody and so, reluctantly, I must reject your kind offer. The lady will stay with me.’

Guigemar ran to the stables, mounted his horse and let all his knights gather around him. ‘Then it shall be war between us!’ he cried. Almost all of the knights who had come to fight for Meriaduc at the tournament rallied to Guigemar’s call, and a sizeable army rode straight to the castle of Meriaduc’s foe, who welcomed them all very warmly indeed.

The next day they rode on campaign, arriving back at the town in which Meriaduc’s castle stood. And to close the tale in brief, they laid siege until the inhabitants were faced with starvation, and at last they captured the castle and killed Meriaduc. And with great joy, Guigemar led his lady away.

And the man who could not find it in his heart to love was at last reunited with the lady he had been searching for all along.