

# Lybeaus Desconus (The Fair Unknown)

*Thomas Chestre*

*a fourteenth century Middle English verse romance*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose  
by**

**Richard Scott-Robinson**

This story has been translated and retold, in the style of Hannah Scot, from: Mills, M, 1969. Lybeaus Desconus. Published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press. From British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ii of the early-fifteenth century, with parallel readings from Lambeth Palace MS 306.

Copyright © Richard Scott-Robinson, 2001, 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. The download of a single copy for personal use, or for teaching purposes, does not require permission.  
richardsr@hotmail.co.uk





# The Fair Unknown

Thomas Chestre

*a late-fourteenth century Middle English verse romance*

**J**hesu Cryst our Sauyour · And hys modyr, þat swete flowr · Helpe hem at her nede · þat harkenep of a conquerour · Wys of wytte and whyght werroure · And doughty man yn dede – May Jesus Christ our saviour and his mother, that sweet flower, help at his need anyone who will listen to this story of a brave and intelligent knight, who was very accomplished in battle. His name was Guinglain, the son of Sir Gawain, and he was conceived secretly in a forest – listen! because no story of a better knight exists.

Guinglain was handsome to look at, well-proportioned and strong, with bright, intelligent eyes, despite being a bastard. His mother kept him in seclusion, away from any threat of shame or dishonour because of his illegitimacy; and because of his handsome looks she lovingly called him Prettyface. And rather naïvely in turn, he never thought to ask his father's name.

One day, Prettyface went into a forest to hunt deer and came across a knight lying on the ground, lifeless in a shining cocoon of bright steel. A dead knight. The child disrobed the body and dressed himself in the sturdy and expensive armour, and when he was fully armed he rode to the city of Glas, that some take to mean Glastonbury, where King Arthur was holding court. He kneeled in the hall before all the knights, greeted them courteously and correctly and said: 'King Arthur, my lord, grant me permission to say a few words, for your love.' King Arthur acceded to his request without hesitation.

'But who are you?' he asked.

The child said: 'I haven't a clue who I am, Sir, isn't that ridiculous! But while I was in the forest my mother called me Prettyface.'

'It is indeed ridiculous,' replied the king, 'that he who would be a knight, and fully looks the part I must say, does not even know his own name!' Then King Arthur turned to the assembled nobles.

'Now shall I give this handsome young man a name before you all,' he cried, 'for he is so fair and noble-looking; a name, by God, that is unknown even to his mother, whoever she is. Everybody shall call him the Fair Unknown, for love of me. And now you know his name.'

King Arthur immediately knighted him, gave him a new suit of armour, a mighty sword, I tell you no word of a lie, and hung a shield around his neck, a gilded shield sporting a silken griffin; and he had Sir Gawain agree to teach him all the subtleties of combat on the tournament field.

When he had thus been made a knight, this young man asked a favour: 'I would be very pleased,' he asked the king, 'to take the first combat for which you are required to provide a champion.'

The king replied: 'I grant you your asking. Whatever adventure comes along will be yours. But I think you are too young for serious fighting, by all that I can see.'

*The tale of the Fair Unknown is found in a number of other Medieval manuscripts, including one of the mid-fifteenth century known as Cotton Caligula A ii. lying in the British Library, a volume that was rescued from a fire in the library of Robert Bruce Cotton in 1731. It is also found in Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61, which contains the story of Sir Orfeo, and in a mid-fifteenth century manuscript known as Lambeth Palace MS 306.*

*Composed in around 1380 by a poet named Thomas Chestre, it uses a number of pre-existing Arthurian story elements fashioned around a journey taken by a maiden and her dwarf that is very similar to one found in the twelfth century tale of Ipomadon by Hue de Rotelande.*

Then all the dukes, earls and barons in King Arthur's hall washed and went to the tables to eat; and there was no shortage of food I can tell you! Shortly afterwards, the king was approached by a maiden on horseback with a dwarf riding alongside, both sweating profusely.

The maiden, Elaine, was as bright as a button: a lady messenger. No countess, or queen even, could match her for composure. She was richly and generously clothed in a fine garment trimmed with fur; she rode a milk-white horse and sat on a saddle studded with diamonds. The dwarf was smartly dressed also, well-built with a beard as yellow as wax and, truly, his hair hung in plaits down to his waist. His shoes were cut like a knight's; he was not poor.

'Tell everyone why you are here,' he urged his mistress, 'for the time has come.'

The maiden knelt before all the knights, greeted them courteously and said: 'A terrible thing has happened; my lady of Segontium, who is so brave, has been put in prison and asks you to send her a knight, quickly, to release her.'



Up sprung the young knight with a light heart and said: 'King Arthur, my lord, if you will keep your word to me, I shall take on this fight and win this fair lady.'

'I did indeed give you my word,' replied King Arthur, 'and I shall keep it without any argument. God grant you grace and strength to uphold this lady's rights with the edge of your sword.'

But Elaine was not pleased with this at all and said: 'Why did I choose to come here for help? Have no doubt that I shall make it widely known that you send children to fight your battles, when Lancelot, Perceval, Gawain and other skilled and tested warriors just stand by and watch; your reputation shall be destroyed!'

Rather arrogantly and a little foolishly, the dwarf approached King Arthur and said: 'Noble King, this is ridiculous! The child here is not a warrior! Before he has ever seen the lady he will be required to fight three battles at least, beginning at the Perilous Place beside the Castle of Adventure.'

The Fair Unknown answered: 'Go to hell! I have never been frightened of any man! I bring from a great battle where many men were slain a little knowledge of fighting with spear and sword. He who flees through fear should be dragged through the streets and butchered. I shall take on this battle, as King Arthur requires, and let nobody down.'

King Arthur told the maiden in no uncertain terms: 'You shall have no other knight, by God who died for me! If you do not like him, go somewhere else!'

The maiden was so angry at this that she sat and sulked at a table, eating and drinking nothing, despite the fine company around her. At last the tables were cleared.

Then King Arthur called to him four of his best knights, to arm the Fair Unknown.

'With Christ's help,' he said, 'he will find strength and honour and be a good champion to the Lady of Segontium, and uphold her rights.'

These knights were happy to respond to their king's command: Sir Gawain, Sir Perceval, Sir Yvain and Sir Gawain's own brother Sir Agravain, as the French tale tells us. They cast on him a silk shirt, then a white tunic and finally a bright coat of chain mail with very small, strong links.

Sir Gawain, his own father, hung a shield about his neck; a shield whose emblem was a griffin. Lancelot brought him a spear that would serve him well in combat, and a keen sword. Sir Yvain brought him a horse that was eager and accomplished in battle, and Sir Perceval set upon his head a fine steel helmet.

The knight sprang onto his new horse and rode to King Arthur. 'My noble lord,' he said, 'give me your blessing without delay, for I wish to depart immediately.'

King Arthur raised his hand and gave him his blessing, as a noble sovereign should. 'God grant you success,' he said. 'May you free the lady from her prison, and Godspeed!'

**T**he maiden mounted her pony, the dwarf rode by her side, and for three days they gave the young knight nothing but grief and abuse.

'Useless oaf!' she would cry. 'Wretch!' Then on the third day: 'Even if you were five times as strong as you are,' she chided, 'you would soon face the same humiliation. The pass ahead is occupied by a knight who fights all comers; his name is Sir William Selebranche and he is such a fine warrior that no man has ever conquered him. All who ride against him receive a spear through the groin, or the heart!'

'Is he that good?' retorted the Fair Unknown.

When he caught sight of them approaching, Sir William Selebranche rode from the Perilous Place and said: 'Welcome my fair brother! Whoever rides here, by day or by night, must fight with me or forfeit all his arms.'

'If I must,' replied the Fair Unknown, 'then take your horse and we will see how firmly you sit in your saddle.'

Without any pause, each rode to give himself some room to turn, then galloped towards the other. The Fair Unknown hurt Sir William in the ribs, lurching him so violently in his saddle that his stirrups broke and he fell backwards over his horse's backside and onto the ground.

'By my faith!' he cried. 'Nobody has ever done that to me before! Since my horse is gone and you call yourself a knight, fight with me on foot.'

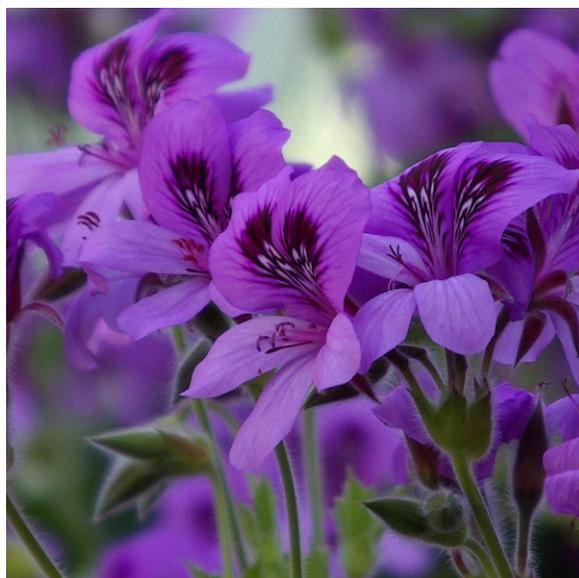
They sprung against each other with their swords swinging, blows clanging against steel and sparks flying from helmets. The Fair Unknown made a swing for Sir William's head that tore the protection away from his helmet and shaved him to the bone. Sir William launched himself into a desperate counterattack and broke his sword into two pieces against the other knight's armour.

'Mercy!' he cried. 'For the love of Mary, let me live! I have no weapon!'

'Only if you make me a promise before we part,' answered the Fair Unknown. 'You will swear upon my sword, on your bended knees, that you will go to King Arthur and say: "Lord of renown, I deliver myself as prisoner, overcome by the knight who sent me here, known to you as the Fair Unknown."'

Sir William went down on his knees and did as he had been asked.

They all departed. Sir William took the shortest route to King Arthur's hall. And by chance, before nightfall he met with three knights, his sister's sons, who were



not at all pleased to see him in such a state. ‘Uncle William!’ they cried. ‘Who has cut your face so badly and why are you walking so dejectedly in the opposite direction to the one you should be taking?’

‘There is no other course to take,’ he replied. ‘I have been defeated by a brave knight called the Fair Unknown, who rides with a well-dressed dwarf as his squire, and I have sworn upon his sword to go directly to King Arthur’s court, resting neither by day nor by night until I have yielded to him as a prisoner and vowed never to take arms against any of his knights ever again; all this have I sworn.’

Then said the three knights: ‘You will be well avenged, uncle, this we swear!’

Thinking himself to be in uninhabited terrain, the Fair Unknown, along with Elaine and her dwarf, rode from pass to valley, from valley to ridge, and when darkness descended he found the fair young damsel ready to spend the night in his company.

‘Forgive me,’ she encouraged, ‘for saying such wicked things about you. Let me make it up to you in some little way.’ The Fair Unknown forgave her, and very little sleep was had by them that night.



In the morning, they made their way towards Segontium. The dwarf, the damsel’s squire, served them both. Soon they came upon three knights, all in bright armour riding out of Carbantoritum, armed to the teeth: the nephews of Sir William Selebranche.

The eldest nephew lowered his lance, but to no advantage because his thighbone snapped in two as the spear of the Fair Unknown struck him. Blows rained thick and fast, grim strokes from all sides. The middle brother tried to wrestle the Fair Unknown to the ground, but broke his left arm in the attempt. The youngest brother saw that he was now forced to sustain the combat alone and so yielded up his spear and shield.

‘No!’ cried the Fair Unknown. ‘You shall not escape so lightly, by God! You and your two brothers shall here and now swear to me that you will take yourselves immediately to King Arthur’s court and say: “Lord of renown, a knight has sent us here as your prisoners; we bequeath to you our castles and our towns, and give ourselves into your hands, to do whatever you desire with us.” Unless you do this, I shall kill you all.’

The brothers swore to go to King Arthur’s court and make their oaths. The Fair Unknown then departed with the maiden.

For three days they rode onwards with light hearts, this Fair Unknown, the damsel Elaine and her dwarf. And ever westwards they rode, through dark and ancient forests, towards Segontium.

A makeshift bower of branches and leaves gave them shelter for one night, keeping them dry while the dwarf remained outside to keep a watchful eye open, so that no thief should take their horses. But fear gripped him; the smell of fire, the sounds of violence.

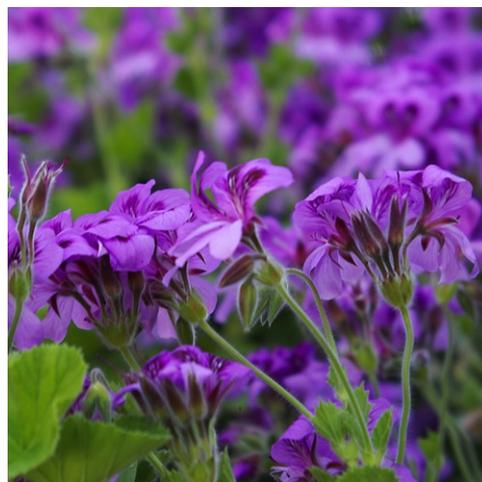
‘Arise, young knight!’ he whispered. ‘Get on your horse and be on your guard.’

The Fair Unknown leapt onto his horse, took his shield and lance in his hands and rode towards the fire. And when he got near, he saw two giants. One of them held a maiden to him and the other was turning a wild boar about on a spit.

'Help!' cried the damsel. 'Perish the day that I should have to sit with two fiends like these! Help me Mary, for the love of your sweet son Jesus, don't abandon me!'

The Fair Unknown took up his lance and galloped towards the black giant, piercing him through a lung. The point went on into his heart. The maiden leapt up and thanked heaven's queen for sending such prompt relief!

Elaine arrived, and she and the dwarf took the damsel by the hand and led her away into the forest. The red giant struck out with the spit like a madman. His blows were so fierce that the young knight's horse fell dead to the ground. The Fair Unknown leapt out of his saddle like the spark out of a coal and gave the giant a stroke of his sword that cut his arm in two. The giant fell to the ground and the Fair Unknown cut off his head.



Giving the same treatment to the giant he had first impaled, he took the two heads to the damsel for whom he had fought. She was very happy and excited.

'Gentle damsel,' he said, 'tell me your name and where you were born.'

'My father lives close by,' she replied. 'He is Earl Antore, an old and distinguished knight who was once a mighty warrior. Because of me, the giants have had our castle under siege for a long time. Yesterday, they sprang out of a cave and took me to their cooking fire. They would have killed me had not God, who made this world, sent you to save me.'

Without any more ado, the Fair Unknown selected a fresh horse, they mounted their horses and rode off together. He told the Earl how he had saved his daughter, and the two heads were sent to King Arthur, and made a big impression at court. The reputation of the Fair Unknown rose by leaps and bounds.

The Earl gave him some fine clothes, bright armour, a shield and a noble warhorse, and quickly proffered his daughter's hand in marriage to this young knight, along with fifteen castles and their lands, to hold in perpetuity. But the Fair Unknown declined the generous offer. 'By the love of sweet Jesus,' he said, 'I have no plans to marry just yet.'

Dressed in his new arms and seated upon his new horse, the Fair Unknown rode with Elaine and her dwarf towards the city of Carlisle. And there they saw an area of parkland in which stood a castle that seemed fit to be in royal hands. It was the most magnificent stone castle that any of them had ever seen, with battlements all around.

'This would be a fine castle to capture,' observed the Fair Unknown, ambitiously. The damsel laughed. 'It belongs to the best knight in these parts,' she cautioned, 'and whoever fights with him is invariably made to bend his neck to the sword. For the sake of his lady, who is very beautiful, he has made it known that if any man can bring into his presence a more attractive woman, that man will win a white falcon as his reward. But if the maiden turns out to be not so attractive after all, the man must fight with this lord, whose name is Sir Gyffroun; and if he loses, his head will be displayed for all to see on the end of a spear. And if you don't believe me, look for yourself at the battlements over there. Can you see all the heads on poles, some alone and some in pairs, all around the castle?'

'By Christ!' exclaimed the dwarf.

They spent the night in the town at the foot of the castle. Next morning, the Fair Unknown rose early and armed himself in Earl Antore's armour. Then he mounted his horse and rode towards the proud

palace.

Sir Gyffroun arose early, as usual, and when he saw a knight galloping towards him like a prince, he cried: 'Do you come with good intent or with bad?'

'I have an unquenchable thirst to challenge you,' replied the Fair Unknown. 'For you seem to have some strange idea that no woman can come even halfway to matching your lady for beauty, yet I know just such a girl in the town. Therefore I shall take your white falcon rightfully to King Arthur.'

'Gentle knight,' replied Sir Gyffroun, 'how shall we decide which of us is telling the truth?'

'Set them both in the marketplace,' replied the Fair Unknown, 'in the centre of Carlisle, and let every man see them and decide for himself. If my damsel is less attractive than yours, I shall fight you for the white falcon.'

'I agree to these terms,' cried Gyffroun.



The Fair Unknown rode back to his lodgings and asked the damsel Elaine to dress herself in her finest frock. 'By heaven's queen!' he exclaimed, 'Gyffroun's damsel will be down from the castle in a moment! If you cannot show everyone that you are the prettiest girl around, I must fight with him to win the white falcon.'

The damsel Elaine quickly put on a fine robe and a velvet mantle trimmed with grey fur. Then the Fair Unknown set her upon an attractive pony and the three of them rode off. Faces turned admiringly as they passed.'

She rode into the marketplace and waited there. Sir Gyffroun approached with two squires, carrying a red shield with a gold border and three silver owls; and all his horse's trappings were in the same matching colours. One squire carried his lances and the other bore the white falcon.

Behind him rode a proud lady clothed in purple. Folk had come from far and wide that morning just to catch a glimpse. They led her into the marketplace so that all could see her. Then everyone, young and old, were of one voice:

'Gyffroun's lady is as beautiful as a rose in a rose garden,' they all said. 'Without any doubt. And Elaine the messenger seems but a spray of lavender in comparison!'

'Sir Fair Unknown!' cried Sir Gyffroun 'You have lost the hawk, I think!'

What more needs to be said? They rode into a field and galloped towards each other with lances lowered. Timber broke, spears splintered and the ensuing blows came like thunder from the sky; heralds sounded trumpets and shouted out the progress of the fight for those who could not see for themselves.

The knights rode towards each other once more, with great ferocity. Sir Gyffroun struck the Fair Unknown a massive blow on the shield, but the young knight held firm in his saddle and with the point of his own spear cast Sir Gyffroun and his steed down heavily onto the ground. The crack that everybody heard was the sound of the knight's back breaking.

Then all who were there said that the Fair Unknown had won the white falcon. They brought the bird to the young knight and everybody accompanied him into the town. Sir Gyffroun was taken on his shield up into the castle, with great lamentation. The gyrfalcon was put in the custody of a knight and taken to King Arthur, along with a message describing the circumstances under which the hawk had

been won.

When King Arthur received the communication and had it read out, he exclaimed: 'The Fair Unknown is invincible! This is the fourth time now that he sends me the spoils of victory!' and he sent a hundred pounds worth of gold florins out to Carlisle. The Fair Unknown entertained the local lords and nobles for a month, then he and the damsel Elaine took their leave and continued their journey towards Segontium.

**E**ver westwards, they journeyed.

As they rode over a hill one day they heard the sound of horns blowing in the forest below and saw huntsmen and hounds of all descriptions in the wooded valley beneath them. And as they rode on, conversing, a greyhound came running across their path; and it was the most beautiful animal they had ever seen. Its coat was multicoloured, with patches of red, yellow, pink and blue, like a garden on Midsummer's Eve.

'I have never seen a jewel as beautiful as this greyhound,' said the damsel. 'Wouldn't it be lovely to own it?'

The Fair Unknown caught the animal and gave it to her, and not long afterwards they saw a deer running through the forest, chased by two greyhounds just like the one that Elaine was now leading. It was truly an enchanted forest.

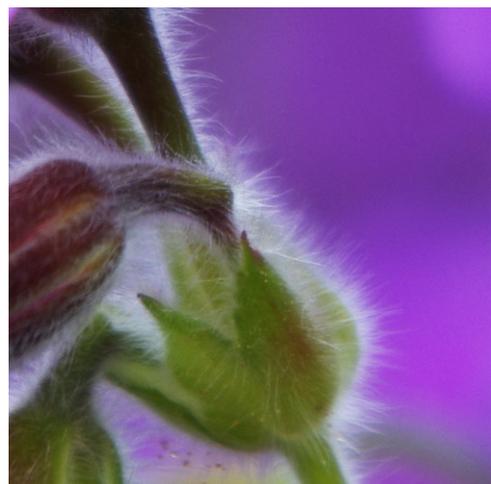
**O**ne morning in June, when the day is long and the birds sing merrily, a great city came into view before them, beside a river; there were castles and a palace, and many roads and bridges leading in through the city wall. The Fair Unknown asked its name and the damsel answered: 'Sir, it is called the Isle of Gold, and it is not a peaceful city. For a noble and beautiful lady is struggling to hold onto her lands. A giant called Maugys is hereabouts and nobody can match him for strength. Whoever crosses into the city must lay down his weapons and kneel before this giant. He is thirty feet high and has the strength of five knights. You would be no match for him at all; he is truly a nasty piece of work. His head is the size of a beehive, his eyebrows are like sow's bristles and his fists can deal a dreadful blow.'

'Noble maiden,' replied our young knight. 'I have seen the wind blow great oaks to the ground and leave the smaller trees standing.'

The three of them rode towards the city and caught sight of the giant on one of the bridges. His arms and the trappings of his horse were all jet black, he held a black shield with a trinity of idols picked out in gold, and carried a huge lance.

'I say, you fellow in white!' cried the giant as they approached. 'Tell me who you are. If you value your health I advise you to turn back.'

'I am a knight of King Arthur's and I have made a vow never to turn back,' replied the Fair Unknown.



They readied their horses and charged towards one another. Lords and ladies leaned out of windows and towers and prayed that the knight might defeat this giant. Their shields broke thunderously as they met, pieces flew everywhere, and then they fought on foot like two mighty warriors; no man can describe the blows they gave, such was their hatred of one another. From early morning to late evening they fought, and the Fair Unknown developed such a thirst that at last he cried out: 'Maugys! Listen!

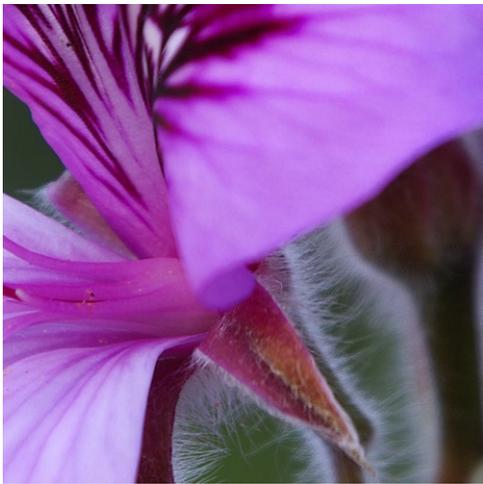
If you let me go for a drink I will grant you any request you may care to name. It will bring you no honour if I die of thirst fighting you!’

Maugys had to agree, and he let him go to the river; but as the Fair Unknown lay on the bank drinking water from his helmet, the giant gave him a stroke that knocked him into the creek. The Fair Unknown dragged himself from the mud, his armour out of place, dirty and heavy with the water pouring from it.

‘By Saint Michael, now I am as light as you!’ he cried. ‘Did you think I was unchristened? I shall reward you well for this baptism, you friend of fiends, by the grace of God Almighty!’

They began to fight anew, each dealing strong blows, and many a lady in the city wrung her hands in concern, for Maugys had by now completely shattered the young knight’s shield. The Fair Unknown ran to where the giant’s shield had fallen earlier and picked it up.

They fought beside the river until it was nearly dark, when a blow from the young knight struck the giant on the shoulder, cut through steel plate and chain mail, flesh and bone, and the giant’s arm fell to the ground, followed shortly by the giant himself.



As he lay there, the young knight cut off his head.

Grasping the giant’s head, he carried it into the city. A lady received him graciously. Her name was Lady Amour. She thanked him for delivering her from the vile giant and, leading him to a chamber, she undressed him and gave him some clean, dry clothes to put on. And then she offered him her body, along with the lordship of the city.

The Fair Unknown quickly accepted both offers and returned her affections, for she was very attractive. But she brought nothing but treachery and harm to him. Would that she had remained a virgin! The Fair Unknown stayed in that city for twelve months, giving not a second thought to the damsel Elaine nor to his promise to deliver the Lady of Segontium from her anguish. For this lady knew more wiles than five others put together and with lies, deceptions and sweet music she made him see a fantasy, made him think that he was in Paradise, may the devil take her!

One day he met the damsel Elaine in the castle tower and she said: ‘Knight, you have proved false in your word to King Arthur. For the love of a woman who can do much in the way of miracles, you have found dishonour. My lady of Segontium languishes in her prison with little hope of release from you!’

When the Fair Unknown heard her say this, he thought his heart would break for sorrow and shame, and from a secluded doorway in the city wall he made his escape, and rode forth with his shield and armour, taking the lady’s steward as his squire; Girflet was his name.

They rode as fast as they could, pursuing their journey on bay steeds until, on the third day, they came to a lovely city.

It was Segontium.

Within the city stood a magnificent cathedral, protected by many castles and buildings of marvellous appearance. But the Fair Unknown soon found more wonder in what he saw men doing in that town. The filth and sewage that is usually thrown out of a city, they were gathering in! He quickly asked: ‘Tell me, maid Elaine, what is going on? They are gathering in all the sewage and offal and rotten garbage that is usually cast out. Why are they doing this? Are they stupid?’

'I will tell you,' said Elaine. 'No knight, however desperate he is, can ever get any hospitality here because of the steward, Sir Lambard, the constable of the castle, no matter how much gold he offers. Go and ride up to the east gate and ask for shelter for the night, and you will see that you will have to fight for it! And if he overcomes you, his horns will blow and his trumpets will ring out and all the youths and young women of the castle will throw that filth all over you. And wherever you go, to your life's end, you will be recognised as a coward. And thus will the honour of King Arthur be lessened.'



'That would be a nasty thing to happen to any knight,' said the Fair Unknown. 'I will do my best to honour King Arthur and rid the Lady of Segontium of this rubbish. Girflot, make yourself ready, bring five lances and come along with me.'

They rode off, and quickly came to the castle gate. The gatekeeper let them both in and asked: 'Who is your lord?'

'King Arthur!' replied the Fair Unknown. 'The mightiest lord of all; a well of courtesy, the flower of chivalry, and the enemy of all villains like you!'

The gatekeeper ran off to convey this news to his lord.

'I speak the truth,' he insisted when he found him. 'Two knights of the Round Table have arrived. They are clad in red armour with three gold lions on their shields.'

His lord was delighted. 'I shall joust with them!' he cried, and commanded that the knights be taken into a field outside the castle gate. The man raced off like a greyhound after a hare, eager to convey these instructions.

'Errant knights,' he cried as he returned, 'let nothing hinder you, but make sure your shields are strong and your girths correctly adjusted, and ride into that field over there. My lord, with his own spear and shield, would like to put your skills to the test.'

That doughty steward, Sir Lambard, armed to the teeth, stalked like a leopard into the field where the two knights were waiting for him. He set his shield into position, and only just in time, for the Fair Unknown was already bearing down upon him with his lance to the fore. Each struck the other on the shield. Pieces of wood and leather flew everywhere.

'This young knight is keen,' observed young and old, with encouragement.

Sir Lambard rode off the course in a rage and cursed. 'Bring me another lance!' he shouted, angrily. 'If King Arthur's knight knows his craft, he will have to show it now.'

They galloped together again and each aimed a blow at the other's shield. Sir Lambard's lance broke once more, and the Fair Unknown sent his blow so swiftly that it knocked Sir Lambard clean out of his saddle.

Sir Lambard was ashamed. 'Shall we continue?' asked the young knight.

'No!' came the reply. 'Never before have I encountered such a knight as you. I feel in my heart that you must be of Sir Gawain's kin. If you will fight for my lady, my heart is yours in faith and, indeed, in love.'

'Certainly I will fight for your lady!' replied the Fair Unknown. 'Why else do you think I am here!'

‘Then welcome!’ cried Sir Lambard.

The damsel Elaine was brought to Sir Lambard, she and the dwarf, and they described all the wonderful deeds and adventures that this young knight of the Round Table had already accomplished on the way to Segontium. Then in good spirits, laughing and joking, they went to eat. Sir Lambard and the young knight spoke as though they were close friends, of adventures that had once taken place.’

‘Sir constable,’ said the Fair Unknown. ‘Who is this knight who holds the Lady of Segontium a prisoner?’



‘By Saint John!’ replied Lambard, ‘it is no knight who holds her but two clergymen; these are the false miscreants who have done this deed and are her foes. Churchmen. Ministers of the black arts. Believers in magic and miracles. The one brother is called Iraine and the other Mabon.

‘Iraine and Mabon have constructed a remarkable palace that no man of chivalry can find a way of getting into; a cathedral, constructed out of parables supported by falsehoods, and this makes it so impregnable that the Lady of Segontium herself is held prisoner within it. Often we hear her cry; but we cannot see her for all the stonework, so we cannot help her. These brothers do her every sort of villainy. They torture her with tedium night and day. And they have sworn binding oaths to

bring her to her death, unless she concedes everything to Mabon.

‘This noble lady is heir to all this fine country. But she will not defend herself and therefore we are in despair. They will surely destroy her.’

‘I shall release this lady as my own!’ cried the Fair Unknown.

There was no more to say. Everyone turned to their meal, with a good heart. Many barons and city burghers had come into the hall to listen to the proceedings and they found Lambard and this young knight of the Round Table in fellowship together, speaking of perilous deeds.

They took their rest as it suited them in the castle that night, and in the morning the Fair Unknown armed himself; he was fresh and eager to fight. Lambard led him to where the castle gates lay open and waiting; but neither he nor anyone else dared take the young knight any further. They turned and left him there; all except Girflet. The Fair Unknown threatened dire consequences if they should delay any more.

Reaching the cathedral alone, they called up a prayer to Jesus, to announce their arrival.

Then the young knight rode into the cathedral on his horse. When he reached the entrance to the nave, he got out of his saddle.

A service was underway at the far end of the vast space; he could hear the music being played, the sound of harps and lutes and the noise of a magnificent organ. In the middle of the floor nearby was a great spread of candles burning brightly. He led his horse past them.

There were many nooks, crannies and side chapels to be seen between the columns, and there were choristers in cassocks, singing to the playing of the organ. The music was glorious.

Beside each chorister was a burning candle.

The knight penetrated more deeply still, past columns and mighty pillars of crystal and jasper decorated with enamel, as he tried to determine with whom he should fight. He passed doors of polished

metal. The windows were of stained glass and the whole space was filled with images.

He sat down on the high altar and at once the music fell silent, the choristers quietly rose, put out their candles, and went away. Suddenly, the doors and windows beat with a noise of thunder and the stone from the walls began to crumble, dislodge and fall down. The young knight was astonished. The altar beneath him began to shake and as he sat, the arched roof started to crack and crumble as though it was about to break apart. The Fair Unknown sat dismayed, thinking that he had been led into a trap, when suddenly he heard the sound of horses. Then his spirits rose and he said to himself: 'Now I shall have some fun!'

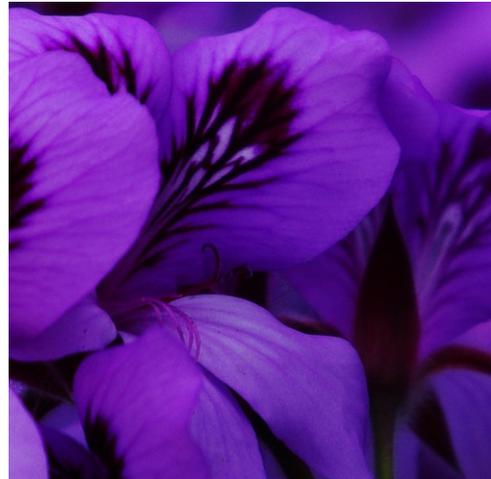
He looked out onto the field and saw two men in purple, their armour and harness and trappings were all in purple, with gold ornaments. One rode into the cathedral and cried: 'Sir errant-knight! There is no choice for you now but to fight with us! And you will need to be very skilful indeed to win that precious lady.'

'I am ready and eager,' cried the Fair Unknown, and he leapt into his saddle, took a lance in his hand and swiftly rode to where he could unleash the full power of his talent against his foes.

Mabon and he came together like lightning, each striking a blow on the other's shield; but Mabon's lance shattered into tiny fragments as the Fair Unknown bore him, saddle and all, over his horse's backside and down onto the ground. Mabon lay as though half dead. But then came Iraine in helmet, chain mail and breastplate, fresh for the fight and eager to bring the young knight of the Round Table to grief.

The Fair Unknown saw him coming, and both splintered their lances as they clashed together; and then they set upon each other with swords, exchanging grim strokes, each intent upon impressing the justice of his cause upon the other.

As they fought, the cunning Mabon got to his feet. But the Fair Unknown slashed across Iraine's thigh with his sword, cutting through armour and flesh right down to the bone. The man fell from his horse.



The Fair Unknown dismounted from his own injured steed and freshly engaged Mabon, who, being a blackguard, managed to contrive to break the young knight's sword. The Fair Unknown ran quickly to where Iraine lay injured and grabbed his sword; it was double-edged, and he ran back to engage Mabon once more. There were few words of love exchanged between them!

Mabon would not let up, but at last the Fair Unknown sliced through his shield with the sword he had taken from the injured Iraine; and to tell the tale correctly, he took off Mabon's left arm with that stroke. Then cried Mabon: 'Stop, gentle knight! Stop! Your blows are too much! I yield to you!'

'By all that I have gained so far,' cried the Fair Unknown, 'not for all the world! You had better carry on fighting, for one of us is going to lose his head.'

Mabon and the Fair Unknown hewed at each other afresh, but the knight of the Round Table was the stronger now and he clove Mabon's helmet in two, spilling his brains across the field.

With Mabon dead, the Fair Unknown ran to where he had left Iraine, intent on killing him also. I tell you truly, he was not tired of fighting! But when he arrived, Iraine was nowhere to be seen. The Fair Unknown searched everywhere, and when it was clear that he had vanished, the young knight felt not only cheated but apprehensive as well.

'I shall pay dearly for this,' he thought. 'Iraine will torment me with chants and curses.' And he sat dejectedly in the cathedral, bereft of all happiness, not knowing what to do.

And as he sat, a window appeared magically in a stone wall. The young knight's heart filled with wonder and awe as he watched a snake emerging, a snake with a woman's face.

'I am not old, but very young,' she said, enigmatically.

Her body, he could see now, had wings, and everything about her shone like enamel, or gold. She was huge, and the Fair Unknown broke into a cold sweat as she emerged from the stone. Transfixed by the sight of her, his heart pounded inside his chest as though it would burst. She moved towards him, and before he knew it, she had coiled herself around his body and was kissing him intimately on the mouth.

With this show of affection, her tail and wings fell away and before him stood such a beautiful woman that he had never seen such beauty in his entire life before. She was completely naked and the Fair Unknown found himself a little embarrassed.

'Gentle knight,' she said. 'God has answered your prayers and granted that you should kill my foes! You have slain two churchmen who did the work of the devil. By the power of their false arguments, untrue creeds and evil dogma, they have done a great deal of harm. Through enchantment, they turned me into a snake to live in woe, until I should kiss Sir Gawain, that doughty knight, or one of his kin.'

'Sir, for saving my life, you shall have fifty castles and myself as your wife, if it is King Arthur's will that this be so.'

The Fair Unknown was overjoyed and leapt onto his horse. He still feared Iraine, however, for he knew that he was not dead and could harm him with the words that came from his mouth.

The Fair Unknown rode to the castle gates where all the people were assembled; and when they saw him they began to shout and cheer. The young knight of the Round Table told Lambard and all the other bold knights what had happened, how he had killed Mabon and wounded Iraine, and how their beautiful lady, the Lady of Segontium, had been turned into a dragon through their chants and liturgies, and how the kiss of a true knight of King Arthur had restored her once more into a beautiful woman.



When the Fair Unknown had told all this to the steward, told him everything, Sir Lambard quickly sent his lady a robe of purple trimmed with grey fur. These were carried to her by a lady who could be relied upon to be discrete. And when she was ready, the Lady of Segontium made her way to her chambers, accompanied by many knights.

All the people of Segontium in fact, brought their lady home, and escorted her through the streets, and set a crown of gold and precious stones upon her head. Then all the high-ranking knights swore allegiance and fealty anew, as was proper. And each nobleman gave her many gifts, of value according to his status. And she and the Fair Unknown remained there for seven days, with Sir Lambard, then they made their

way with great honour, joy, and lightness of heart, to the court of King Arthur.

The king and all his knights of the Round Table heartily thanked God that the Fair Unknown had achieved such a prize, and, with no less enthusiasm, the king gave that gentle lady to be his wife.

And the Fair Unknown, and his new wife, lived in joy and happiness for many years. Now may Jesus Christ our saviour and his mother, that sweet flower, grant us a good end.

Amen.

Here ends the tale of the Fair Unknown.