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*The Lais of  
Marie de France*

TRANSLATED  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
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pages  
43-55

Penguin Books

## GUIGEMAR

Whoever has good material for a story is grieved if the tale is not well told. Hear, my lords, the words of Marie, who, when she has the opportunity, does not squander her talents. Those who gain a good reputation should be commended, but when there exists in a country a man or woman of great renown, people who are envious of their abilities frequently speak insultingly of them in order to damage this reputation. Thus they start acting like a vicious, cowardly, treacherous dog which will bite others out of malice. But just because spiteful tittle-tattlers attempt to find fault with me I do not intend to give up. They have a right to make slanderous remarks.

I shall relate briefly to you stories which I know to be true and from which the Bretons have composed their lays. After these opening words I shall recount to you, just as it has been set down in writing, an adventure which happened in Brittany long ago.  
[1-26]

At that time Hoilas ruled the land, which was as often at war as at peace. The king had a baron who was lord of Liun. His name was Oridial and he enjoyed the confidence of his lord. He was a brave and valiant knight and his wife had borne him two children, a son and a beautiful daughter. The girl's name was Noguent and the boy was called Guigemar. There was no more handsome young man in the kingdom. His mother cherished him greatly and his father loved him dearly. As soon as he could bear to part with the boy, his father placed him in the service of another king. The young man was wise, brave and loved by everyone. When the time came that he had reached the right age and maturity of mind, the king dubbed him nobly and gave him whatever armour he desired. He left the court, dispensing lavish gifts before he departed, and went off to Flanders, where one could always find war and strife, in search of renown. At that time no one could find

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his equal as a knight, be it in Lorraine, Burgundy, Anjou or Gascony. [27-56] But Nature had done him such a grievous wrong that he never displayed the slightest interest in love. There was no lady or maiden on earth, however noble or beautiful, who would not have been happy to accept him as her lover, if he had sought her love. Women frequently made advances to him, but he was indifferent to them. He showed no visible interest in love and was thus considered a lost cause by stranger and friend alike.

At the height of his fame this noble knight returned to his homeland to see his father and his lord, his loving mother and his sister, who had all longed for his return. He had spent a month with them, I think, when the fancy took him to go hunting. That evening he summoned his knights, his hunters and his beaters, and in the morning went off into the forest, for hunting brought him great pleasure. They gathered in pursuit of a large stag and the hounds were unleashed. The hunters ran in front and the young man lingered behind. A servant carried his bow, his hunting-knife and his quiver. (If the opportunity arose, he wished to be ready to shoot an arrow, before the animal had stirred.) [57-88] In the heart of a large bush he saw a hind with its fawn; the beast was completely white with the antlers of a stag on its head. When the dog barked, it darted forth and Guigemar stretched his bow, fired his arrow and struck the animal in its forehead. Immediately the hind fell to the ground, but the arrow rebounded, hitting Guigemar in the thigh and going right through into the horse's flesh. He was forced to dismount and fell back on the thick grass beside the hind he had struck. The animal, wounded and in great pain, lamented in these words: 'Alas! I am mortally wounded. Vassal, you who have wounded me, let this be your fate. May you never find a cure, nor may any herb, root, doctor or potion ever heal the wound you have in your thigh until you are cured by a woman who will suffer for your love more pain and anguish than any other woman has ever known, and you will suffer likewise for her, so much so that all those who are in love, who have known love or are yet to experience it, will marvel at it. Be gone from here and leave me in peace.' [89-122]

Guigemar was seriously wounded and dismayed by what he had heard. He wondered where he could go to find a cure for his wound, for he did not intend to allow himself to die. He knew full

well, and said to himself, that he had never seen any woman whom he could love or who could cure him of his suffering. He called to his squire: 'My friend, ride quickly and bring my companions back, for I should like to speak with them.' The young man rode off and Guigemar remained behind, lamenting his suffering. He bound his wound firmly and tightly with his shirt, then mounted his horse and departed. He was keen to get away, for he did not want any of his followers to come and hinder him, or attempt to detain him. A green path traversed the wood which led him out into an open space. There on the plain he saw a cliff and a mountain and from a stream which ran below a creek was formed. On it lay a harbour, in which there was a single ship whose sail Guigemar could see. The ship was fully prepared for departure, caulked inside and out in such a way that it was impossible to detect any joints. There was no peg or deck-rail which was not made of ebony. No gold on earth was worth more and the sail was made entirely of silk, very beautiful when unfurled. [123-60]

The knight was perturbed, as he had never heard say that ships could dock there. He rode forward, dismounted and in great pain climbed aboard expecting to find men in charge. But the ship was deserted and he saw no one. In the centre of the ship he discovered a bed whose posts and side-pieces were wrought after the fashion of Solomon, engraved with inlaid gold and made of cypress wood and white ivory. The quilt which lay upon it was of silk woven with gold. I could not set a price on the other bedclothes, but I can tell you this much about the pillow: no one who had lain his head on it would ever have white hair. The sable-skin coverlet was lined with Alexandrian silk, and on the prow of the ship stood two pure gold candelabra (even the less valuable of the two was worth a fortune) in which were lighted candles. [161-86] Guigemar marvelled at all this and in great pain from his wound reclined on the bed to rest. Then he rose intending to leave the ship, but he could not go back, as the ship was already on the high seas, speeding quickly away with him, the wind favourable and blowing gently. There was no question of his returning to land and he was grief-stricken, not knowing what to do. No wonder he was dismayed, for his wound was causing him great suffering. But he had to accept his fate and he prayed to God to take care of him, to bring him, if at all possible, to a safe harbour and protect him

from death. He lay down on the bed and slept, but by now the worst was over and before evening he would reach the place where he would be cured, below an ancient city, capital of its realm. [187-208]

The lord who ruled over the city was a very old man whose wife was a lady of high birth. She was noble, courtly, beautiful and wise, and he was exceedingly jealous, as befitted his nature, for all old men are jealous and hate to be cuckolded. Such is the perversity of age. He did not take lightly the task of guarding her. In a garden at the foot of the keep was an enclosure, with a thick, high wall made of green marble. There was only a single point of entry, guarded day and night. The sea enclosed it on the other side, so it was impossible to get in or out, except by boat, should the need arise in the castle. As a secure place for his wife, the lord had constructed within the enclosure a chamber of incomparable beauty, at the entrance of which stood a chapel. [209-32] The walls of the chamber were covered in paintings in which Venus, the goddess of love, was skilfully depicted together with the nature and obligations of love; how it should be observed with loyalty and good service. In the painting Venus was shown as casting into a blazing fire the book in which Ovid teaches the art of controlling love and as excommunicating all those who read this book or adopted its teachings. In this room the lady was imprisoned. To serve her the lord had provided her with a noble and intelligent maiden, who was his niece, his sister's daughter. The two loved each other dearly, and when the husband was away, the girl remained with her until his return. No one, man or woman, could have gained access to this spot, or escaped from this walled enclosure. An old priest with hoary-white hair guarded the key to the gate; he had lost his lower members, otherwise he would not have been trusted. He recited the divine service and served her at table. [233-60]

That very day, in the early afternoon, the lady had made her way into the garden. She had fallen asleep after her meal, and then gone with her maiden in search of recreation. They looked down towards the shore and saw the ship rising on the waves as it sailed into the harbour, but they could not see how it was being steered. The lady wanted to turn and run: no wonder she was afraid. Her face became quite flushed. But the maiden, who was

wise and of bolder disposition, comforted and reassured her. They hastened towards the ship, and taking off her coat, the girl boarded the beautiful vessel. She found there no living thing apart from the sleeping knight. Seeing how pale he was the girl assumed he was dead. She stopped and looked at him, then returned, called hastily to her lady and gave her a true account. She lamented the dead man she had seen and the lady replied: 'Let us go together, and, if he is dead, we shall bury him. Our priest will help us. But if I find him alive, he will speak to us.' They made their way without delay, the lady leading and the maiden following. [261-92] When she entered the ship, the lady paused before the bed; she looked at the knight and grieved deeply over his handsome body, which filled her with sorrow. She deplored the loss of this young life. Placing her hand on his chest, she discovered that it was warm and his heart sound, beating beneath his ribs. The knight who was sleeping awoke and saw her. Joyfully he greeted her, knowing full well that he had reached the shore. The lady, tearful and perturbed, responded to him politely and inquired how he came to be there, from what land he was, and whether he had been exiled through war. 'My lady,' he said, 'that is not the case. But if you wish me to tell you the truth, I shall do so and withhold nothing from you. I have come from Brittany and today I went hunting in a wood, where I shot a white hind. The arrow rebounded, giving me such a wound in the thigh that I think a cure is impossible. The hind lamented and spoke to me, cursing me and swearing that my only cure would be at the hands of a damsel. I do not know where she is to be found. But when I heard my fate I hurriedly left the wood, saw this ship in a harbour and foolishly got on board. The ship quickly sailed away with me in it. I do not know where I am or what this city is called. Fair lady, I beg you in God's name, please help me, for I do not know where to go, or how to steer the ship.' [293-336] She replied: 'My dear lord, I shall gladly help you: this city belongs to my husband, as does all the surrounding country. He is a rich man of high lineage, but he is very old and fearfully jealous. On my honour, he has imprisoned me in this enclosure. There is only a single entrance and an old priest guards the gate: may God grant that he be consumed by hell-fire! I am shut in here day and night, and not once would I dare leave without his permission or unless my lord asked for me. My bedchamber and

my chapel are here and this maiden is with me. If you wish to remain until you can travel more easily, we shall be pleased to shelter you and will serve you wholeheartedly.' When he heard these words, Guigemar thanked the lady politely and said he would stay with her. He raised himself up off the bed and they supported him with some difficulty. The lady took the young man to her chamber, where he was placed on the maiden's bed, behind a canopy which served as a curtain in the bedroom. [337-68] They brought water in golden basins, washed his wounded thigh, then removed the surrounding blood with a fine piece of white linen and bound it tightly. They treated him with loving care, and when their evening meal arrived the maiden retained sufficient for the knight's needs, so that he was well supplied with food and drink. But love had now pierced him to the quick and his heart was greatly disturbed. For the lady had wounded him so deeply that he had completely forgotten his homeland. He felt no pain from the wound in his thigh, yet he sighed in great anguish and asked the maiden serving him to let him sleep. As he had dismissed her, she returned to her mistress, who was, like Guigemar, affected by the ardour which had kindled within her heart. [369-92]

The knight remained alone, mournful and downcast. He did not yet realize the cause, but at least he knew that, if he were not cured by the lady, his death would be assured. 'Alas,' he said, 'what shall I do? I shall go and ask her to have mercy and pity on this forlorn wretch. If she refuses my request and is arrogant or harsh, then I must die of grief and languish forever from this ill.' Then he sighed, but soon a new thought struck him: he told himself that suffering was inevitable, for there was no alternative. He spent a sleepless night, sighing in anguish. In his mind he constantly recalled her speech, her appearance, her sparkling eyes and beautiful mouth: the pain she caused reached deep into his heart. In a whisper he begged her for mercy and almost called her his beloved. If he had only known her feelings and how love was afflicting her, he would, I think, have been happy. A little comfort would have gone some way towards assuaging the suffering which had drained his face of colour. But if he was feeling anguish for love of her, the lady had no reason to feel superior. Next morning, before daybreak, she rose, bewailing the fact that she had spent the night awake. Love, which was torturing her, was the cause.

The maiden, who was with her, could see from her appearance that she was in love with the knight who was lodging in her chamber for his cure. But the lady did not know whether or not he loved her. When she entered the chapel, the maiden went to the knight. [393-438]

She sat down by the bed and he addressed her in these words: 'My friend, where has my lady gone? Why did she rise so early?' Then he fell silent and sighed. The maiden replied: 'My lord, you are in love: mind you do not conceal the fact too long. Your love may well have found a true home. The man who wishes to love my lady must keep her constantly in his thoughts and, if you remain faithful to each other, the love between you will be right and proper. You are handsome and she is beautiful.' He replied to the damsel: 'I am inflamed with such love that, if I do not receive succour, I shall be in a sorry plight. Help me, my sweet friend. What shall I do with this love?' The maiden comforted him most tenderly, and assured him of her assistance and good offices, wherever possible: she was most courtly and noble. [439-64]

When the lady had heard mass, she returned, aware of her obligations. She wished to know what the knight was doing, if he was awake or asleep. The love for him which had entered her heart had not abated. The maiden summoned her to approach the knight. She would have ample time to explain her feelings to him, no matter what the consequences. He greeted her and she him. They were both suffering great distress, but he did not dare ask anything of her, as he was a stranger from a foreign land. He was afraid that, if he spoke to her of his emotions, she would hate him and send him away. But he who does not let his infirmity be known can scarcely expect to receive a cure. Love is an invisible wound within the body, and, since it has its source in nature, it is a long-lasting ill. For many it is the butt of jokes, as for those ignoble courtiers who philander around the world and then boast of their deeds. That is not love, but rather foolishness, wickedness and debauchery. A loyal partner, once discovered, should be served, loved and obeyed. [465-95]

Guigemar was very much in love and either had to receive relief or be forced to live a life of misery. Love emboldened him to reveal his feelings to her. 'My lady,' he said, 'I am dying because of you; my heart is giving me great pain. If you are not willing to cure me,

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then it must all end in my death. I am asking for your love. Fair one, do not refuse me.' When she heard his words, she replied fittingly, and said lightly: 'Friend, such a decision would be over-hasty: I am not accustomed to such requests.' 'My lady,' he replied, 'in God's name, have mercy on me! Do not be distressed if I say this: a woman who is always fickle likes to extend courtship in order to enhance her own esteem and so that the man will not realize that she has experienced the pleasure of love. But the well-intentioned lady, who is worthy and wise, should not be too harsh towards a man, if she finds him to her liking; she should rather love him and enjoy his love. Before anyone discovers or hears of their love, they will greatly profit from it. Fair lady, let us put an end to this discussion.' The lady recognized the truth of his words and granted him her love without delay. He kissed her and henceforth was at peace. They lay together and talked, kissing and embracing. May the final act, which others are accustomed to enjoy, give them pleasure. [496-534]

Guigemar was with her for a year and a half, I believe, and their life gave them great delight. But fortune, never unmindful of her duties, can soon turn her wheel. One man takes a fall, another rises; so it was in their case, for they were soon discovered.

One summer morning the lady lay next to the young man. She kissed his mouth and his face, then said: 'My fair, sweet friend, my heart tells me I am about to lose you: we are going to be discovered. If you die, I too wish to die; and if you manage to escape, you will find another love and I shall remain here, grief-stricken.' 'My lady,' he replied, 'do not say such things! May I have no peace or joy, if I ever turn to another woman. Do not be afraid.' 'Beloved, give me assurance of this. Hand me your shirt and I shall tie a knot in the tailpiece. I give you leave, wherever you may be, to love the woman who can undo the knot and untie it.' He gave it to her, made his pledge and she tied the knot in such a way that no woman could undo it, without the help of scissors or a knife. She gave him back the shirt and he took it on the understanding that she would make a similar pledge to him, by means of a belt which she would gird about her bare flesh and draw tightly around her loins. He encouraged her to love any man who could open the buckle without tearing or severing it. Then he kissed her and let the matter drop. [535-76]

That day they were perceived, discovered, found and seen by a

cunning chamberlain sent by her husband. He wished to speak to the lady, but could not gain access to the chamber. Seeing them through a window, he reported the matter to his lord. When the lord heard him, it gave him more pain than he had ever known. Summoning three trustworthy men, he went forthwith to the chamber, had the door broken down and discovered the knight, whereupon in great anger he ordered him to be killed. Guigemar stood up, quite unafraid. He seized a large fir-wood pole, used for hanging clothes, and waited for them, intending to make someone suffer: before any of his adversaries had got near him, he would have maimed them one and all. The lord looked at him intently, asked who he was, where he was from and how he had entered. Guigemar explained how he had arrived, how the lady had retained him, and all about the prophecy of the wounded hind, about the ship and his wound. Now he was entirely in the lord's power. The lord replied that he did not believe him, but that if things were as he stated and he could find the ship, he would then put him out to sea. If he survived, he would be sorry, and if he drowned, he would be delighted. When the lord had given this assurance, they went together to the harbour, where they found the ship and put him aboard. [577-619] The ship set sail, taking him back to his own country, and got under way without delay while the knight sighed and wept, lamenting the lady frequently and praying to Almighty God to let him die a quick death without ever reaching land, if he could not see again his beloved whom he desired more than his life. His grief was unabated until the ship arrived in the harbour where it had first been discovered, very close to his homeland. Guigemar disembarked as quickly as possible and recognized a young man whom he had raised and who was leading a charger for a knight he was following. Guigemar called to the youth, who looked round, saw his lord and dismounted. He offered him the horse, and they rode off together. All his friends were full of joy that he had been found. But although Guigemar was highly regarded in his land, he was constantly sad and downcast. They wanted him to take a wife, but he would not hear of the idea. Never would he take a wife, for love or money, unless she could undo his shirt without tearing it. The news travelled throughout Brittany and there was no lady or maiden who did not make the attempt, but they were never successful. [620-54]



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I must tell you about the lady whom Guigemar loved so much. On the advice of one of his barons her husband imprisoned her in a tower of dark-hued marble. She suffered during the day and at night it was worse. No man on earth could describe the great pain, agony, anguish and grief which the lady experienced in the tower, where she spent, I think, over two years. She knew no joy or pleasure and frequently mourned for her beloved: 'Guigemar, lord, how sad that I met you! I prefer to die a speedy death rather than suffer this misfortune too long. Beloved, if I could escape, I should drown myself just where you were put to sea!' Then she rose: distraught, she went to the door and found no key or bolt. Thus she had the chance to escape, and no one at all hindered her. She went to the harbour where she found the ship. It was attached to the rock where she intended to drown herself. Seeing it, she went aboard. But she had only one thing on her mind: it was there that her beloved must have drowned. Suddenly she could not remain upright. If she could have reached the side, she would have thrown herself overboard, so great was the anguish she was suffering. The ship set sail, carrying her quickly away, and reached port in Brittany, beneath a fine, strong castle. [655-90] The lord of the castle, whose name was Meriaduc, was waging war against a neighbour, and for that purpose he had risen early, intending to send his men forth to inflict losses on his enemy. Standing at a window, he saw the ship arrive. He went down some steps and summoned a chamberlain; they went quickly towards the ship, climbed the ladder and boarded it; there they found the lady who was as lovely as a fairy. Taking her by the mantle, the lord took her off to his castle, delighted by his discovery, as the lady was extremely beautiful. He knew full well that, whatever the reason for her being on the ship, she was of a noble lineage, and he conceived a love for her greater than for any other woman. He had a very beautiful, young sister in his chamber, to whom he entrusted the lady. She was well served and honoured, richly dressed and attired, but she was always sad and downcast. The lord often went to speak to her, for he loved her with all his heart. He begged her for her love, but she remained indifferent to his pleas. Instead she showed him the belt: she would love only the man who could undo the knot without tearing it. When he heard her, he replied angrily: 'There is also in this land a knight of very

great renown who refuses in similar fashion to take a wife because of a shirt with its right flap knotted. It cannot be untied, except by using scissors or a knife. I think it was you who tied that knot.' When she heard this, she sighed and almost fainted. He took her in his arms, cut the lacing of her tunic, and endeavoured to open the belt, but to no avail. Afterwards all the knights in the land were summoned to make the attempt. [691-742] nice!

Thus things remained for a long while until the occasion of a tournament which Meriaduc proclaimed against his enemy. He summoned knights and retained them, confident that Guigemar would come. He asked for Guigemar's presence as a friend and companion, promising him recompense and beseeching him not to fail him in his hour of need, but to come to his assistance. Guigemar arrived, richly attired, bringing with him more than a hundred knights. Meriaduc lodged him in his tower with great honour, then called for his sister to greet him, sending two knights with orders that she should adorn herself and come forward, bringing the lady whom he loved so much. She obeyed his commands, and richly attired, the two entered the hall hand in hand. The lady was sad and pale, and hearing Guigemar's name she lost her balance. If the sister had not held her, she would have fallen to the ground. The knight rose to greet them; he saw the lady and looked at her appearance and bearing. Stepping back a pace, he said: 'Is this my sweet friend, my hope, my heart, my life, my beautiful lady who loved me? Where has she come from? Who brought her here? But I have been indulging in very foolish thoughts. I know it is not she; women look very much alike.' My mind has been disturbed for nothing, but since she resembles the woman for whom my heart sighs and trembles I shall gladly speak to her.' [743-83] Then the knight went forward, kissed her and sat her down beside him; he spoke no other word than his request for her to be seated. Meriaduc looked at them, very unhappy at the way things appeared. He called laughingly to Guigemar: 'Lord, if you wish, this maiden will see if she can manage to undo your shirt.' Guigemar replied: 'I accept,' and he summoned a chamberlain who looked after the shirt, ordering it to be brought to him. It was given to the maiden, but she did not untie it. She recognized the knot easily, but her heart was too full of anguish; she would have been willing to try, if she could and if she dared. Meriaduc realized

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this and it grieved him. All he could do was to say: 'Lady, try to undo it.' When she heard the command, she took the flap of the shirt and, to the knight's astonishment, untied it easily. He recognized her, but nevertheless he was not completely convinced. He addressed her in these words: 'Beloved, sweet creature, tell me the truth: let me see your body and the belt with which I girded you.' He placed his hands on her hips and found the belt. [784-821] 'Beloved,' he said, 'how fortunate that I have discovered you like this! Who brought you here?' She related to him the grief, the great suffering and the dreariness of the prison in which she had been, and how things had turned out, how she escaped with the intention of drowning herself, but had found the ship, gone on board and arrived at this port; and how the knight had retained her and looked after her with great honour, but had constantly made advances to her. Now she was once more full of joy: 'Beloved, take your sweetheart away!' Guigemar rose. 'My lords,' he said, 'listen to me! I have discovered a friend whom I thought I had lost forever. I implore Meriaduc in his mercy to restore her to me. I shall become his vassal and serve him for two or three years with a hundred knights or more.' Then Meriaduc replied: 'Guigemar, I am not in sufficiently dire straits or so troubled by war that you should request this of me. I found her and I shall keep her and defend her against you.' [822-52]

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When Guigemar heard this, he quickly commanded his men to mount. He departed, issuing a challenge to Meriaduc. It grieved him very much to leave his beloved. He took with him every knight in the town who had come for the tournament. Each one pledged his support: they would accompany him wherever he went: the man who failed him now would be disgraced. That night they arrived at the castle of Meriaduc's opponent. The lord lodged them and was happy to have Guigemar and his assistance. He realized the war was over. Next day they rose early and everyone in the lodgings equipped himself, whereupon they made a noisy exit from the town with Guigemar out in front. They reached the castle and attacked it, but it was strong and they could not take it. Guigemar besieged the town and would not leave until it was captured. His friends and followers increased in number so much that he starved all those inside. He captured and destroyed the castle and killed the lord within.

With great joy he took away his beloved. Now his tribulations were over. [853-82]

The lay of *Guigemar*, which is performed on harp and rote,<sup>1</sup> was composed from the tale you have heard. The melody is pleasing to the ear. [883-6]