

THE ENCHANTER MERLIN

BOOK ONE: HOW MERLIN, BY LOVING, BECAME A GREAT ENCHANTER

PROLOGUE

I

And I too am searching for a man, a hero! Let him come, let him stand before me; I promise to march after him on the road of justice.

All that I ask is that he should be very real, and even a strong inclination toward the material would not be superfluous, so many people of our day being confused by ideal creatures. In attaching myself to a historic individual, I do not have to answer for his virtue or his vices.

Like the Florentine during the Black Death—and today the disease is no longer only afflicting the body but the immortal soul too—may I not also, in a circle of friends, in the shadow of an olive-tree, on the edge of a crystalline spring, my forehead circled by an oak-branch, my hands full of flowers, listen to hundreds of stories, until the burden of the burning day diminishes and night brings repose, if not forgetfulness, to my heart?¹

Blue birds the color of time, chimeras with silken wings, vagabond unicorns, who never sleep, who help a man to get through the sterile hours, either because you amuse the waiting and appease the dolor, or because you sow a torch of glow-worms beneath the footsteps of the man whose route is tenebrous, can you not find me a hero?

On the other hand, I can invoke only you, the wisest, the best-loved, the most accredited, the most powerful of the Muses, O Routine, who render all enterprises facile: I shall consult only you. Come, guide me, on foot along the beaten track, by the side of which grow the vulgar flowers easiest to pick. Take me away from the summits that give one vertigo; I have lived there for too long in mist and storms. Put a brake on me if I forget myself to the point of straying from the banal highway, followed by the human herd. Open their hearts and ears for me! They yield proudly to your slightest desires.

The one I was seeking is found. Yes he is, Reader, and you'll believe me if I swear to you that the choice has not been purely voluntary, but was imposed upon me by the hero himself. For you need to know that, since my early youth, the individual in question has never ceased to haunt my dreams, to obsess my wakefulness, as if he were depending on me to give him life for a second time. I repeat that he has been knocking relentlessly at my door, like a revenant to whom I have the power to return to the light of day; and in his plaints and moans, he begged me to recall him to the memory of forgetful earth, promising me that in return he would cause to pass before me, without overwhelming me, the slow cortege of evil days. He promised to diminish for me the cares of the present, if I would consent to reawaken for him the magic of the past in its glory.

I have obeyed.

His name, his parentage, his genealogy, whether it was noble or plebeian—that is what I ought to begin by telling you; I'm not unaware that that is the first rule. But a false shame retains me, for you are the great slave of words; I fear that, on the name alone, you might form a false idea of my enterprise, and go away without wanting to listen to me. On the other hand, when the sequence of events brings him on to the stage, the opportunity to argue will be gone; he will have become a *fait accompli*. You will accept him as such, with ordinary docility. That is what experience has taught me, although rhetoric denies it.

¹ "The Florentine" is Giovanni Boccaccio, author of the *Decameron*.

Now, without deliberation, help me to transport you from the very start to the threshold of the inferno, with which I assume you are familiar, and even into the heart of the abode of eternal dolor. Not that I belong to the satanic school—as you shall soon see—but because the truth commands me to set that first scene. History speaks; tradition commands; it is necessary to follow it.

I shall begin. Listen.

II

Have you ever seen a deliberative assembly divided into a host of parties, each of which is trying to defeat all the others? If you have witnessed that spectacle for a day, or a minute, you have not forgotten it. You know, then, that everyone sets a trap beneath everything he says. There, nothing is more perilous than a smile, because it is the messenger of fraud, and fraud drags death in its wake. Silence is also deceptive, but it is only momentary; it immediately gives way to immense sniggering, the echo of all the filthy, subterranean minds that moral darkness attracts as a funereal lantern attracts the swarm of night-flying moths.

If you have seen that spectacle, you can already picture the aspect of Hell at the moment this story begins. You can imagine the stupid bewilderment of the crowd, proud of being fooled majestically; the oratory precautions, gentle doves that are suddenly transformed into serpents; speeches in which every word stifles thought; intelligence no longer serving any other purpose than to hollow out, spiral after spiral, the ever-new creation of Falsehood.

Everyone was busy with that toil. Every mouth was giving birth to lies, and in the middle of an inextricable discussion, interrupted by the hissing of snakes, the Word of Hell was consummate. Every fraudulent word, as it emerged envenomed from a demon's mouth, evoked a demonic creature that rose up as if to an abysmal summons.

All the petty powers were avidly disputing the floor at every moment, forgetful that they had eternity before them; it seemed to them that if they missed, for a single second, the opportunity to make their strident voices resound, it would secure the empire of evil forever.

In that chaos of voices, only one voice was silent, and that was the most powerful; it was hidden there, like a boa constrictor beneath a hive of buzzing bees. Coiled up and mute, it had almost been forgotten. More than one yapping tongue, deafening itself, was beginning to scorn that taciturn king, when, with a prodigious leap, it launched itself from its lair; unfurling its coils in the vast confines of the abyss, it raised one of its heads above every group.

Silence abruptly fell, and this is what it said:

“Your discussions charm me, because they lead nowhere. You are the true kings of sophism. I listen delightedly to your speeches, which dry up thought in souls. Know that I would never have thought of interrupting you if necessity—the sole god that we recognize—had not demanded it of me. Thus far, you have counterfeited masterfully the creation on high. Beneath every heaven you have set an abyss, beneath every joy a dolor, and I congratulate you for it. But is the imitation complete? Have you demonstrated that Hell is as knowledgeable and as profound as Paradise? Have you copied the classical Heavens, without omitting anything that they contain? In sum, as the Heavens have unfurled, have you unfurled Hell?”

“Yes, certainly, we have done that,” replied the swarm of the subterranean worlds.

“My dear friends,” the king of Hell continued, “fatuity has blinded you. The most beautiful work of what they call Providence, you haven't even tried to imitate.”

“What is that work?” cried the accursed.

“What!” their leader replied. “You don't even suspect? The immaculate angel of the Annunciation has descended from Heaven to announce to the Virgin of Judea that Christ will be born of her womb. Have you attempted anything similar? You haven't even thought of it; your imitative minds haven't dared to risk that model. Believe me, you're degenerating.”

“What shall I do to prove that I am still worthy of you?” roared the ancient abyss.

“An easy thing, if one dares to attempt it. Nothing simpler: you need an infernal Christ, born of a virgin.”

All of them shouted at the same time, in a thousand different tones: “That’s true! Narrow minds that we are! Why didn’t we think of it? Yes, like Heaven, we need a Christ born of a virgin.”

Then the king of Hell went on: “Who among you will go to earth to play the role of the angel in regard to Mary?”

At this point a universal roar replied; an inextinguishable desire for love rose up from the very hearts of those who had never loved.

With that, it continued: “You put too much passion into my cause. Truly, you’re emotional. That bears too much resemblance to life. It’s good taste here not to acclaim so loudly. Lukewarm, insipid, evasive words—that’s what I prefer. One could say ‘infernal’ without ceasing to be polite. I’ll go myself.² In Hell, I alone am sufficiently advanced to counterfeit angelic power.”

III

In what era did this story take place? It’s impossible for me to reply to such a question. If you want a rigorous date, I can do no more than leave this page blank and abandon my narrative. However, I shall say, following the example of the ancients—what better authority is there?—that it was before the harvest. The ears of corn were still green; they gave off the odor of smut on the edge of the wood. I shall also say that the day was mild and temperate. It might have been a morning in the month of May, or perhaps June. A sparse warm rain had refreshed the stifling air of the meadows; it had almost dried up, except in the calices of the wild roses and the flesh leaves of the oak-trees. Only a few gilded clouds on the borders were carrying away, I know not where, in red tatters, some ancient belated and fugitive go—for all the pagan gods had not yet quit the earth. The cross was unsteady in the place where it was most firmly planted; the world, not knowing yet whether it belonged to Jupiter or Christ, adorned itself with its most beautiful radiance. Its breath resembled ambrosia, as if to say to ancient voluptuousness: “Don’t worry; whatever happens, I’ll remain faithful to you.”

A forest extends into the distance, from ravine to ravine, from mountain to mountain, where more than one city lies dormant beneath the moss. In the middle of the forest, on a vast lawn, on the bank of a torrent, what do you see? A monastery, doubtless the first to have been raised in this part of Gaul.

The wall is high, carpeted with ivy, higher than the hill that surrounds it on all sides. If you could climb to the top of the mountain, you would see at your feet the closed chapel, the open tomb, hollowed out in advance, the courtyard, the garden strewn with brambles and wild sorrel, a solitary stork walking along a path bordered with mallow.

What! Not a single human figure!

Is the monastery inhabited? The door has never been opened; no prayer has ever been heard therein, nor the sound of any bell; a saint has walled herself up in that holy place. She is the daughter of a king who was gripped by earthly ennui in her cradle. Her soft virginal breath purifies the world from afar. She has sworn never to have any husband than Jesus Christ. No oath was ever more sincere.

Today, a knight arrives, at the gallop of his black Saxon hack, a golden helmet on his head and a red cloak on his shoulders. He knocks on the monastery door.

“Open up,” he says. “I’m a wounded penitent; I bring news from Calvary, I’ve recently saluted Bethlehem and Nazareth. I shall perish, my sister, if you delay any longer. Remember the good Samaritan.” And he points to gaping wounds; he clutches a crucifix to his bosom.

The walled-up door is unsealed; the knight enters through the debris.

² Quinet adds a note at this point to say that this assertion is “in the tradition”—and, indeed, there is a very similar passage in Hersart de la Villemarqué’s own romance in the 1862 *Myrdhinn*, likewise derived from the *Prose Merlin*. However, Hermione also adds a note to the chapter saying that “this first scene in Hell is none other than the memory of a session of the Legislative Assembly on the eve of the *coup d’état*, of inextricable arguments between two camps of Reaction, each of which was attempting to damn the other. ‘In that chaos, only one voice was silent’—that of Louis Bonaparte: ‘a boa serpent who enlaced France in his coils.’ That prediction of Edgar Quinet’s dates from October 1848.”

Night has fallen; a night of Erebus, dense and furrowed by lightning. The innocent, holy virgin throws herself down on her bed, whiter than hawthorn blossom, and goes to sleep, her head on her arm. Agitated and unquiet, however, she has forgotten to make the sign of the cross at the foot of the crucifix. Hell is alert and has seen it! It has said: "That's good; she's mine!"

Night has fallen. The young woman has remained saintly. There she is, asleep. But great God, what sleep, and what dreams! In the depths of the woods, what blazing sighs! In the clouds, what tears! In the heavens, what an inferno!

The night has passed. The day is fine and radiant. The saint awakes; her guest has gone. She falls to her knees, veils her face, and drowns in her tears. Oh saints, protect her from any gaze. Burning tears on the flagstones, prayers, vows, macerations, abstinences, cilices—what does it take, then, to efface a dream?

Her guest has gone. Jets of red flame are attached to the four feet of the foaming horse. The grass of the valleys dries up in the distance; the forest is aglow with the reflection of a blaze.

IV

A few years have passed—five or six, at the most. The hero of this story has been born. He has been born, but for him there have been no tears, no screams, no sobs, no breast-feeding and no weaning. His mother dared not even offer him her breast in secret. She called him Merlin.

The day after the day he came into the world, she took him in her arms, sadly, and wept.

"Don't weep, Mother," the new-born said to her, in a man's voice, opening his eyes.

Frightened and delighted by the prodigy, his mother lets him fall at her feet. He gets up safe and sound, smiling, and emerges from his swaddling-clothes.

"I'll comfort you, Mother."

"You're my shame."

"I'll be your glory."

"You're scaring me, my child!"

With that, leaving his linen behind, he starts striding back and forth in front of her, an open book in his hand. His eyes are glued to it, pensively.

"Who taught you to read, Merlin?"

"I already knew before I was born."

"Why, dear child, nail your eyes to that tome so soon? Wait, my son, until you become a man."

"Become a man, dear Mother, like all the rest? Is it worth the trouble? My life to come, I assure you, will be more astonishing than my birth."

Such was the first advertisement that the mother of my hero received of her son's destiny. Nevertheless, wise and prudent, she feared being mistaken. How many times premature flashes of intelligence have been followed by imbecile darkness! How many times infant prodigies have been seen to become nonentities for the rest of their lives! I've known several myself, which I could cite without overmuch embarrassment.

That was the danger for Merlin, if her mother was deceiving herself. There were moments—as we shall see—when he gave the impression of being an infant god.

Nothing is truer—but what would it have taken to give birth to an opposite idea? A game of dice, of quoits, a kite, a drum, or a little bell, and the marvel of Heaven would be no more than a paltry homunculus.

To help nature in one direction, and fight it in another, was a great task for a young woman like Séraphine, almost always alone, devoid of advice, who scarcely dared bear the name of mother.

V

One day he was playing downstairs with knucklebones when his mother, gazing intently at the knight in the golden helmet, said to him: "Advise me, Seigneur. This child, I swear to you, was born

without a father. He's a prodigy, the son of a dream. Even if his education cost me eternal life, I wouldn't want to spare anything. What plan should I follow? What direction?"

"You're right," said the knight, raising his red cloak over his face. "Let's talk about it at leisure."

During this dialogue, Merlin, while pretending to play, listened.

"First of all," the mother continued, "I'd sacrifice all I possess to initiate him into Christianity. I've already vowed him to the Virgin Mary. That's why he's wearing a blue robe."

"That's good, Séraphine. If you'll take my advice, though, you won't neglect to instruct him in paganism. Its gods, believe me, aren't as dead as people pretend. They have an infinite fondness for those who don't deny them in times of ill-fortune."

"But Merlin might be the foremost of monks," replied the mother, timidly.

"It would be a hundred times better for him to be the last of the druids."

"But truly, what can be set above the Christian Heaven?"

"Many things. Personally, for example, I prefer the pagan Elysium, without a doubt."

"Isn't it necessary to direct Merlin toward spiritual matters?"

"Believe me, don't exalt him so soon; it's necessary not to neglect the material too much."

"Oh, Seigneur, if all my wishes came true, he'd find happiness in the contemplative life."

"What are you saying? It's the active life that will suit him: business, war, the foundation of all nobility, that's at least one goal of existence."

"O celestial ignorance! If only you could accompany him until his final day!"

"I hope, on the contrary, that he'll bite into the fruit of science."

During this dialogue, Merlin listened in anguish, torn between the two forces that were attracting him to the two opposed extremities of the world. His mother looked at him benevolently. The stranger fascinated him with a serpentine gaze. But neither was more astonished than the other when the child, interrogated as to what he wanted to become, replied in a voice as forceful as a giant's, while stamping his foot: "I want to be an enchanter!"

VI

What was the cause of such an indiscreet response? Doubtless the difference of opinions, sentiments, beliefs and religion between the father and the mother; add to that the deadly habit, transmitted all the way to us, of talking in front of children as if they don't understand us. While we imagine ourselves to be alone, those little intelligences drink deep draughts of the poison that pours from our lips. You think that they're entirely occupied in chasing a fly, but we're imprinting on their ingenuous souls the wrinkles of an anticipated old age, for which there is no longer any remedy.

No one in the world experienced more cruelly than my hero the consequences of that custom. After the fatal conversation between his mother and the knight, you would no longer have recognized him. Two spirits were incarnate in him, arguing over him. What's astonishing about that? Incontestably, he bore a strong resemblance to his mother. It was from her that he got his beauty, his forehead, his eyes, his ingenuous mouth, his eyebrows like those of a Madonna, and, with regard to the internal, his piety, his desire for sanctity, his moral life—or, to put it better, his soul, almost in its entirety.

Nevertheless, he had a few distant traits of his father: for example, curiosity, an inexorable memory, impatience, and a horror of restraint.

Via his mother, he was tightly attached to Heaven; via his father, to Hell.

Via one, he soared in the future; via the other, he was the serf of the present, the slave of the past.

God or Satan, which would emerge victorious within him? A cruel question, which already made his life a torment, at an age that, for others, is golden.

Sometimes he thought he heard the extinct voices of all the pagan gods wandering on the heath, which said to him: "Merlin! Merlin! Remain faithful to us! Only build us a little house of heather; we will promise you happiness."

As soon as he set to work, though, another voice rose up to his left, which said to him: "What are you doing, Merlin? It's a cross that it's necessary to plant! Look at the flowers! They have all converted this morning; now they are taking the form of the cross; look at the clover in your garden."

Then Merlin picked a bouquet; he counted the clover leaves: one, two, three. He stopped, in amazement. His reason was half-vanquished; it only remained for his pride to submit. And, God be praised, he would have done it without reserve! But immediately, the pagan gods made one last effort, setting him a host of ambushes.

They whispered in his ear: "Is it the time to abandon us, then, when no one any longer gives us honey-cakes? Merlin! Look at the ram crossing your path; he still wears the horns of Jupiter-Ammon on his head!"

Merlin was forcefully shaken again; he whispered to himself: "Since the ram still wears horns in imitation of Jupiter, how can one doubt that Jupiter leads the flock of the worlds?"

To this reasoning Merlin added his natural generosity. He would willingly have doomed himself for such modest gods.

And that is enough to understand how unhappy he was, torn between those two powers. He could no longer find any peace. At a time when the earth was full of calamities, there was, I dare say, no one who suffered more than Merlin. Thus, his early adolescence was spent in tears.

VII

As his melancholy increased and nothing could cure him of it—he had suffocations and palpitations of the heart that robbed him of sleep—his mother thought about sending him away to complete his education with the wisest man of the epoch. His name was Taliesin.

Whether he was a druid or a Christian no one knew exactly. Some affirmed that he was one or the other. He lived in a wood in which he had built himself a hut, near which herds of aurochs that he had domesticated ruminated in peace. Oak trees graying with age, covered in mistletoe, hid him with their shade. Picture a man seventy years of age, of tall stature, with a clear complexion and scarlet hair, under which shone two sky blue eyes and a physiognomy both robust and mystical in its entirety.

As soon as Merlin had confided the cause of his torments to him, Taliesin interrupted him, generously.

"Oh, my son," he said to him, "You've doubtless been sent to be my heir. An entire world is perishing with me. If you're the one who is to announce the new world, I'll tell you who I am. You alone will have known me!"

With these words, he took Merlin by the hand and, having led him to the densest part of the forest; he sat him down beside him on the moss and continued in these terms:

"I haven't always been a hermit in this forest. Old age hasn't always weighed down my footsteps. At your age, my son, I was a commander of men, and even of the army of the stars, which have forgotten me and mock me now."

"The army of the stars!" exclaimed Merlin, dazzled. "You're an enchanter then, Father?"

"What! You doubt it too, my son?" the old man replied, bitterly. "Listen to me. Several faults doomed me; I want to forearm you against them. When young I was, like you, very modest. People took me at my word; because I was modest, they concluded that I had reason to be, and soon, I had lost half my authority in helping them. They left me to follow the prideful, who trampled them underfoot. Don't do as I did!

"I had another setback. For a long time I thought that the truth, once expressed, would be resplendent of its own accord. I thought then that its light would pierce the darkness by itself. So, scarcely had I found one truth than I went in search of another. In that indefatigable race toward enlightenment, I thought that the world was following me breathlessly.

"Let my example be a lesson to you! It's said that your generation is even harder of hearing than ours. When you've published a truth, repeat it; when you're repeated it, say it again. You'll learn in your

turn how much more rebellious the human head is than the heart. It's a hundred times easier for us—enchanters, that is—to change earth and Heaven in the blink of an eye than to get a new idea into those heads of stone.

“Of all the faiths that display right and justice, people reject the dazzling light as if it were a poisoned arrow. How many days, years, centuries does it take before their eyes adapt to the splendor of the truth? Then they bless what they cursed, and curse what they blessed—but it's always too late.

“One more piece of advice, my son. People are convinced that a person can only do one thing. Personally, I've been a bard and an enchanter, and that's what completed my damnation. Always do the same thing, my child, and they'll believe that you do it well. Be careful at the outset; if you begin by smiling, they'll demand that you keep your princely smile on your face to the tomb and beyond. If you begin weeping, they'll demand tears until the end. Such as I have known them, they surely still are!”

“Can it be?” exclaimed Merlin.

“Yes, my son. I foresee that you'll be hated, especially by the wicked.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you won't be their dupe. They're accustomed to regard honest men as their natural prey, and when, by chance, one refuses to be, the wicked experience an authentic indignation, for they believe themselves to be defrauded of their most reliable and most legitimate property. Imagine the wolf, if a lamb denied its right to kill it.”

Merlin collected the enchanter's words submissively, but he thought that old age had rendered him misanthropic. He opened his ears to the sage's advice, but in secret, he closed his heart to it.

“What should I do, if I must be your successor?” he asked.

“Do you know the twenty-five thousand verses of the Triads?”³ the old man replied.

“No,” said Merlin. And he perceived then, for the first time, how ignorant he was, and that a few vague notions and general aspirations, to which his knowledge was reduced, were very little without a knowledge of facts. He made a vow to become as knowledgeable as Taliesin.

From that day onwards no one encountered him without seeing a book in his hand.

“Go and tell the world in what isolation I'm dying,” Taliesin said then. “The death of the smallest bird, or the smallest insect buzzing in the wood, makes more noise than mine. Watch and learn, my son.”

Then, becoming more excited as his end approached, already illuminated by the light of the tomb, he added, with an incomparable majesty:

“I was at God's right hand when he created the world. I was walking in Eden at the moment when the word of malediction emerged from Satan's mouth. I was the first bard, my son, and my first abode was the region of the stars. I was with my Lord in the highest sphere, when Lucifer fell into the infernal depths. I have carried my banner before Alexander. I knew the name of the stars of the North and the South. I have been to the throne of the All-Highest in the Milky Way; I was in Canaan when Absalom was killed. I have transported the Holy Spirit in the valley of Hebron. I was a master in the company of Elijah and Enoch I was present at the crucifixion of the son of God. I was the original architect of Nimrod's tower. I am a marvel whose origin is unknown. I was in the Ark with Noah and Alpha. I have seen the annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah. I was in Africa before the foundation of Rome, and I have taken shelter in what remains of Troy. I covered Moses with the waters of the Jordan. I was in the crib with my Lord. I have suffered hunger for the son of the Virgin. I have been a bard, a harpist on the white mountain. I have sat upon the white throne of the ecliptic. Now I am Taliesin.”⁴

³ The reference is to the so-called *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* [The Triads of the Island of Britain], collections of which are contained in various 13th and 14th century manuscripts, although the notion that they are detached fragments of a monolithic work assembling the wisdom of the Welsh bards, as is tacitly assumed here, is dubious. They include fragments of Arthurian mythology appropriated from Anglo-Norman sources as well as Celtic materials.

⁴ Quinet adds a note saying that this speech is a literal translation of “a fragment of Gallic poetry.” Hermione's notes comment that this chapter and the surrounding ones reflect Quinet's “adolescent sentiments, poetic reveries [and] the influences that presided over his education,” and claims that Taliesin “recalls the scholar Kreuzer;” it is not obvious to whom she is referring, although either of the famous violinists named Kreutzer might be considered as a bard of sorts.

With these words, the old man yielded his soul. Merlin buried him with his own hands beneath immense mossy stones, which a dozen men of our day would not be able to move.

I have often seen that tomb, when, in my youth, I too went to read enchanted books on enchanted days on the hill that is known today as the Corne d'Arthur,⁵ because of the debris of an old wall that crowns it. The immense forest has disappeared. At least the ax has respected the weeping fir-trees atop the sepulcher.

⁵ La Corne d'Artus—which Quinet's alternative spelling makes more approximate to "Arthur's Horn" is a hill in Beaubery, in Burgundy, at the top of which is what was long imagined to be a Druid monument, although more recent belief asserts that it is the ruins of one of the towers of a castle built by Artus, one of the original overlords of the Charolais. The young Quinet's familiarity with the enigmatic artefact presumably occasioned his later decision to call his mythical king Arthur, and might well have helped formulate the notion of "the spirits of the ruins" that he subsequently refined in Greece.