

Tirant lo Blanc

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The order of the garter

“The year and a day had passed, and the marriage festivities had been fully celebrated, when the king sent word to all the estates, entreating them to wait a few days, as his majesty wanted to proclaim a brotherhood which had only recently been founded, consisting of twenty-six knights, all of whom were free of reproach; and everyone in the court was happy to remain. And sir, as I and these knights who are present have heard from the mouth of the king himself, the true reason for the founding of this brotherhood is as follows.

“On a day of good cheer, when there was much dancing, the king, having danced, withdrew to rest at one end of the hall; the queen stayed at the other end with her damsels, and the knights continued dancing with the ladies. And it happened that one damsel, dancing with a knight, came near the king; and as she made a turn, a garter for her stocking fell down. The garter was adorned with a selvage, and everyone thought that it was the one she had worn on her left leg. The knights close to the king saw that the garter had fallen to the floor. This damsel was named Madresilva. But do not think, sir, that she was prettier than the others, or that everything about her was the last word in gentility. She was somewhat loud, and rather brazen in her dancing and speech; she could sing reasonably well, but still, sir, one could have found three hundred damsels there who were prettier and more accomplished. But men’s tastes and appetites are very different.

“One of the knights close to the king said to her, ‘Madresilva, you’ve lost one of your pieces of leg armor. It seems to me that you must have had a bad page who did not know how to tie it.’

“This damsel, rather embarrassed, left off dancing and turned to pick up her garter; but another knight was quicker than she and picked it up first. The king, seeing the garter in the hands of this knight, immediately demanded it and told him to place it on his left leg, over the hose, just below the knee.

“The king wore this garter for more than four months, and the queen never said a thing; and when he would dress himself most splendidly, he was more willing than ever to show off his garter before everyone. All this while no one dared to say anything to him about it, except for a single attendant who was one of the king’s favorites, and who had noted that he had worn the garter for an exceedingly long while.

“One day he was alone with the king and said to him, ‘Sir, if your highness only knew what I know, and heard the murmuring of all the foreign visitors at court, and of your own subjects, and of the queen and all the ladies of honor!’

“‘What can it be?’ said the king, ‘Tell me at once!’

“‘Sir, I will tell you. Everyone is astonished that you are making such a commotion over this insignificant and ordinary damsel who is of low condition and held in very small esteem. For so long a time now your highness has worn her token on your person, and in plain sight, for all the world to see. This show would be excessive if she were a queen or empress. And why, sir! Can your highness not find in this kingdom damsels of nobler lineage and greater beauty, who are more distinguished in grace, discretion and many other virtues? The hands of a king, after all, can reach where they

will.'

"So the queen is displeased with this, and the foreign visitors and my own subjects are astonished!' the king replied. And he said these words in French; *Puni soit qui mal y pense!* And he said further, 'I vow to God that over this very matter I will found an order of knighthood; an order and brotherhood that will be remembered for as long as the world lasts.'

"He then had the garter taken off his leg, as he did not want wear it with the heavy melancholy that had settled over him. But he kept his condition private.

"Now after the completion of the festivities, as I have told your lordship the king ordered the following:

"First, a chapel dedicated to the blessed St. George was to be built inside Windsor Castle, located in the noble town of that name, and this chapel would be constructed in the manner of a church choir in a friars' monastery. To the right of the chapel entrance would be two seats; to the left two more; and descending from this point, eleven additional seats on each side. So there would be twenty-six seats in all, each to be occupied by a knight. High on each chair, over the knight's head, would hang a splendidly gilded sword, the sheath covered with brocade or crimson cloth and embroidered with pearls, gold or silver, as the knight desired and in the best fashion that he could afford. At the side of the sword would be a helmet of the type used in jousts, and this helmet could be of well wrought steel or finely gilded wood; and on the helmet each man could have a crest with a device of his choosing. Finally, on the back of each chair would be nailed a slab of gold or silver, painted with the arms of that knight.

"Later I will tell your lordship of the ceremonies performed in this chapel. Now I want to tell you which knights were elected into the brotherhood. First, the king chose twenty-five knights, and, counting himself, there were twenty-six in all. The king was the first to swear to uphold all of the articles of the brotherhood; and not all the knights who asked to take the vow could do so. Tirant was the first knight to be elected, as he was the best of all the knights. Afterwards, these knights were chosen: the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Bedford, the Duke of Lancaster, the Duke of Exeter, the Marquis of Suffolk, the Marquis of St. George, the Marquis of Belpuig, John of Warwick the grand constable, the Earl of Northumberland, the Earl of Salisbury, the Earl of Stafford, the Earl of Vilamur, the Earl of the Black Marches, the Earl of Joyous Guard, Lord Escala Rompuda, Lord Puigverd, Lord Terranova, and the esteemed noblemen, Sir John Stuart and Sir Albert Riusec. The aforementioned knights were of the kingdom, and these that follow were foreigners: the Duke of Berry, the Duke of Anjou, the Earl of Flanders. They were twenty-six knights in all.

"Sir, each knight chosen to enter the order underwent the following ceremony. The articles of the order were handed to a bishop or archbishop; and he took them as they were, closed and sealed, and carried them to the chosen knight. This knight was also given a robe all embroidered with garters and lined with sable, and a long cape, which, like the robe, reached down to his feet; the cape was of blue damask, lined with ermine, and had a white silk cord with which to tie it on top. The wings of the cape could be thrown back over the shoulder, so that one could see both the robe and cape at the same time. The hood was embroidered, and lined ermine. The embroidery was of a garter and closely resembled one, that is to say, it showed a band with buckle and belt-tip just like many fashionable ladies of honor wear on their legs to tie their stockings, and when they have buckled this garter they give the free end a twist over the buckle, making a knot, and let the end hang almost to mid thigh. In the center of the garter were embroidered these letters: *Puni soit qui mal y pense.* The robe, the cape, and the hood were all embroidered with similar garters, and each knight in the order had to wear them every day of his life, whether he was in the city or town, or in the country, or doing combat, or wherever he might be. And if a knight did not wear them —either because he forgot or by choice— then any king-of-arms, herald, or pursuivant who caught him had the power to strip him of the gold chain around his neck, or whatever he wore on his head, or his sword, or anything that he carried, even if he were in the presence of the king or in a public plaza. Each time a knight was found without his proper apparel he had pursuivant. And this officer who took the two escuts would donate one of them for candle wax to a chapel of St. George of his own choosing, and the other coin

he could keep for his alertness.

“And this bishop or archbishop or other prelate who gave the knight his vows of the order had to come to the knight as the ambassador from the brotherhood itself, and not from the king; and he was to lead the knight to a church, whichever it might be (although if there was a Church of St. George close by, they would go there directly); and the prelate would have him place his hand on the altar as he spoke these words:

Traduit par Ray La Fontaine