

# Gawain and the Green Knight

*A classic legend from England  
retold by Susan Thompson*

King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table had enjoyed many years of peace. Tales of their honor and bravery had spread far and wide. No one dared to challenge the borders of the kingdom, so the knights' days were often spent engaged in jousting and other games, especially at Christmas.

King Arthur particularly enjoyed such merry-making. His love of fine tales of quests was legendary. It was said that the king would not sit down to feast until he was promised the tale of a great adventure.

One year, the New Year's Eve feast had just begun when the great doors to the hall were flung wide by a huge green knight astride a powerful green horse. The knight was perfectly proportioned and many of the women in the hall thought him uncommonly handsome. He wore no armor, helmet, or hauberk. In his great hands he carried only a sprig of holly and an ax of monumental size. He wore a beautiful mantle lined with white fur and embroidered with green jewels and gold thread. His handsome features and fine silk garments dazzled the revelers.

The Green Knight gave no greeting, but, instead, rode to the center of the hall.

"Who is lord of this castle?" he asked in a voice deep and fierce. "I would speak with him."

"I am the one you seek," Arthur replied, his hand falling unconsciously to the hilt of his sword.

"I do not come to wage war," said the knight, stopping his horse before the dais where Arthur feasted with his greatest knights. "I propose only a game."

"Come, sit, join us in our feast," said Arthur. "We will talk of this game after we eat."

"I do not wish to feast with you," said the knight. He turned toward the knights in the hall.

"I propose a challenge. I will give this fine ax, which has no equal, to any man who will strike one blow against me unchallenged. If I survive the blow, this man will agree to meet me twelve months and one day hence to receive the same from me. Who among you will accept my challenge?"

King Arthur laughed. Surely, he thought, this was a joke. The Knights of the Round Table chuckled with their king, but no one answered the challenge.

A look of scorn darkened the Green Knight's face, and Arthur and his knights became uneasy. The Green Knight spurred his horse round the room, his horse's hoofbeats echoing throughout the now silent hall.

"I have heard much talk of the Knights of the Round Table, of their bravery and chivalry. I see now that it is only legend. Not one of you is brave enough to strike this blow."

"Had I thought you were serious about this game, I would have been the first to accept your challenge," Arthur replied, his face red with shame and anger.

"Uncle, let me stand in your stead and strike the blow," said Arthur's young nephew, Gawain. Gawain was not yet a knight, but Arthur, seeing the conviction on the boy's face and the embarrassment of the other knights, commanded his nephew to kneel before him. Arthur knighted him and Gawain turned to the Green Knight.

"I accept your challenge." Gawain's voice rang throughout the hall. The other knights of the Round Table admired this young knight, who had shown more bravery than they who had more experience.



The Green Knight dismounted and bent so that his neck was clearly exposed. Gawain took up the ax, raised it high and brought it down with such force that the Green Knight's bones and tendons were cleanly severed. His head rolled to the foot of the dais where King Arthur was seated. The knight's headless body straightened and strode to the dais where he lifted his severed head by its glittering green hair, and tucked it beneath his arm. His eyes opened and gazed forth at Gawain.

"A fine blow, indeed," his lips spoke. "Take heed of our agreement, Sir Knight. I am known as the Green Knight of the Green Chapel. When you ride out to meet me twelve months hence to receive the reward you surely deserve, you will find me there." The Green Knight mounted his horse and rode so swiftly from the hall that sparks flew from his horse's hooves.

The hall was silent for a stunned moment before those gathered returned to their merry-making, congratulating Gawain on his bravery.

The months of the year flew swiftly, and soon it came time for Gawain to set out to find the Green Knight. On All Saints Day, Arthur gathered his knights and the ladies of the court together for feasting and fellowship. No one talked of the seriousness of Gawain's quest, but teased and laughed with him, all the while fearing that they would never see the young knight again.

After eating, Gawain formally asked the King, if he might leave Camelot to go in search of the Green Knight. With a heavy heart, Arthur gave his permission. Gawain prepared himself, dressing in his finest garments. He heard mass, bid the members of the court good-bye, and then galloped away on his horse, Gringolet.

For seven weeks, Gawain rode through unknown lands searching for the Green Chapel. The road was not easy, and he encountered great hardship. He fought many fierce challengers, several who might have

slain him if he had not been such a brave and noble knight. He traversed rugged terrain and saw wondrous sights. He slept where he could find little comfort, in his armor, in caves, even on solid rock. The winter weather was merciless, hammering him with sleet and rain. Thus Gawain wandered, searching, in pain and alone. On Christmas Eve, disheartened and nearly exhausted, he stopped by the side of a lonely trail, knelt down and prayed for shelter and a place to hear mass. No sooner had he risen from his prayers than he saw a castle in the distance. Encouraged, Gawain remounted Gringolet and rode to the castle.

The man who greeted Gawain at the door was fierce of face but gracious and cultured in his speech. He invited Gawain to join his family for Christmas and Gawain gratefully accepted. They feasted and made merry that day and the next. On the third day, the lord of the castle asked Gawain what dark deed had driven him to wander alone with such courage when he could have been feasting with the King.

"I am searching for the Green Chapel and the Green Knight who abides there. I have agreed to meet him there on New Year's, but I do not know where to find him. Do you know of this Green Chapel?"

"Aye. It is not more than a half day's ride from here. Stay with us a little longer, rest, and on New Year's Day ride out to meet this Green Knight."

"This is good news you have given me," laughed Gawain in relief. "My quest is at an end. I will gladly stay, and I thank you for your hospitality."

"Wonderful! Tomorrow you must rest, sleep late, and, after you eat, amuse yourself by keeping my wife company until I return to the castle." The lord paused a moment, thinking. "Sir Knight," he said, smiling, "let us make an agreement. Whatever I bring back from hunting in the woods shall be yours, and whatever good fortune befalls you during the day, shall be mine in exchange. Let us strike this bargain, what-



ever good or bad happens to either of us, we will honestly exchange."

"I agree happily for it sounds a pleasant way to pass the time," said Gawain.

The next day, Gawain whiled away the day in the company of the lady of the castle. That afternoon, while they sat before the fire, he was startled when the lady asked, "My lord, Gawain, do you not find me attractive?"

"My lady, your beauty is beyond compare," replied Gawain honestly.

"Then why have you not tried to win my heart?"

"You are indeed beautiful, my lady, and if you were not married to my gracious host, I would most certainly woo you for myself," Gawain replied.

"My lord has made everything in his castle available to you, Sir Knight," said the lady.

Gawain did not wish to anger or insult his host by making amorous advances toward his wife, but neither did he wish to hurt the lady's feelings. "One kiss then," he said, and the lady was satisfied.

When the lord of the castle returned home, he presented Gawain with a deer, and Gawain gave the lord a kiss. The lord laughed lustily. "Indeed, that is good fortune, Sir Gawain."

The second day went much as the first. The lord returned with a fox, and Gawain gave the lord the two kisses that he had received that day. Again the lord laughed at Gawain's good fortune.

On the third day, New Year's Eve, Gawain sat before the fire with the lady of the castle. Her beauty pleased him, and, as she rose to kiss him, warmth of feeling for her spread throughout his body. He felt nothing but joy in her presence.

"I have enjoyed our time together, Gawain. I shall miss your conversation and handsome presence. Do you not have a token that you might give me to remember you by?"

Gawain replied that he did not. The lady offered him a ring to remember her by, but Gawain refused it. At last she

brought forth a finely sewn girdle of green silk. Seeing that he was about to refuse this gift also, she made light of its importance.

"This is but a mere scrap of cloth of little value. It's the feeling that went into making that makes it special, for no man who wears it will ever be cut down by other of this world."

Gawain realized that such a garment would be valuable protection for him when he went to face the Green Knight. The lady pressed him to accept the girdle and he consented. She asked that he ways keep it concealed, especially from her husband, and that he never tell anyone about its existence. Gawain agreed that no one would know of it ever.

That night the lord returned with the spoils of his day's hunting, and Gawain bestowed upon him three of the sweet kisses a man could give. He said nothing of the green girdle.

"By God, you have had happiness today," laughed the lord. They all sat down to dinner and Gawain graciously thanked his hosts for making his stay such a pleasant one. He asked the lord if he could provide a guide to show him the way to the Green Chapel, and the lord agreed.

The world was swept with brewing storms that night as Gawain lay awake worrying over the confrontation to come. At dawn he rose and asked for his horse and his armor. He donned the green girdle beneath his mantle, not for its rich color or fine cloth, but for the protection it would provide when he was unable to take up his sword to defend himself.

The morning was gloomy with mist and Gawain and his guide rode forth to the Green Chapel. Deep in the forest, at the edge of a dark glade, the guide stopped.

"I have brought you as far as I dare," said the guide. "Ahead lies the Green Chapel. As one who knows you and has come to love you, I warn you to be careful for the knight who dwells here is fierce and quick to strike. Take a different road, Sir Gawain, and ride safely away from this



place. I swear that I will tell no one that you fled from this confrontation."

"Thank you for your help and your good wishes," said Gawain, "but I cannot turn back, for that would make me a coward. Such an act would be unforgivable. This is my fate, and I will not evade it."

After saying good-bye, Gawain rode into the clearing and saw the Green Chapel. It sat at the back of the glade, in the shelter of two large oaks. A tangle of ivy laced its rough stone walls and its courtyard was overgrown with herbs. It appeared deserted. "Such a gloomy, ugly place befits its master," he thought. "But I have agreed to this meeting, and God's will be done. No matter what happens, I will show no fear."

"Who is the master here?" Gawain called out. "Where is the one who agreed to meet me on this day?"

"I am here," called a voice from the slope above Gawain. Gawain looked up, and there stood the Green Knight.

"Shortly you will get what you deserve," said the Green Knight before turning to continue sharpening his ax with long, powerful strokes. Gawain had never seen a knight take such care or joy in the labor of sharpening a weapon. While the rhythmic whirring of the ax stroking the whetstone clearly brought pleasure to the Green Knight, the high-pitched sound sent a shiver down Gawain's spine. Yet, no sign of fear showed upon his face.

Soon the Green Knight emerged from a cavern carrying a great Danish ax with which to return Gawain's blow. So great in size was the ax that when Gawain saw it, he could not conceive of any mortal man being able to lift it. The back of his neck began to tingle as he anticipated the blow to come.

"Gawain," said the Green Knight, "you are a man of your word and I am pleased to see you. You have timed your arrival perfectly, as I knew you would. Now, you remember our agreement. Take as little time to prepare as I did when you gave

your single blow that took my head. Remove your helmet."

"Yes, you may strike your one blow, and rest assured it will meet with no resistance from me," said Gawain.

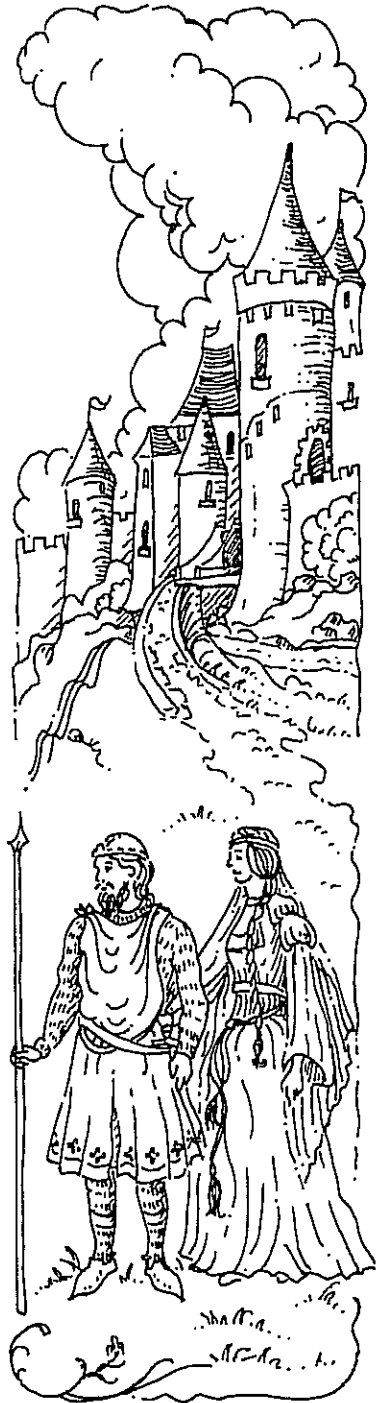
Gawain the Good removed his helmet and calmly bent forward, exposing his neck for the knight. The Green Knight swiftly raised his ax and brought it down with such strength and ferocity that, had it met with Gawain's vulnerable neck, his life would surely have been forfeit. But, as the ax came down, Gawain looked from the corner of his eye to see the shining blade descending and turned his shoulder in fear. The Green Knight, seeing Gawain flinch, stayed the blow.

"Gawain the Good, who is known for his great courage, who has never shown fear when confronted by a host of foes, you are flinching in fear. Never would I have thought it of you. When I stood for your blow, no fear did I show, never did I flinch. When it comes to courage, I believe that I am the better man," said the Green Knight.

"I will not flinch again, Sir Knight," promised Gawain savagely. "You can be sure of that even though I know that if you separate my head from my body, I cannot retrieve it and put it on again." Gawain bent again and no move did he make in any part of his body as he waited for the Green Knight's blow to descend.

The Green Knight noted Gawain's determined stillness. "In truth, I believe it is your own fear that you fear most," he said, almost gently. "Therefore, I will delay this no longer."

The Green Knight again raised his ax and brought it down quickly. Gawain did not flinch, even when the cold blade of the ax grazed the skin of his neck. When he felt his blood trickle over his shoulders and saw it dribbling to the ground, Gawain moved swiftly, jumping out of the reach of the Green Knight and his ax. He quickly replaced his helmet, and held his shield before him.



"You have had your one blow, sir," he said. "If you attempt another, I promise that it shall be returned in full measure."

The Green Knight laughed. "Come, Gawain, do not be so fierce. No one here has given you anything that you did not deserve. The taunting I gave you when I sharpened my ax was for the kiss you took from my wife on the first day of our agreement. The blow from which you flinched was for the day you took two kisses. The blow that wounded you was for the third day, when your honor failed, Gawain the Good. You returned the three kisses, but the girdle you kept for yourself was none other than my own, made for me by my beautiful wife. I know of every moment you spent in my castle while I was hunting, for I devised these tests for you. I sent my wife to try you, and you fared well."

Gawain slowly lowered his sword and bent his head in deep shame. Suddenly he ripped off the offending girdle and flung it at the knight.

"I have failed," Gawain cried. "I have been a coward and have coveted. Fear of your stroke has caused me to forsake in myself all that a knight should be: loyal and giving. I confess to being false and afraid. Only your good will has let me win this day."

"I assure you that any harm that I have suffered has quickly healed," said the Green Knight, offering the girdle back to Gawain. "Your sins are forgiven. You are indeed Gawain the Good, and I give to you this green girdle. Wear it in good faith, Sir Knight, as a reminder of the challenge you faced at the Green Chapel."

"I will wear it not for its beauty but to remind me of my fears and my deceit," said Gawain, taking the girdle. "When I feel proud of my accomplishments in battle, I will look upon this girdle and it will humble me."

"Indeed, that is why I was sent to Camelot, to try your pride and to see if the tales that people told of the Knights of the Round Table were true," explained the Green Knight.

"What is your name, noble knight, so that when I tell this tale, I may tell them of you?" asked Gawain.

"That I will gladly tell you," said the Green Knight. "I am Bercilak de Hautdesert."

The two knights embraced, and they parted there in the cold. The Green Knight returned to his wife and his castle, and Gawain ventured into the forest to begin the long journey back to Camelot.

Along the way, Gawain met with many adventures and won many victories. He slept in lodges or out in the open. The wound on his neck healed quickly, and he took to wearing the green girdle as a baldric tied under his left arm. He arrived safely at Camelot where the King and Queen greeted him joyously and listened to his tales of adventure. Gawain gave an honest account of all that had befallen him, including showing everyone present the scar on the back of his neck from the blow the Green Knight had given him because of his deceit.

"I must wear this badge always," Gawain told the King, "for nothing good befalls a man who hides from his fears."

The King offered words of solace to his nephew. Members of the court also offered comfort and agreed that henceforth the lords and ladies of the Brotherhood of the Round Table would wear bright green baldrics in honor of Gawain the Good and his great quest.

