

SEVEN

Gawain and the Green Knight



I remember it was cold at Christmas that year, and colder still at New Year, the snow thick on the ground, the wind icy from the north. But neither the snow nor the wind could dampen our spirits. We were at Camelot and it was New Year's Eve once more. Everyone was gathered for the feasting, the knights all in their places at the Round Table; and my dear Guinevere sitting with all the ladies of the court beneath a great canopy. A blazing fire crackled in the hearth, the ale flowed freely and my harper played as only he could play. Bercelet lay at my feet, waiting in high hopes for the feasting to begin. The boar's head, apple in his mouth, was carried into the hall, and we all of us pounded the table impatiently; for, as was the custom at Camelot, we knew we could not begin eating until we had heard of some new quest, of some stirring adventure. I waited. We all waited. The knights looked at each other, but no one rose to his feet. Nothing happened. Bercelet licked his lips.

At that moment, from outside in the courtyard, came the clatter of horses' hooves on the cobbles. The doors of the hall flew open, and before I had time to call for them to be closed, a giant of a man rode in on a towering warhorse that pawed the ground, sides lathered up, tossing its fine head, snorting its fury. The man swept the hall with terrible eyes, wolfish eyes that froze the courage in a man's veins, eyes you could not hold with your own. But it was not the man's eyes that amazed us most, it was not his size either – and I tell you I'd never in my life set eyes on a bigger man – no, it was the colour of him. Green, the man was green from head to foot. Green jerkin, common enough; green cloak, again common enough, you might think – but his hair was green, his hands as well.

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And I swear that his hair, which was as long as mine is now, was green too. The horse was green, and the saddle. He wore no armour, but carried a green axe in one hand and in the other a branch he'd ripped off some holly tree – a sign of peace, but he didn't look very peaceful to me.

He threw the branch to the ground as he spoke. 'And who might be the leader of this motley crew? I'll talk to no one else.' It was a moment or two before I could find my voice.

'Welcome, stranger,' I said. 'Why don't you come and join us?'

'I have not come here to waste my time in feasting. I can do that well enough at home. I have something else in mind. You are King Arthur?'

'I am.'

'Well, King Arthur,' he began, his thunderous voice heavy with sarcasm. 'I have heard all about the so-called bravery of you and your knights. The whole world is talking of little else. I have come all this way from my home in the North Country to find out just how brave you are. Looking about me, I see nothing but a bunch of beardless little boys. Are you quite sure I have come to the right place?'

At this there were howls of protest. 'You may bark loud enough,' he went on, 'but I doubt very much if there's anyone here man enough to accept my challenge. We shall see. We shall see.' And he held out his axe in both hands. 'You see this axe? I will submit myself right now to one blow from this axe, just one blow – but only if, in twelve months and a day from now, I can repay the blow in kind, just one blow. Tit for tat, how's that? There, is that simple enough for you dunderheads?'

I looked about the hall. No one moved a muscle. No one said a word.

'Well, I can see I was wrong,' he laughed. 'I said I saw boys about me. I see only chickens.'

Now my blood was up. I had had enough. 'You've asked for it,' I shouted. 'I'll do it, and with pleasure too. Down off your horse.' It wasn't so brave as it sounds. After all, a man without his head could hardly do you much harm, could he?

Then suddenly Gawain was on his feet beside me. 'No, my Lord,' he said. 'Let me. I'll see to him. I'll shut his big mouth for you, once and for all. I've rested on my laurels long enough. It is time I proved myself fit again to sit around this table.'

'Very well, Gawain,' I replied, more than a little relieved. 'But be careful. Things are not always as they seem.'

With a great laugh, the Green Knight jumped down from his horse. 'So, Arthur, at least you have one man amongst all these boys,' he quipped.

'Enough!' cried Gawain, striding across the hall to meet him. Dwarfed, but not cowed, he squared up to the Green Knight. 'It will be a promise, a bargain between us,'

he said. 'I promise, by my honour as a knight, that I will strike you just once, as you've said; and that in a year's time you can do the same to me – if you're still able to, which I doubt.'

'We shall see,' said the Green Knight, and he handed Gawain his axe. 'You do know which end to hold, don't you?'

'Kneel, you overgrown leek!' Gawain cried, gripping the axe tightly. The Green Knight knelt down and pulled aside his hair, so that his neck was bare. Gawain seemed to be hesitating for a moment.

'Come on then, Gawain, what are you waiting for? Are you frightened of the sight of a little blood? Strike man, strike!' Gawain hesitated no longer. He severed the Green Knight's head clean from his shoulders and sent it rolling across the floor. But there was not a drop of blood, green or red, not a single drop – and no time to wonder at it either, for the Green Knight sprang at once to his feet, picked up his head and vaulted headless on to his horse. It was the severed head under his arm that spoke.

'You have a year and a day, Gawain. I am the Green Knight of the Green Chapel in the Forest of Wirral. You'll find me easily enough. If you do not, then the whole world will know that the great Sir Gawain is a coward and all King Arthur's court with him.' With that, he galloped away out into the snow, leaving the hall silent and aghast behind him. It was some time, I can tell you, before any of us felt at all festive.

The seasons passed as they always do, slowly enough for the young, but ever faster for the old. And for poor Gawain too, though still young in body and spirit, the year raced by. The following Michaelmas, I held my court at Caerleon and we had a great feast for Gawain to send him on his way. Lancelot was there, Bors, Gareth and Gaheris, Gawain's brothers, Bedevere and all the others. Even the Archbishop was there to bless him. In hushed silence, Gawain put on his fine gold-inlaid armour. We embraced without a word. Then he turned away from me, mounted Gringolet, his black warhorse and rode off. Few of us thought we would ever see him again.

What happened after this, Gawain himself later told us. Impetuous he may have been, but he was never one given to exaggeration or wild imaginings. He rode away from us with a heavy heart that day. He travelled up over the windswept hills of North Wales and down into the forests beyond. It was bitterly cold. The forests were a haven for robbers, savage men who could be hiding anywhere, ready to spring out and ambush any luckless stranger. Some, seeing the star of Logres on Gawain's shield and knowing who he was, let him pass by. Others did not. Time and again, Gawain had to fight them off. Many a cold night he slept out in the open, and many a day passed with no food either for himself

or his horse, so that they were both much weakened by the time they came at long last into the Forest of Wirral.

He asked anyone and everyone he met where he might find the Green Chapel, but no one seemed to have even heard of it. He began to despair of ever finding the place in time. On and on he rode, ever deeper into the forest, wading through marsh and mud; until on Christmas Eve, he found himself fording a stream and riding through open parkland towards a fine castle. The drawbridge over the moat was down, so he rode across and knocked at the door.

A porter greeted him with a welcoming smile and invited him to come in. Gringolet was led away for a rub-down, then to a warm, dry stable where there was all the sweet hay and all the clean water he could want. Gawain was brought into the hall to meet his host, the lord of the castle. The moment Gawain set eyes on him, he knew he was in good hands, for everything about the man was courteous and kind, from his honest eyes to his open smile. Gawain told him at once who he was and where he had come from.

'No matter who you are,' said the lord of the castle, clasping his hand, 'you are more than welcome to my home. You need rest, and here you shall have all you need. My castle is your castle. Everything I have is yours for as long as you want to stay.' Gawain could hardly believe his good luck.

Then there began three days of Christmas celebrations. People flocked to the castle from miles around to meet Gawain, and he was feted royally. Nothing was too much trouble. The lady of the castle, his host's wife, saw to his every need – and she was as beautiful a woman as Gawain had ever met. Never had he enjoyed a Christmas as much as this; but from time to time a shadow came over him as he thought of the dreaded appointment with the Green Knight, now only a few short days away. The happier he was, the less he wanted to die.

'You are sad, Gawain,' said the lady of the castle, as they sat talking together late one evening.

'After all you have done for me, my lady, I have no right to be,' Gawain replied. He had tried so hard to drive away his black and fearful thoughts, to hide from them his growing anxiety. 'But I am afraid that tomorrow I shall have to leave and be on my way. I have promised to be at the Green Chapel on New Year's Day, and as yet I don't even know where the place is. I must not be late, I cannot be.'

'Nor shall you be,' laughed the lord of the castle, 'because the Green Chapel you speak of is no more than a two hours' ride from here, on a good horse. And Gringolet is a fine warhorse. So why don't you stay here for three more days, until the morning of New Year's Day itself? I shall have someone show you the way, just to be sure. How would that be?'

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'That,' said Gawain, greatly relieved, 'that would make me the happiest man alive. You've been so good to me, so kind. I won't get in the way, I promise. I'll do anything you say, everything you say.'

'Well then,' said the lord of the castle, 'I shall be out hunting every morning. The distance you've travelled, I should imagine you've seen quite enough of a horse's neck – so why don't you just stay in bed and rest? My wife will look after you.'

'I can think of nothing better,' said Gawain. But he noticed then that the lady was smiling at him rather too knowingly.

'Now,' said his host, 'since it's still the festive season, why don't we play a little game? Let's you and I make a bargain.'

'Why not?' Gawain said.

'What if I promise that I will give you whatever I bring back from the hunt?' the lord of the castle went on. 'And you promise me, in return, that you will give me anything and everything that you manage to come by back here in the castle? Well?'

'It's a bargain,' Gawain laughed. 'Anything at all I come by, you shall have, I promise – though I can't for the life of me think what it might be.'

So Gawain slept in the next morning whilst the lord of the castle went out hunting. And as he dozed, the door of his room opened silently. Gawain opened his eyes to find the lady of the castle sitting on his bed smiling down at him, her eyes full of love. Gawain didn't know which way to look, not what to talk about – and it was very obvious that she had more in mind than just talk. But talking was all Gawain would allow himself to do. After all, this was the wife of his kind host, his good friend. But how he was tempted! The woman was wonderfully beautiful, so beautiful he had to force himself to look away, if he was to resist her. The trouble was, he didn't want to resist her, even though he knew he should.

'I am disappointed in you, Gawain,' she wheedled. 'You talk and talk, but you do not ask me to kiss you.'

'Well, if you're offering, my lady,' said Gawain, 'then who am I to turn you down?' And the lady leant over, took his face in her hands and kissed him gently.

When she had gone, Gawain got up, washed and dressed, thinking all the while of the kiss. All that day, he lazed about the castle talking happily to the lady. She made him forget all his troubles, even his encounter with the Green Knight in the Green Chapel.

At dusk the lord of the castle returned, mud-splattered from the chase. He strode into the hall and threw down a roe deer at Gawain's feet. 'Yours,' he said. 'As we agreed. What have you got for me, then?'

'This,' said Gawain, and he took his host's face in his hands and kissed him. 'That's all, I promise.'

'I believe you,' laughed the lord of the castle, 'but what I'd like to know is how you came by this kiss.'

'Oh no,' said Gawain, shamefaced. 'That wasn't part of the bargain.' And they said no more about it. That night the three of them feasted together on capons and mead, and talked and laughed into the early hours.

In the morning Gawain woke to the sound of baying hounds and hunting horns. From his bed he could see the lord of the castle riding out across the parkland. As he expected, and as he hoped too, it wasn't long before the lady came into his room. She sat on his bed, closer this time, stroked his hair and talked again of love. Gawain laughed it all off as best he could, but it was not easy. When she offered him two kisses he did not find it at all difficult to accept; and this time the kisses were sweeter and longer than before, kisses he could not forget even if he had wanted to – and he did not want to.

That evening the lord of the castle returned from the hunt, a boar slung across his shoulders. 'Here we are,' he said. 'Not a bad day's work, eh? What about you?'

'Just this,' said Gawain. And at that he kissed him twice, though not, I imagine, as long nor as sweetly as he had kissed that morning. But he had kept his part of the bargain. Dinner went on again into the small hours and through it all the lady tried to seduce him with her eyes – and with her husband there at the same table. Although Gawain tried to look the other way, he found he did not want to.

Gawain scarcely slept at all that night. Haunted by thoughts of the Green Knight, he tossed and turned. It wasn't until dawn that he sank into a troubled sleep. When he woke, the lady of the castle was gazing down at him. She had never looked more lovely, but there were tears in her eyes. 'What is it?' she cried. 'Don't you like me? Am I that ugly to you? There's someone else, isn't there? You love someone else back at Camelot.'

'No, my lady,' said Gawain, taking her hand in his. 'There's no one else. It's not that. But you have a husband, a fine man, a noble knight. He's been a good friend to me. It wouldn't be right to love you. Do you think I don't want to? As a man I want to, but as a knight I must not, I cannot. Can't you understand?'

'But why not just this once?' The lady persisted, as she stroked his hair and traced his mouth with her finger. 'No one would know. I would tell no one. You would tell no one. Where's the harm in it? Please sweet Gawain, be nice to me.'

But Gawain would have none of it. He clenched his jaw and turned away from her. 'You should go, my lady,' he said stonily. The lady bowed her head and wept.

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'Like it or not, Gawain,' she said. 'You cannot stop me from loving you. I shall always keep you in my heart. I shall never forget you, never.'

'Nor I you, my lady.' Gawain said, and he meant it too.

'Will you at least do one thing for me?' she pleaded. 'Just to remind you of me from time to time, will you take this?' And she handed him the belt she wore around her waist, a belt of green ribbon interwoven with gold thread. 'Wear it always*Gawain, and I promise you will never come to any harm, for there is within it an all-powerful magic. Wear it and you will be safe, wear it and think of me. I know you are not my knight and should not wear my favour, but no one need see it. One day it may save your life. Make me happy, Gawain. Do just this one little thing for me. But promise me that, whatever you do, you will never tell my husband.'

Gawain needed no persuading about that. He had no intention of telling her husband, nor of handing over the belt either. Tomorrow he had to face the Green Knight, and this belt could be the saving of him. Now he would at least stand some chance of survival. Now he had some hope of living beyond tomorrow.

'Dear, sweet Gawain,' she whispered, and she kissed him three times, and so passionately this time that she left Gawain quite breathless, his heart pounding.

At sundown Gawain was waiting in the hall when the lord of the castle came in from the hunt, swinging a fox by its brush. Gawain went right up to him, took him by the shoulders and kissed him loudly three times. 'Three!' cried the lord of the castle, wiping his cheeks. 'And all I have to offer you in return is this poxy fox. Here. I wish you joy of it.'

Try as he might, Gawain could not enjoy the New Year's feast that night. There was wine, there was music, there was dancing. But hidden around his waist he could feel the lady's magic belt. He had not kept his promise to the lord of the castle; and worse, he knew it was out of cowardice that he had broken the bargain. The belt might save his life the next day, but it would not save his honour. All night long he lay in a turmoil of guilt, but he could not bring himself to hand over the belt and give up his only chance of life.

Gawain was up early on New Year's Day. He tied the belt around his waist, put on his warmest clothes and his fine gold-inlaid armour. Down in the courtyard he embraced his host for the last time, quite unable to look him in the eye. He looked for the lady of the castle but she was nowhere to be seen. He mounted Gringolet and waved his farewells. They let down the drawbridge and, with a squire ahead to guide him, Gawain rode out into the biting January cold.

For nearly two hours they rode on, following a winding, tumbling stream along a mist-filled valley. Suddenly the squire reined in his horse and pointed. 'Over there,' he

said, his voice hushed. 'Beyond those trees, you can't miss it, the Green Chapel. Sir Gawain, I know it's not my place, but if I were you I wouldn't go any closer. The Green Knight who lives there fights anyone who goes near. And I'm telling you, he never loses. Plenty have tried, but not one of them has ever lived to see another dawn. Listen, you can hear the crows gathering. Turn back Gawain, before it's too late. I won't say a word, I promise.'

'What must be done must be done,' Gawain replied. 'I am a knight of King Arthur's court. We may feel afraid, but we do not flinch and we do not run.'

'On your own head be it then,' said the squire, and he rode away and left Gawain alone in the swirling mist.

Gringolet pawed the ground, eager to be going. 'Don't be in such a hurry,' said Gawain aloud. 'I just hope and pray the lady was telling the truth about this magic belt. If not . . .' And as he spoke, he heard from somewhere ahead of him a grating, grinding sound. He listened again. It was just as he feared, metal on stone. The Green Knight was sharpening his axe. Gawain shivered in spite of himself. 'What must be must be,' he sighed, and he put his spurs to Gringolet's sides, urging him onwards.

He rode through the dripping trees, crossed a stream and came to a grassy mound. Near the mound stood a small chapel, the roof and walls all as green as the surrounding grass. From somewhere inside the mound itself, Gawain could hear the axe still being sharpened. It set his teeth on edge, and a shiver of fear ran down his spine. He thought of galloping off and, but for the green belt, he would undoubtedly have done so. Instead he dismounted. 'Who's there?' he shouted. 'I am Sir Gawain from King Arthur's court, and I have come as I promised I would. Come on out.'

'When I am ready,' came the reply. 'When my axe is sharp enough. I won't be long.' And the gruesome grinding ground on. He waited, pacing up and down, until at long last out came the Green Knight, feeling the blade of his axe with his thumb. He was every bit as huge and as terrifying as Gawain had remembered him. 'That will do nicely,' he said, and he looked mercilessly down at Gawain out of his grey-green, wolfish eyes. 'Welcome, Gawain,' he said.

'Let's not waste time on pleasantries,' said Gawain, longing now to have it done with. He felt his courage ebbing away with every passing moment.

'As you wish,' said the Green Knight. 'Take off your helmet, then. This won't take long.' Gawain removed his helmet, knelt down on the wet grass and bent his head. He closed his eyes and waited, but nothing happened.

'Go on then.' He could speak in no more than a whisper. 'Go on. I won't move.'

The Green Knight whirled his great axe around his head, around and around so that

it whistled through the air. In spite of himself, Gawain could not stop himself from flinching.

'What's the matter with you, Gawain?' the Green Knight scoffed, leaning nonchalantly on his axe. 'We aren't frightened, are we? I thought the knights of King Arthur's court were supposed to be so brave, and I heard Sir Gawain was the bravest of all. So, the great Sir Gawain is afraid of a little whistle, is he?'

'Get on with it, damn you,' Gawain cried. 'All right, I winced; but I won't do it again.'

'We shall see,' laughed the Green Knight. Once again he heaved up his axe. This time he held back the blow just a hair's breadth from the skin of Gawain's neck. Gawain felt the wind of it, but never moved a muscle.

'Well done, Gawain,' he said. 'That was just to see how brave you really are. This time though there'll be no holding back. Prepare yourself.'

'Can you do nothing but talk?' Gawain was more angry than frightened now. 'Strike man, strike. Or maybe you're a bit squeamish at the idea of killing a defenceless man, is that it?'

A third time now, the Green Knight swung up his axe. This time, the blade came close enough to nick the skin on Gawain's neck. Gawain felt the pain of it and the warm blood trickling down. He was on his feet in an instant, springing back and drawing his sword.

'That's it!' he cried. 'You've had your chance. One stroke, just one stroke. That was the bargain. Now I can defend myself, and by God I will.'

But strangely, the Green Knight just smiled and threw aside his axe. 'No, Gawain,' he spoke gently now, a different voice, a voice Gawain thought he knew from elsewhere. 'No, we shall not fight, you and I. We are friends. Do you not recognize me?' And as he spoke, the green of him vanished, his form changed, and he became the lord of the castle. Gawain was speechless. 'If I had wanted to, Gawain, I could easily have cut your head off, just as you did to me a year ago.'

'I don't understand any of this,' said Gawain, lowering his sword.

'You will,' said the lord of the castle. 'You will. Twice I held back my axe and drew no blood. That was because you twice kept your promise to me back in the castle, first with the one kiss my wife gave you, and then with the two kisses also. I see you remember it well. But Gawain, the third time, you deceived me. Yes, I had the three kisses she gave you, but she gave you something else as well, didn't she? She gave you a favour to wear, a green belt, a magic belt with power to save your skin, so she said. You never gave it to me. You never said a word about it. And for that I cut you – though not too deep, I hope. You see, she told me everything. I knew every word that passed between you, every look. If you had once weakened, and dishonoured your knighthood, then I can tell you, your

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head would be lying there at my feet, your life's blood pouring out on the grass.'

'I feel sick with shame,' said Gawain, taking off the green belt and offering it to him.

'No need, Gawain. The belt was a little thing, a little sin. No one is perfect, but you, my friend, are as close to perfect as I have ever met, or ever shall meet come to that. Keep the belt so that you do not forget us, nor what has happened here – but I'm afraid it's just an ordinary belt, it has no all-powerful magic.'

'After what I did, I do not deserve such kindness,' said Gawain. 'I did you wrong. I broke my word. I dishonoured my knighthood.'

'Nonsense.' The lord of the castle took him warmly by the shoulders. 'You wished only to live. What man faced with death does not wish to live, tell me that? Come, Gawain, I've had my fill of this dank and dismal place. Let's go back to the castle and feast some more. I'm glad it's over. I tell you, I'm sick to death of green. We'll roast the boar.'

'I'm tempted,' said Gawain. 'And as you now know only too well, I've never found temptation easy to resist. But I will resist this time. I'd better be on my way home to Camelot. If I don't get back soon, they'll think I'm dead – as by rights I ought to be. But before I go, tell me something. How were you able to turn yourself green as you did? How could you ride off with your head under your arm? And how was it that there wasn't a single drop of blood when I cut it off?'

'You deserve to know everything, and you shall,' said the lord of the castle. 'Mine is a strange story, but a true one nonetheless. My name is Sir Bernlak, Knight of the Lake. It was the Lady Nemue, the Lady of the Lake, who sent me to Camelot to test the courage of King Arthur and his knights, to find out if all the good things we had heard were true. I will tell her that there is at least one knight who is as noble as they say, and as brave and gentle too.' The two friends embraced, blessed each other and parted.

Some weeks later, Gawain came home to Camelot. And how we feasted! After he had told us his story, he showed us the scar on his neck; and as final proof, he gave me the green belt interwoven with gold thread. He need not have done so, for knowing Gawain as we all did, none of us seated at the Round Table ever doubted a word of his story.