

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Fit I

1

After the siege and the assault had been exhausted at Troy,
And the city had been broken to bits, and burnt to brands and ashes,
The man who wrought that tragedy, by means of his treasonous works,
Was brought to trial for treachery, truly the worst in the world.
It was Aeneas the nobleman and his high-and-mighty kin,
Who later oppressed many provinces, becoming overlords
Of well-nigh all the wealth in the isles that lie away to the West.
After that, Romulus, rich in rank, rushed away to Rome;
He was the first with pomp and pride to build that city up,
And he named it from his own name, which now the place still bears;
Tuscus turned to Tuscany, setting up dwellings to start with;
Under Longbeard in Lombardy houses were lifted up;
And far across the French Channel, by a man named Felix Brutus
On many broad banks our Britain was happily
Created;
To war, and woe, and wonder,
By turns we have been fated;
And here both bliss and blunder
Have flourished or abated.

2

And after Britain had been founded by this noble lord,
Bold men were bred up in it, who loved the clash of combat;
Time after time, as the years turned, they stirred up many troubles.
And more things to marvel at have come about in this country
Than in any other that I know of, since that ancient time.
But of all the kings that ever built and ruled in Britain here,
King Arthur was the noblest one, as I have always heard.
And therefore I intend to present an adventure, a true tale,
Which some of those among you may think more of a miracle,
An extraordinary adventure among the Arthurian wonders.
If you will listen to this tale, just for a little while,
I shall tell it to you right away, as I heard it in the court
Being told—
Here written down in ink,

A story strong and bold,
 Its letters truly linked
 In our Britain as of old.

3

King Arthur's court lay at Camelot as Christmastime was coming,
 Attended by many gracious lords, and the worthiest of knights—
 All the courtly brotherhood of the world-renowned Round Table—
 With costly revelry carried on, and carefree entertainments.
 At times they conducted tournaments where many men tilted,
 Jousting there most joyously, these knights of gentle birth,
 And afterwards rode back to court to sing and dance their carols;
 For there the festivities went on full strength for fifteen days,
 With all the meals and merriment that anyone could devise.
 Such clamorous and gleeful noise was glorious to hear,
 A delightful din all down the day, and dancing through the night,
 To the heights of happiness everywhere in the halls and in the chambers
 For those great lords and their grand ladies, whatever they liked best.
 Indeed, with all the delight in the world, they were dwelling there together,
 The most noteworthy knights that ever served, save for Christ himself,
 And the very loveliest ladies that had ever lived on earth,
 And their king the handsomest ruler who ever had held court,
 For all these fair folk in that hall were in the flush that youth
 Can give,
 Since Heaven had blessed them most—
 Their king superlative
 In mind and will, his host
 The hardiest troops alive.

4.

While the New Year still was so very young it was only newly come in,
 The court was served double helpings on the daises that day.
 From the moment the king had entered the hall in the company of his knights,
 After Mass had been celebrated by all with chanting in the chapel,
 Loud cries were being cast aloft, by clerics and the others.
 "Noël!" they shouted out anew, naming it over and over,
 And next the noble men ran out and passed their presents around,
 Shouting loudly, "New Year's gifts!", and "Guess which hand it's in!",
 Busily bantering back and forth about the presents they gave.
 Ladies laughed out loud in sport even when they were losers,
 And he who won would not be sorry, you may be sure of that.

They kept on making all this mirth until it was time to feast.
 Then, after they had washed their hands, they went to their seats in order,
 The best-born always seated above, as it seemed proper to do.
 Queen Guenevere, the fairest of all, was set in their very midst,
 Taking her place on the high dais, with hangings all about:
 Fine silk draperies on the walls, and a canopy overhead
 Of excellent tapestry from Toulouse, and cloths from Turkestan,
 Embroidered, and among the threads the finest gems were set
 That could be purchased in those days, indeed at any price,
 With many pence.
 Breathtaking to behold,
 With bright gray eyes she glanced;
 A lovelier gem, we're told,
 Never held men entranced.

5.

But Arthur would not eat his meal until all the rest had been served,
 So boisterous in his youthfulness, he was even somewhat boyish.
 He liked his life to lie lightly on him, and two things he disliked:
 Either to lie in bed too late, or to sit still for too long,
 Since his young blood and restless mind kept him busy all the time.
 And also another inclination had lately become his custom:
 That he in his high majesty declared he would not eat
 On such a festive holiday before he had been told
 A weird and wonderful account of some adventurous thing,
 Of some amazing marvel that he might believe to be true,
 About his ancestors and their arms, or other adventurers;
 Or until some true knight sought from him a man of a similar sort
 To join with in a jousting match, to lay themselves at risk,
 A life for a life in jeopardy, the one against the other,
 Allowing Fortune to favor one, to give that man the edge.
 This was the custom for the king, when he was in his court,
 At each and every splendid feast among his noble people
 In the hall.
 Proud in both face and figure,
 He ruled them, standing tall
 In the New Year, full of vigor,
 Making merry with them all.

6.

So there he stood, the spirited king, steadfast and masterful,
 Chatting of gracious courtly trifles in front of the high table.
 There good Sir Gawain was given a seat beside Queen Guenevere,
 And Agravain of the Hard Hand sat on his other side,
 Both of them sons of the king's sister, his nephews, and trusted knights.
 At their table Bishop Baldwin sat, in the place of honor, by Arthur,
 And Ywain, son of Urien, shared the same platters with him.
 These seated on the dais were sumptuously served,
 And after them many trusty men, ranged at the long side-boards.
 Then the first course was carried out to the cracking sound of trumpets—
 Slung under every one of which, a brilliant banner hung;
 And a new noise of kettledrums combined with the noble bagpipes,
 Whose loud, wild, warbling notes wakened the hall's echoes,
 So that many hearts were lifted high as the blasts of music touched them.
 Dishes came fast and furiously, piled high with many dainties,
 Such an abundance of fresh meats, laid on so many plates,
 That the servers had trouble finding room at everybody's place
 To set the silver platters down that held the broths and stews,
 On the cloth.
 Each lord took what he wished,
 None grudged him, none was loath;
 Each pair had a dozen dishes,
 Good beer and bright wine both.

7.

But now I will say no more about the serving of their feast,
 For everybody must surely know that none would be left wanting.
 Another noise, entirely new, was nearing them in a rush,
 And this indeed would give the King permission to eat his dinner!
 For scarcely had the ringing trumpets ceased reverberating,
 And the first course been served in the court, all in order of rank,
 When in there burst through the hall door a terrifying figure,
 The tallest in his stature that had ever stalked the earth;
 From his neck to his midsection so solid and squarely-built,
 And his loins and limbs of such a length and also such a girth,
 I wouldn't find it hard to grant he was genuinely half-giant!
 Nevertheless I must suppose he was actually a man,
 And quite the most handsome of that bulk that could ever ride a horse;
 For although his body was so broad across the back and breast,
 Both his belly and his waist were most becomingly slender,
 And every part of him in proportion completely followed suit

When seen.
 Men marveled at the hue
 That stained him with its sheen;
 Charging into their view,
 He was—face and all—*bright green!*

8.
 And his clothing, like the fellow himself, was all decked out in green:
 A straight, tight-fitting tunic clinging close about his trunk,
 With a handsome mantle over it, decorated inside
 With fur trim around the edge where the elegant lining showed,
 Shining bright as ermine, and the same was seen in the hood
 That was tossed back, free of his locks, and lay across his shoulders;
 Snugly fitting stockings he wore, in that same shade of green,
 That hugged his calves, and he had strapped on bright spurs underneath
 Of shiny gold, over silken borders, which were richly striped,
 And below his shanks he wore no shoes as he came riding in.
 All the rest of his vesture, truly, was also sparkling green,
 Both the bars running across his belt and the other brilliant stones
 That were richly spread around throughout his elegant array,
 Over his person and his saddle, upon a silken backing.
 It would be tedious to tell you half the bright details
 That were embroidered over it, the birds and butterflies,
 With gay beadwork of bright green set in amidst the gold.
 The pendants of the horse's breastplate, the splendid crupper band,
 The studs on the bit, and all the metal, were coated with enamel;
 The stirrups he stood up in were stained in the same way,
 And the saddle-bows and saddle-skirts, were an identical shade
 That gleamed and glinted, all of them, and inlaid with green stones.
 The horse the fellow rode on was colored the same as he,
 And grand:
 A green horse huge and thick,
 A steed hard to command,
 In its braided bridle quick,
 And well-suited to the man.

9.
 The knight was splendidly decked out, with all his gear in green,
 And even the hair on his head agreed, matching that of his horse,
 The flowing locks were all fanned out, enveloping his shoulders.
 A mighty beard as big as a bush hung covering his chest,

That, together with the splendid hair cascading from his head,
 Was clipped off in a circle at the level of his elbows,
 So the upper halves of his arms were hidden, precisely in the style
 Of a King's Cappadocian cape that closes around the neck.
 The mane of the man's magnificent horse looked very much like his own,
 Well-curled and combed out carefully, containing many knots
 That were plaited in, with golden threads among the fair green hairs,
 In every case one strand of hair aligned with another of gold.
 The tail of the steed and his topknot were twined in the same fashion,
 Both of them being bound about with a band of the brightest green,
 And studded with expensive stones all the way down to the dock,
 And then lashed tightly with a thong and an intricate knot on top,
 Where many brightly glittering bells of burnished gold were jingling.
 Such an animal on the earth, and such a worthy rider,
 Were never seen in that hall before by the eyes of any man
 Or lord.
 He glanced with lightning speed,
 Those who saw him swore.
 No man, they all agreed,
 Might stand against his sword.

10.

Nevertheless he wore no helmet, nor chain-mail hauberk either,
 No steel plate over his breast and neck, nor any hint of armor,
 Neither a shield nor a spear shaft with which to thrust or strike,
 But in one hand, as a sign of peace, he held a holly bough,
 That tree that burns the brightest green when all the groves are bare,
 And in his other hand an axe, a huge and monstrous tool,
 A brute of a battle-axe to describe in words, whoever might try.
 The head was as long as an ell-rod, a yard and a span in length,
 The spike on the tip was hammered out of green and golden steel,
 The biting blade was burnished brightly, bearing a broad edge
 As finely honed for slicing as a keenly whetted razor.
 The shaft and hilt of the stout staff the grim man gripped it by
 Were wound about with iron straps down to the butt of the helve,
 And carved all over with green designs that were pleasingly engraved;
 A leather thong wrapped round the shaft and fastened at the axe-head,
 Looping round and round the handle all along its length,
 And many choice and splendid tassels, dangling off the strap
 From buttons of a brilliant green, were richly braided there.
 This splendid man reined in his horse, and riding into the hall,
 Drove straight up to the high dais, undaunted by any danger.

He hailed not one of them but stood and glared high over their heads.
 These were the first words that he spoke: "Where," he said, "is the man,
 In charge of all this company? I would be glad to see
 That lord with my own eyes, to parley with the man who wears
 The crown."

On the knights he cast his gaze;
 His eyes rolled up and down;
 Paused; studied to appraise
 Who had the most renown.

11.

For a long time all the men sat looking, staring at this knight,
 For each one marveled to himself what such a sight might mean
 That a horseman, and his horse as well, should take on such a hue
 And grow as green as the grass grows, and, it seemed, even greener,
 Than green enamel painted on gold, glowing even brighter.
 The servants who were standing by studied him, stalking near,
 With all the wonder in the world as to what he might want to do.
 For many marvels had they seen, but such as this one—never;
 Therefore, people decided it was a phantom, faerie trick;
 Which is why so many noble knights were afraid to answer him,
 And, wholly astounded at his speech, all sat as still as stones
 In a swooning silence through every corner of the resplendent hall.
 As if they had suddenly slipped asleep, the noise of their voices slackened
 Instantly:
 I think not all from fear,
 But some from courtesy—
 Let him to whom all defer
 Address him suitably.

12.

Then Arthur, in front of the high dais, took in this awesome marvel,
 And greeted him in appropriate fashion, for he was never afraid,
 Saying to him, "Sir, you are indeed welcome in this place.
 I myself am the head of this house, and Arthur is my name.
 Swing down lightly from your horse, and linger here, I pray,
 And whatever it is you want from us, We'll find out in a little while."
 "No, so help me Him who sits on high!" the knight replied,
 "To stop for any length of time in this house was never my errand;
 But since your fame, good sir, is lauded loftily to the skies,
 And your castle and your knights in armor are reported to be the best,

The sturdiest men in steel armor that ever mastered steeds,
 The worthiest and manliest warriors anywhere in the world,
 Proven men to play against in every noble pastime,
 And this place is renowned for courtliness—so I have been told—
 Well, that, indeed, is what has brought me here at Christmas time.
 You may be certain by this branch of holly that I bear,
 I pass into this house in peace, not seeking any peril;
 For if I had traveled with companions, warlike in fighting gear,
 I have a hauberk at my house and a helmet there as well,
 I have a shield and a sharp spear, shining splendidly,
 And many other weapons at hand, that I know how to use;
 But since I wish no war with you, the weave I wear is softer.
 And now, if you are really as brave as all the warriors say,
 You'll grant me, out of your good grace, the simple game I seek,
 By right.”

Arthur made this reply,
 ”If you, Sir courteous knight,
 Crave unarmed combat, why,
 You won't fail to find a fight.”

13.

“No! I'm not asking for a fight, I tell you in good faith,
 For sitting about on these benches here are only beardless boys.
 If I were buckled into my armor, mounted on my high steed,
 There's no man here to match me, their might is far too weak.
 Therefore, all I crave in this court is a little Christmas game,
 Since it is Yule and New Year, and here are some lively lads.
 If anybody now in this house imagines himself to be
 So brave, so bold in his blood, and so crazy in the head
 That he'll dare to stoutly strike a stroke and receive one in return,
 I shall present him with a gift, this gorgeous long-blade axe,
 This battle-axe, one of the heaviest, to handle as he likes,
 And I shall await the first blow, unprotected as I sit.
 If any man is fierce enough to test what I propose,
 Let him step smartly up to me and snatch hold of this weapon—
 I'll quit my claim on it forever, let him keep it as his own—
 And I will withstand a stroke from him, unflinching, on this ground,
 So long as you grant me the right to deal him one stroke in return,
 To pay
 Him back: yet give him a year,
 Twelve whole months and a day.

All right now, quick! Let's hear
What anyone dares to say."

14.

If he had astounded them at first, then now they were even stiller,
All the liegemen in that hall, the highborn and the lowly.
The man there who was sitting his horse swiveled in his saddle,
And roughly rolled his bloodshot eyes wildly around the court;
He arched his bristling eyebrows, which were gleaming a vivid green,
And pointed with his beard, back and forth, to see who would stand up.
When none would answer him man to man, he cleared his throat too loudly,
Drew himself up to his full height, and lorded it over them thus:
"What! Is this King Arthur's house?" the haughty fellow scoffed,
"Whose fame continually runs throughout so many realms?
Where now is your arrogant pride, and your mighty conquests,
Your great ferocity and fury, and your *exalted* words?
Now are the revelry and renown of the famous Round Table
Overturned with a single word from a man all by himself,
For you all cringe in your cowardice, without a blow being struck!"
With this he laughed so loudly that their lord was stung to the core;
The blood shot suddenly into his fair face and cheeks from shame
And disgrace.
He grew angry as the wind,
As all did in that place.
A king of the bravest kind,
He stepped up, face to face,

15.

To that mighty man, and said, "By Heaven, Sir, your request is daft,
And since you have asked for a foolish thing, it is fitting that you should get it.
I know of no knight here aghast at your exalted words.
Now hand me over your battleaxe, this minute, in God's name,
And I myself shall grant the favor that you've requested here."
He stepped up lightly to that knight and snatched the axe from his hand.
Then haughtily the other man dismounted to the ground.
Once Arthur had the axe in hand, he gripped hold of the helve,
And sternly swung the thing about, preparing to deal that stroke.
The strong man stood in front of him, in all his towering height,
Taller by a head and more than any in the house.
With stern expression there he stood, and stroked his bushy beard,
And with a countenance unmoved he drew his collar down,

No more daunted nor dismayed at Arthur's sweeping strokes
 Than if someone sitting on the bench had brought him a cup to drink
 Of wine.

Beside the Queen, Gawain
 Towards the King inclined:
 "Please, sir—I speak it plain—
 Let this combat be mine.

16.

"If you are willing, my worthy lord," said Gawain to the King,
 "To command me to come up from this bench and stand beside you there—
 If I, without discourtesy, might leave my place at this table,
 And provided that my liege-lady shall not take it ill—
 I would come forward with this counsel, before your noble court.
 It seems to me an unseemly thing, if the truth were to be told,
 When such a haughty challenge is tossed aloft in your high hall,
 For you, although your desire is strong, to take it upon yourself,
 While so many bold, brave warriors sit about you on the benches
 That, under Heaven, I believe, there are none of more proven courage,
 Nor fitter on the battlefield when fighting is afoot.
 I am the weakest, I well know, and my wisdom is the slightest,
 And the least loss of a life would be mine, were one to tell the truth.
 Only inasmuch as you are my uncle am I to be praised;
 There is no goodness in my body except that it bears your blood.
 And since this task is so impudent, and beneath your dignity,
 And because I have been the first to ask, let it be assigned to me.
 And if I speak out of order, let this noble court debate
 The blame."

The courtiers whispered together,
 Then all advised the same:
 To rid the King of this bother
 And give Gawain the game.

17.

Then the King commanded the knight to rise from the bench and come to him,
 And Gawain instantly stood up, and modestly made his way,
 And kneeling down before the King, he caught hold of that weapon.
 Arthur graciously let him take it, and lifting up his hand,
 He gave Gawain God's blessing, with good cheer bidding him
 Be hardy in his heart and hand, both of them equally.
 "Take care, cousin," the King admonished, "that you carve just one cut,

And if you deal it adequately, I truly do believe
 That you will be able to withstand any blow he shall offer after!"
 Gawain went up to the huge man, with his battle-axe in hand,
 And the one who stood boldly waiting for him was not in the least dismayed.
 The knight who was all garbed in green addressed Sir Gawain thus:
 "Let us go over our pact again, before we proceed any further.
 First, I must request of you, Sir, plainly, what is your name?
 Tell me truly what it is, so that I may believe you."
 "Truly, then," that good knight said, "Gawain is what I'm called,
 Who now will offer you this blow, whatever may happen later,
 And on this day twelve months from now, I will take another from you
 With whatsoever weapon you wish—and not from any man else
 Here below."
 The other knight replied,
 "Sir Gawain, on my soul,
 I am greatly gratified
 That you will strike this blow.

18.

"By God, Sir Gawain," the Green Knight said, "it's wholly to my liking,
 That I shall be taking from your hand what I have asked for here.
 And you have recited without hesitation, in precisely correct terms,
 And clear through, all the covenant I requested of the King,
 Except that you must assure me, Sir, and swear it on your oath,
 That you will seek me out yourself, wherever you suppose
 I may be found upon the earth, and there receive such wages
 As those you deal to me today before this noble court."
 "Where shall I seek you?" Gawain asked, "Where is your dwelling place?
 I have no idea where you live, I swear by Him who made me,
 Nor, Knight, do I know either your court, or even your proper name.
 But direct me faithfully to your house, and tell me what you are called,
 And I shall make use of all my wits to find my way to it,
 And that, I swear to you, is the truth, upon my word of honor."
 "That's quite enough in this New Year—no further oath is needed,"
 Declared the gigantic man in green to the noble-hearted Gawain.
 "If I can answer your questions truly, after I've taken your tap
 And you have deftly struck me, then immediately I'll direct you
 To my house and home, and I will tell you what is my proper name;
 Then you may call on me, and thereby hold yourself to our pact.
 And if I am unable to speak, then all the better for you,
 You may linger on in your own land, and look for me no further!—so,
 Don't hold back!
 Take up your grim tool now,

And let's see how it hacks."
 "I'll gladly show you how,"
 And Gawain stroked his axe.

19.

The Green Knight promptly arranged himself in position on the floor;
 He bent his head down a little, uncovering the flesh,
 He laid his long and lovely locks forward over the crown,
 Leaving his naked neck exposed, before the business at hand.
 Gawain took a grip on his axe, and gathered it up high,
 He braced his left foot on the floor, a little ahead of the right,
 And swiftly let the heavy axe swing down on the naked neck,
 So that the sharp edge of the blade sliced down into the bones
 And sank clean through the shining flesh, cleaving it in two,
 Until the edge of burnished steel bit straight into the ground.
 The handsome head dropped from the neck, and fell onto the floor,
 Where many struck at it with their feet as it was rolling about;
 The blood was spraying out of the body, gleaming all over the green.
 Yet the fellow neither faltered nor fell, none the worse for all of this,
 But stoutly he sprang forward at once upon his sturdy shanks
 And violently he lunged out where the knights stood in their places,
 Caught a hold of his shapely head, and lifted it quickly up;
 And after that he hurried back to his horse, and seized the bridle,
 Stepped up into the steel stirrup, swinging himself astride,
 And he held his own head in his hand dangling by the hair.
 The rider settled himself securely, as well-seated in his saddle
 As if no mishap had troubled him, although he sat in his place
 With no head.
 He twisted his great trunk,
 That gruesome body that bled.
 Many were in a funk
 When all his words were said,

20.

For now he was holding the head in his hand, upright on his palm,
 Aiming its face directly towards the nobles on the dais,
 And then it lifted its eyelids up, and stared with wide-open eyes,
 And out of its mouth it spoke to them, in words you may now hear:
 "Look to it, Gawain, that you are ready to go as you have pledged,
 And seek me faithfully, my man, until you find me out,
 As you have promised in this hall, in the hearing of these knights.

Make your way to the Green Chapel, I charge you, to receive
 A stroke just like the one you've struck—as you will have deserved—
 Which will promptly be repaid to you next New Year's Day in the morning.
 Many people know me as the Knight of the Green Chapel;
 And so you will never fail to find me—if you seek me out.
 Therefore, come, or you'll deserve to be called a craven coward.”
 With a violent yanking on the reins, he turned his horse around
 And hurtled out at the hall door, holding his head in his hand,
 So fast that the fire flew from the flints struck by the horse's hooves.
 To what country he then returned, nobody there knew,
 Any more than they could know the place from which he had come.
 What then?
 The King and Gawain shared
 A laugh at him, a grin—
 Yet openly they declared
 It a true phenomenon.

21.

Although King Arthur, that gracious Lord, at heart was quite astounded,
 He let no semblance of this be seen, but spoke out confidently
 And clearly, to the lovely Queen, in a model of courtly speech:
 “Dear lady, do not be dismayed at what we've seen today.
 Mummery such as this is to be counted on at Christmas—
 With the playing of our interludes, so we may laugh and sing—
 Along with courtly carols that are danced by our knights and ladies.
 Nevertheless, I may indeed address myself to my dinner,
 For I have certainly seen a marvel—and that I can't deny.”
 He cast a glance upon Sir Gawain, aptly directing him,
 “Now, Sir, you may '*hang up your axe*,' it has hewn enough for now.”
 And it was displayed above the dais, hung on a tapestry,
 Where all might look at it as a marvel, and stand in awe of it,
 A testament to prove the truth of this wonder-making tale.
 Then these two lords walked up together, sat down at one table,
 The King himself and the worthy knight, and eagerly men served them
 Double dishes of all the dainties, a feast fit for a king,
 With every kind you could imagine, of food and minstrelsy both.
 Thus they joyfully passed that day until it had reached its end
 On the land.
 Now think well, Sir Gawain,
 And let your will withstand
 Fear, that you may maintain
 This quest you've taken in hand.