



## SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

King Arthur's adventures did not end when he had defeated the Saxons and brought peace to Britain: for though he had set up the Realm of Logres – the land of true good and piety, nobleness and right living – the evil was always breaking in to attack the good. It would need many books to tell of every adventure that befell during his reign – that brief period of light set like a star of Heaven in the midst of the Dark Ages: and we cannot, for example, tell here how Arthur himself fought with the Giant of St Michael's Mount who carried off helpless wayfarers to his dark and evil castle; nor how he made war against the Emperior Lucius and was received in Rome; nor even of his fight with the dreadful Cat of Losane.

But year by year the fame of his court grew, and spread far and wide, and the bravest and noblest knights in the world came to his court and strove by their deeds of courage and gentleness to win a place at the Round Table.

Many stories are told of these knights also – of Launcelot and Gawain, of Tristram and Gareth, of Percivale, Ywain, Marhaus, Cleges, Agravaine, and many, many others – and more adventures that befell the most famous of these than may possibly be told in one book.



'Not so,' cried the Green Knight in his great booming voice. 'Here I see only beardless children whom I could fell with a stroke! Nay, I come rather in this high season of Our Lord's birth to bring Yule-tide sport, a test of valour to your feast. If any man in this hall is so brave and so courageous as to exchange stroke for stroke, I will give him this noble axe – heavy enough truly to handle as he may desire: yes, and I myself will stand here on the floor and receive the first stroke of the axe wherever he may smite me. Only he must swear, and you, lord king, to give me the right to deal him such another blow, if I may, a twelve-month and a day from now.'

More silent still sat the knights; if they had been surprised before now their amazement was greater still. But none dared answer his challenge, so terrible was the man and so fearsome the great axe which he held in his hand.

Then the Green Knight laughed aloud in mockery: 'Is this indeed the Court of King Arthur?' he cried, 'and are these the far-famed Knights of the Round Table? Now is their glory laid low for ever, since even to hear tell of blows makes them all grow silent in fear!'

King Arthur sprang up at this. 'Fellow,' he cried, 'this foolishness of yours shall have a fitting answer. If none other will take your challenge, give me the axe and make ready for the blow!'

But at this Sir Gawain rose to his feet and said:

'My lord king and noble uncle, grant me a boon! Let this adventure be mine, for still there is my old shame unhealed: still have I to prove my worth as a Knight of your Round Table, still to fit myself to be a champion of Logres.'

'Right happy I am that the quest shall be yours, dear nephew,' answered Arthur. And the Green Knight smiled grimly as he sprang from his horse and met with Gawain in the middle of the hall.

'I too am overjoyed to find one brave man amongst you all,' he said. 'Tell me your name, Sir knight, ere we make our bargain.'

'I am Gawain, son of King Lot of Orkney, and nephew to royal Arthur,' was the answer. 'And here I swear by my knighthood to strike but one blow, and bravely to endure such another if you may strike it me a twelve-month hence.'

'Sir Gawain,' cried the Green Knight, 'overjoyed am I indeed that your hand shall strike this blow. Come now and deal the stroke: thereafter shall I tell you who I am and where you may find me. Take now the axe and let us see how well you can smite.'

'Gladly will I,' said Gawain, taking the axe in his hands and swinging it while the Green Knight made ready by kneeling on the floor and drawing his long hair on to the crown of his head to lay bare his neck for the stroke. Putting all his strength into the blow, Gawain whirled up the axe and struck so hard that the keen blade cut through flesh and bone and set the sparks flying from the stone paving, while the Green Knight's head leapt from his shoulders and went rolling across the floor.

But the knight neither faltered nor fell: swiftly he sprang forward with hands outstretched, caught up his head, and turning with it held in his hand by the hair mounted upon the waiting horse. Then, riding easily as if nothing had happened, he turned his face towards Gawain and said:





'See to it that you keep your oath and seek me out a year hence. I am the Knight of the Green Chapel, and as such men know me in the north. Through Wales shall you seek me, and in the Forest of Wirral: and you will not fail to find me there if you be not a coward and a breaker of your knightly word.'

With that he wheeled his horse and galloped out of the door, the sparks flying up round his horse's hooves, and away into the distance, his head still held in his hand, swinging easily by the hair.

But all at the feast sat astonished beyond words at this strange adventure, and it was a little while before the hall was filled once more with laughter and the joy of that festal season.

The year went by full swiftly; the trees grew green with spring, the leaves fading through the bright summer days, turned to red and gold in the early autumn; and upon Michaelmas Day King Arthur held a feast at Caerleon with many of his knights, in honour of Sir Gawain who must on the morrow set forth upon his dreadful quest. Ywain and Agravaine and Erec were there; Launcelot and Lionel and Lucan the Good; Sir Bors and Sir Bedivere and Baldwin the lord bishop; Arthur and Guinevere to bless him and wish him God-speed. Gawain donned his armour, curved and shining and inlaid with gold; he girt his sword to his side and took the Green Knight's axe in his hand; then he mounted upon Gringalet his war-horse, and rode into the forests of South Wales, the shield held before him with the device of the Pentangle, the five-pointed star of Logres, emblazoned in the midst.

So Sir Gawain set out, and rode through the realm of Logres, seeking for no joy but a deadly danger at the end of his quest. After many days he came into the wild lands of North Wales, and fared through lonely valleys and deep forests, forced often to sleep out under the stars by night, and to do battle by day with robbers and wild men.

Grim winter had closed upon him when he came to the northern sea, left the islands of Anglesey upon his left, and came by Clwyd to the Holy Head, near Saint Winifred's Well on the shore of the wide river Dee. Near to the mouth he forded the stream at low tide, and came across the desolate sands into the wild Forest of Wirral. Here were many more robbers and evil men, lying in wait by forest path and lonely stream, by rocky defile and by green valley – and he must fight with all who stayed him.



Everywhere he went he asked tidings of a Green Knight and of a Chapel also of Green near which was his dwelling: but none in the forest could help him in his quest. Only a brave knight could have passed that way, and Gawain endured all – foes to overcome, and the bitter weather of mid-winter.

On Christmas Eve he rode upon Gringalet through marsh and mire, and prayed that he might find shelter. And on a sudden he came through open parkland to a fine castle set on a little hill above a deep valley where flowed a wide stream. A fair lawn lay in front of it, and many great oak trees on either side; there was a moat before the castle, and a low palisade of wood.

'Now God be thanked,' said Sir Gawain, 'that I have come to this fair dwelling for Christmas, and may He grant me to find an honourable welcome herein . . . Good sir!' he cried to the porter who came to the great gate when he knocked, 'Grant me entrance, I pray you, and tell the lord of this castle that I am a knight of King Arthur's court passing this way upon a quest.'

With a kindly smile the porter opened the gate, and Gawain rode over the drawbridge and into the courtyard. And there were squires and serving-men waiting who helped him to alight, led Gringalet away to the stable, and brought Gawain into a goodly hall where a fire burned brightly and the lord of the castle came forth from his chamber to greet his guest, saying:

'Welcome to my dwelling, Sir knight: all that I have is here at your service, and you shall be my honoured guest for as long as it shall please you to remain in this castle.'

'I thank you, noble sir,' said Gawain. 'May God bless you for your hospitality.' With that they clasped

hands as good friends should; and Gawain looked upon the knight who greeted him so warmly, and thought what a fine warrior that castle had as its lord. For he was a tall man and broad of shoulder, with an open, honest face tanned red by the sun, with red hair and beard, a firm hand-clasp, a free stride, and a straightforward speech: just such a man as was born to be a leader of valiant men and a lord over wide estates.

The squires led Gawain next to a fair chamber in the keep, where they helped him to lay aside his armour, and clad him in rich, flowing robes lined softly with fur. Then they led him back to the hall and set him in a chair near to the fire, beside the lord of the castle. They brought in the tables then, set them upon trestles, covered them with fair white cloths, set thereon salt cellars and spoons of silver, then brought in the dishes and the goblets of wine. The lord of the castle drank to Sir Gawain, and rejoiced with all his followers that chance had brought so far-famed a knight to his lonely dwelling.

When the meal was ended the two knights went together to the chapel of the castle, where the chaplain celebrated Evensong and the whole service for Christmas Eve.

Then the knight brought Sir Gawain into a comely closet and sat him in a chair by the fire. And there the lady of the castle came to visit him, accompanied by her handmaidens – a very lovely lady, fairer even than Queen Guinevere. So the evening passed in jest and joy, and they brought Gawain to his room with bright tapers, set a goblet of hot spiced wine at his bedside, and left him there to his rest.

Three days were spent in feasting and in Christmas



rejoicings – dancing and carol-singing, and much merriment. And even the lady of the castle sat by Gawain, and sang to him and talked with him, and attended to his comfort.

‘Tarry with me longer,’ said the lord of the castle on the evening of the fourth day. ‘For while I live I shall be held the worthier because so brave and courteous a knight as Sir Gawain has been my guest.’

‘I thank you, good sir,’ answered Gawain, ‘but I must away to-morrow on my high quest. For I must be at the Green Chapel upon the New Year’s day, and I would rather keep mine oath than be ruler of all this land. Moreover as yet I have found none who can instruct me as to where the Green Chapel is.’

The lord of the castle laughed happily. ‘This is indeed good news!’ he cried. ‘Here then you may stay until the very day of your quest’s ending. For not two hours’ ride from this castle you shall find the Green Chapel – a man of mine shall bring you to it upon the first day of the new year.’

Then Gawain was glad, and he too laughed joyously. ‘I thank you, sir, for this news – and greatly also for your kindness. Now that my quest is achieved, I will dwell here in all joy and do what you will.’

‘Then these three days,’ said the lord of the castle, ‘I will ride out hunting in the forest. But you, who have travelled far and endured many things, shall abide in my castle and rest at your ease. And my wife shall attend on you, and entertain you with her company when I am out hunting.’

‘I thank you indeed,’ said Gawain. ‘And in no other wise could I pass with greater joy the three days before my meeting with the Green Knight.’

‘Well,’ said the lord of the castle, ‘so let it be. And as this yet is the festive season of game and jest, let us make a merry bargain together, I vowing each day to give you whatever I may win in the wood, and you giving in exchange anything that may come to you here in the castle. Let us swear to make this exchange, for worse or for better, whatever may happen.’

‘With all my heart,’ laughed Gawain. And so the oath was sworn.

Next morning the lord of the castle hunted the deer through the forests of Wirral and Delamere; and many a hart and hind fell to his keen arrows.

But Gawain slept long in a soft bed hung about with curtains, and dreamt of many things ’twixt waking and sleeping, until the lady of the castle, stepping silently as a sunbeam, came and sat upon his bed and talked with him merrily. Long they spoke together, and many words of love did the lady utter; but Gawain turned them all with jest and courtesy, as a true knight should who speaks with the lady of his host.

‘Now God save you, fair sir,’ she said at length, ‘and reward you for your merry words. But that you are really Sir Gawain I misdoubt me greatly!’

‘Wherefore do you doubt?’ asked the knight anxiously, fearing that he had failed in some point of courtesy.

‘So true a knight as Gawain,’ answered the lady, ‘and one so gentle and courteous unto damsels would never have tarried so long with a lady and not begged a kiss of her in parting.’

‘Faith, fair lady,’ said Gawain, ‘and you bid me to it, I will indeed ask a kiss of you: but a true knight asks not otherwise, for fear to displease you.’



So the lady kissed him sweetly, and blessed him and departed; and Gawain rose from his bed and called for the chamberlain to clothe him. And thereafter he ate and drank, and passed his day quietly in the castle until the lord of it came home in the grey evening, bearing the spoils of the chase.

'What think you of this game, Sir knight?' he cried. 'I deserve thanks for my skill as a huntsman, do I not – for all of this is yours, according to our bargain!'

'I thank you,' answered Gawain, 'and I take the gift as we agreed. And I will give to you all that I won within these walls.' And with that he put his hands on the lord of the castle's shoulders and kissed him, saying: 'Take here my spoils, for I have won nothing but this: if more had been mine, as freely would I have given it to you.'

'It is good,' said his host, 'and much do I thank you for it. Yet would I like to know whence came your kiss, and how did you win it?'

'Not so,' answered Gawain, 'that was no part of the bargain!' And thereupon they laughed merrily and sat down to a fine dinner.

Next morning the lord of the castle went forth down the hillside and along the deep valley-bottoms to seek out and slay the wild boar in the marshes.

But Gawain abode in his bed, and the lady came once more to sit by him; and ever she strove to wheedle him into speaking to her words of love unseemly for the lady of a knight. But Gawain the courteous turned all into jest, and defended himself so well by his wit that he won no more than two kisses, given by the lady ere she left him laughing.

'And now, Sir Gawain,' said the lord of the castle

when he came home that night and laid the boar's head at his feet. 'Here is my spoil of the day which I give you according to our bargain: now what have you won to give me in exchange?'

'I thank you,' said Gawain, 'for your just dealing in this game. As truly will I give you all that I have gained this day.'

Thereat he took the lord of the castle by the shoulders and gave him two kisses, saying: 'Now are we quits – for this and no more have I got me to-day.'

'By St Giles!' laughed the lord of the castle, 'you will be rich in a short time if we drive such bargains!' Then they went to the feast, and sat late over their meat and wine, while the lady strove ever to please Gawain, making fair, secret glances at him which, for his honour, he must not return.

The morrow would be the last day of the year. Gawain was eager to ride forth in quest of the Green Knight; but the lord of the castle stayed him with hospitable words:

'I swear by mine honour as a true knight that upon New Year's Day you shall come to the Green Chapel long ere the hour of noon. So stay in your bed to-morrow and rest in my castle. I will up with morning and ride to hunt the fox: so let us make once again our bargain to exchange all the winnings that may be ours to-morrow. For twice have I tried you and found you true; but the next is the third time, and that shall be the best.'

So once more they swore the oath, and while the lord of the castle went forth with his huntsmen and his pack of music-mouthed hounds, Gawain lay asleep, dreaming of the terrible meeting with the Green



Knight so close before him. Presently the lady came in, blithe as a bird; she flung up the window so that the clear, frosty sunshine streamed into the room, roused Gawain from his slumbers and claimed of him a kiss.

She was fairer than the sunshine itself that morning, her hair falling each side of her lovely face, and her neck whiter than the snow gleaming between the fur of her gown. Sweetly she kissed Gawain and chid him for a sluggard.

'Surely you are a very man of ice that you take but one kiss! Or is it that you have a lady waiting for you in Camelot?'

'Not so,' answered Gawain gravely, 'no lady yet has my love. But it may not be yours, for you have a lord already – a far nobler knight than ever I shall be!'

'But this one day we may love,' she said. 'Surely it may be so? Then all my life-days I may remember that Gawain held me in his arms.'

'Nay, for the sake of mine oath of knighthood and the glory of Logres, I may not do so – for such were shame indeed.'

Then she blamed him and besought him, but ever he turned aside her words courteously, and ever held true to his honour as a knight of Logres should. At last she sighed sweetly, and kissed him a second time, saying: 'Sir Gawain, you are a true knight, the noblest ever. So give me but a gift whereby to remember you, that by thinking of my knight I may lessen my mourning.'

'Alas,' said Gawain, 'I have nothing to give. For I travel without baggage on this dangerous quest.'

'Then I will give you this green lace from my girdle,' said the lady. 'Wear that for my sake at least.'



'It may not be so,' answered Gawain, 'for I cannot be your knight and wear your favour.'

'It is but a little thing,' she said, 'and you may wear it hidden. Take it, I pray you, for it is a magic lace and while a man wears it he may not be slain, not even by all the magic upon earth. But I charge you to hide it, and tell not my lord.'

This proved too great a temptation for Gawain, and, mindful of his ordeal with the Green Knight next day, he took the lace and promised never to reveal it. Then the lady kissed him for the third time, and went quickly away.

That evening the lord of the castle came home from the hunt bearing with him the skin of one fox. In the bright hall where the fire shone warmly and the tables were all laid richly for dinner, Gawain met him merrily:



'I come with my winnings, and I will be the first giver this night!' he cried gaily; and with that he kissed him solemnly three times.

'By my faith,' cried the lord of the castle, 'you are a good merchant indeed: you give me three such kisses – and I have only a foul fox-skin to give you in return!'

Then with laughter and jests they sat down to the feast, and were merrier that night than on any of the others. But Gawain spoke no word of the green lace which the lady had given him.

The day of the New Year came in with storm; bitterly the winds howled and the sleet lashed against the window pane, and Gawain, who had slept but little, rose at the first light. He clothed himself warmly and buckled on his armour, setting the green lace about his waist in hope that its magic might protect him. Then he went forth into the courtyard, the squire brought out Gringalet, well fed and well groomed, and helped him to mount.

'Farewell,' he said to the lord of the castle. 'I thank you for your hospitality, and pray Heaven to bless you. If I might live a while longer I would reward you for your kindness: but greatly I fear that I shall not see another sun.'

The drawbridge was let down, the gate flung wide, and Gawain rode out of the castle, with a squire to guide him. Through the bitter dawning they rode, beneath trees dripping drearily, and across meadows where the wind moaned as it bit them to the bone, and they came to a great valley with cliffs at one side of it, all filled with mist.

'Sir,' said the squire, 'go no further, I beg of you. Near here dwells the Green Knight, a terrible and a

cruel man. There is none so fierce or so strong in this land – and no man may stand against him. Over yonder at the Green Chapel it is ever his custom to slay all who pass by, and fight with them, and kill them – for none can escape him. Flee away now – and I will not tell ever that you fled for fear of the terrible Green Knight.'

'I thank you,' said Gawain, 'but I must go forward. I would be a coward and unworthy of knighthood if I fled away now. Therefore, whether I like it or not I must go forward . . . And God knows well how to save His servants if so He wills.'

'Well then,' said the squire, 'your death be your own doing. Go down this path by the cliff, into the deep valley, and upon the left hand, beyond the water, you will find the Green Chapel. Now farewell, noble Gawain, for I dare not come with you further.'

Down the path rode Gawain, and came to the bottom of the valley. No chapel could he see, but only the rugged cliff above him, and high, desolate banks in the distance. But at length he saw, under the dripping trees, a low green mound beside the rushing stream; and he heard a sound as of a scythe upon a grindstone coming from a deep hollow in that mound.

'Ah,' said Gawain. 'This must be the Green Chapel! A very devil's oratory it is, and green indeed – a chapel of mischance! And within it I hear the knight himself, sharpening a weapon to smite me this day. Alas that I must perish at his hands in this cursed spot . . . Yet will I go on boldly, for my duty is so to do.'

Gawain sprang from his horse and strode down to the streamside:

'Who waits here,' he cried, 'to keep tryst with me? I



am Gawain, who have come to the Green Chapel as I vowed.'

'Wait but a little,' came a mighty voice out of the hollow beneath the mound. 'When my weapon is sharp, you shall have that which I promised you!'

Presently the Green Knight came out with a new, shining axe in his hand. He was as terrible as ever, with his green face and his green hair, as he strode down the bank and leapt over the wide stream.

'You are welcome, Gawain!' he cried in his great voice. 'Now will I repay the stroke you dealt me at Camelot – and none shall come between us in this lonely valley. Now off with your helmet, and make ready for the blow!'

Then Gawain did as he was bidden, bending his head forward, with his neck bare to the stroke.

'Make ready to strike,' he said quietly to the Green Knight, 'for here I shall stand and do naught to stay the blow.'

The Green Knight swung his axe round so that it whistled, and aimed a terrible stroke with the sharp blade of it: and try how he might, Gawain flinched at the sound of it.

'Ha!' grunted the Green Knight, lowering his axe and leaning on the handle of it: 'You are surely not Gawain the brave, thus to fear even the whistle of the blade! When you struck off my head in King Arthur's hall I never flinched from your blow.'

'I shrank once,' said Gawain, 'but I shall not a second time – even when *my* head falls to the ground, which I cannot replace as you have yours! Come now, strike quickly, I will not stay you again.'

'Have at you then!' cried the Green Knight, whirling

his axe. He smote once more, and once more stayed his hand ere the sharp blade drew blood. But Gawain stirred not a jot, nor trembled in any limb. 'Now you are filled with courage once more,' he cried, 'and so I may smite bravely a brave man. Hold aside your hood a little further, I am about to strike my hardest.'

'Strike away,' said Gawain. 'Why do you talk so much? Are you perhaps afraid thus to smite a defenceless man?'

'Then here is the blow I promised!' cried the Green Knight, swinging his axe for the third time. And now he struck truly, yet aimed with such care that the blade only parted the skin at the side of his neck.

But when Gawain had felt the wound and the blood over his shoulders, he sprang away in an instant, put on his helmet, drew his sword, set his shield before him and said to the Green Knight:

'Now I have borne the blow, and if you strike again it is beyond our bargain and I may defend myself, striking stroke for stroke!'

The Green Knight stood leaning on his axe. 'Gawain,' he said, all the fierceness gone out of his voice, 'you have indeed borne the blow – and no other will I strike you. I hold you released of all claims now. If I had wished it, I might have struck you a crueller stroke, and smitten your head off as you smote off mine. The first blow and the second that struck you not – these were for promises truly kept, for the one kiss and the two kisses that my wife gave you in the castle, and you truly rendered to me. But the third time you failed, and therefore had the wound of me: you gave me the three kisses, but not the green lace. Oh, well I know all that passed between you – she



tempted you by my will. Gawain, I hold you to be the noblest, the most faultless knight in all the wide world. Had you yielded to dishonour and shamed your knight-hood – then would your head be lying now at my feet. As for the lace, you hid it but for love of your life – and that is a little sin, and for it I pardon you.'

'I am ashamed,' said Gawain, handing him the green lace. 'For cowardice and covetousness I betrayed my oath of knighthood. Cut off my head, Sir knight, for I am indeed unworthy of the Round Table.'

'Come now!' cried the Green Knight, laughing merrily, so that Gawain knew him indeed to be the lord of the castle. 'You have borne your penance, and are quite absolved and forgiven. Take and keep this green lace in memory of this adventure; and return to my castle and end the festival in joy.'

'I must back to Camelot,' said Gawain, 'I may not bide longer. But tell me, noble sir, how comes this enchantment? Who are you that ride in Green and die not when beheaded? How come you to dwell, a noble knight in a fine castle, and also to strike axe-blows, the Green Knight of the Green Chapel?'

'My name is Sir Bernlak, the Knight of the Lake,' answered he. 'And the enchantment comes from Nimue, the Lady of the Lake, the favoured of Merlin. She sent me to Camelot, to test the truth of the renown that is spread abroad concerning the valour of the Knights of the Round Table, and the worth of Logres.'

Then the two knights embraced one another and parted with blessings. Gawain rode back swiftly through the Forest of Wirral, and after many more adventures he came to Camelot, where King Arthur

welcomed him, marvelled at his tale, and set him with honour in his place at the Round Table. And of all the knights who ever sat there, few indeed were so worthy as Gawain.