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Opening extract from

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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THINK YOURSELF BACK IN YEARS, MY FRIENDS

– not as far as ancient Greece and the siege of Troy, nor as far as Romulus and Remus and Rome, but to Britain after the Romans had gone, a Britain in the early mystical mists of her most turbulent times, striving always to keep the invader at bay, and to make of herself a place where people could live out their lives in peace and safety and prosperity. Many kings came and went, many invaders and conquerors, and as the battles raged throughout the land there was great grief and suffering, and terrible hunger too.

Then, as the myth goes – and whether it is the myth of story or the myth of

history is for you to decide – then there came a king who would lead the people of Britain out of the darkness of their misery and into the sunlight at last. His name was Arthur.

Never had there been a braver, more noble king than this. Saved at birth, hidden away, then plucked from obscurity and chosen to be High King by the magical powers of Merlin, he drew the sword from the famous stone and not long afterwards gathered about him at Camelot all those great Knights, who had goodness at heart, who shunned all greed and pride, the finest and fiercest Knights in the kingdom, who fought only for right and for the wellbeing of others and of their kingdom. You know their names as well as I do from stories that have come down to us through the ages: Sir Lancelot, Sir Percivale, Sir Galahad, Sir Tristram – dozens of them, too many to be listed here – and Sir Gawain, of course, who was the High King's nephew.

My story is of Gawain. Of all the tales of the Knights of the Round Table his is the most magical and the one I most love to tell. For Gawain, as you will shortly see, was as honest and true as a Knight of the Round Table should be, as kind and chivalrous and courteous, as brave as any other, and stronger in battle than any, except Lancelot. But Gawain was headstrong, too, and more than a little vain; and as this story will show, sometimes not as honest or true as he would want himself to have been: much like many of us, I think.

So, to his story, the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

IT WAS CHRISTMAS TIME AT CAMELOT,

that time of the year when all King Arthur's Knights gathered to celebrate the birth of their Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. For fifteen joyous days, after holy Mass each morning there was nothing but feasting and dancing and singing, and hunting and jousting too. Jousting was the favourite sport, each of them striving to unseat the mighty Sir Lancelot – but rarely succeeding of course. And all was done in fun, in a spirit of great comradeship, for they were happy to be together once more, at this blessed time. During the year these

lords were so often parted from one another, and from their ladies, as they rode out through the kingdom on their dangerous missions. So this was a time when love and friendship was renewed, a time to celebrate with their young king all their achievements and their great and good purpose: to bring peace to the land, and make of it a kingdom as near to a heaven on earth as had never before been achieved in Britain, nor in any other land, come to that.

On New Year's Eve, after evening Mass had been said in the chapel and generous new year's gifts exchanged, the High King and Guinevere, his queen, came at last into the great hall where all the lords and ladies were waiting to dine. No one could begin the feasting until they came, of course, so as you can imagine they cheered them to the rafters when they

saw them. Guinevere had never looked so gloriously beautiful as she did that evening, and there were gasps of admiration from around the hall, from lords and ladies alike.

With Arthur on one side of her and Gawain on the other, Guinevere sat down at the high table, which was set on a splendid dais draped all about with silk and richly hung with the finest tapestries from Toulouse and Turkestan. Then, with drummers drumming and pipers piping, the servants came in carrying the food

on great silver plates, piling each table high with roasted meat, capons and venison and pork, and fish fresh-baked in sea salt, and baskets of crusty bread, and steaming soups. Truly there was enough to feed the five thousand, though there were only five hundred there to eat it. As they poured out the wine and ale, filling every goblet to the brim, the scents of the feast that lay before them filled the succulent air, and their nostrils too, so that, their appetites whetted, they were all longing now to begin. But the High King and his queen sat there, not touching their food nor their drink either. Everyone knew that if they did not begin, then out of respect nor could anyone else. And everyone knew also why it was that the king was refusing to let the feast begin.

The great hall fell silent as Arthur rose to his feet.

"You know the custom," he began. "I will not take one mouthful, nor one sip of wine, until I am told of some new and stirring tale, some wonderfully outlandish adventure, some extraordinary feat of arms so far unheard of. And it must be true, too. I don't want you to go making it up just so you can get at the food – some of you are good at the tall stories."

They laughed at that, but as they looked around it became clear that none of them had a tale to tell.

"What?" cried the High King. "What? Not one of you? Well then I see we must all go hungry. Such a pity. Isn't it strange how food you cannot eat always smells so wonderful? It needn't be a story, of course. It could be some new happening, some weird and wondrous event. If I can't have a story, then you'd better hope, as I do, that maybe some stranger will

come striding in here right now and challenge us face to face. That would do. I'd be happy with that. Then we could all begin our feasting before the food gets cold." And with that he sat down.

At that very same moment, just as the High King had finished speaking, they heard a sudden roaring of wind, the rattle of doors and windows shaking and then, outside, the clatter of a horse's hooves on stone. The great doors burst open, and into the hall rode the most awesome stranger anyone there had ever set eyes on. For a start he was a giant of a man, taller by two heads than any knight there, but not lanky and long, not at all. No, shoulder to shoulder he was as broad as any three men stood side by side, and his legs were massive – like tree trunks, they were. And you could see the man's arms were about as thick and strong as

his legs. But that wasn't all. This giant was green: from head to toe. Yes, bright green, I tell you, as green as beech leaves in summer when the sun shines through. And when I say the man was green, I don't just mean his clothes. I mean him. His face. Green. His hands. Green. The hair that hung down to his shoulders. Green. Only his eyes, horror of horrors, glowed red, blood red and glaring from

under his heavy eyebrows, which were as green as the rest of him. Everyone in that hall simply gaped at him, at his hugeness and his greenness, and at his grimness too, for the man had a thunderous scowl on his face that struck terror into every heart.

Grim he may have been, but the giant was gorgeous, too – if such an apparition can ever be said to be gorgeous. He wore a tunic of green velvet with buttons of gleaming gold. Stirrups and spurs were all of gold, both encrusted with the brightest emeralds of the deepest green. And his horse! His warhorse was a monster of a creature – he had to be, just to carry this giant. The horse was green too, green from nose to hoof, from mane to tail. He was pawing at the ground, tossing his head, foaming at his bit; at least the foam was white. He

looked every bit as bad-tempered as his master. They suited each other, those two.

Yet fierce though he seemed, the knight in green wore no war helmet and no armour either. He held no shield before him, and carried no spear, not even a sword at his side. Instead, the hand clutching the reins held a sprig of holly – green, naturally – which might have been laughable had everyone not already noticed what he was carrying in his other hand. It was an axe, but it was no ordinary battle-axe. This weapon was a real head-cruncher. Yet the handle was most delicately carved – bright green of course, as was the cord that looped about it and the tassels that hung from it. Only the huge blade itself was not green. Curved like a crescent moon at the cutting edge, it was made of polished

steel – a hideous widow-maker if ever there was one. Even the dogs, usually so fierce with any stranger, shrank back whining under the tables, their tails between their legs.

There came no cheery new year greeting from this green man, not even a ghost of a smile.

In a thunderous, booming voice as terrifying as the man himself, he said, "So, who's in charge here?" No one answered him. "Well, come on. Speak up. Which of you is the king? It's him I've come to talk to, no one else."

But as he rode around the hall, his blazing eyes scanning the lords and ladies on every side, no one spoke up. And you can understand why. Many of the knights sitting there in that hushed hall had come across all kinds of astounding and alarming looking creatures while out on their quests – dragons and monsters, goblins and ghouls – but never anything quite like this. Most sat there stunned to silence. Others kept quiet out of respect for their High King, wanting to hear how he would reply.

No one doubted for a moment that he would have the courage to speak up, and so he did. Indeed, as he rose to his feet he was smiling broadly. After all, hadn't he just been hoping for such a happening as this?

"Welcome to Camelot, Sir Knight," he began. "I am the king you are looking for,

I think. My name is Arthur. Believe me, you could not have arrived at a better moment. So please dismount and join our new year's feasting, and afterwards you can tell us perhaps why you have come here to our court."

The knight in green rode towards the dais and spoke directly to the High King, but more courteously now.

"My thanks, great King. But I will not stay, nor keep you from your feasting. I will speak my purpose plainly. I cannot tell you how honoured I am to meet you at last, the great Arthur, High King of all Britain. I have heard, as all the world has heard, how you have made of this place the most wondrous kingdom on earth, and gathered around you the most worthy, courageous and chivalrous knights that ever lived. Looking about me I begin to wonder whether you deserve this

glowing reputation at all. I mean no offence great King; as you can see from the sprig of holly I carry, I come in peace. If it were otherwise I'd be armed for a fight, would I not? But you see no armour on me, no helmet, no sword or spear, because it is not war I come for, but sport – well, a sport of sorts, anyway."

"If it's jousting you're looking for," the High King replied as politely as his irritation would allow, "or wrestling maybe, then daunting though you may look, Sir Knight, you'll find no lack of sport here, I assure you."

"But I joust and wrestle only with men," replied the Green Knight. "I see here nothing but beardless boys. It would be no contest. None of you would stand a chance against me. No, I have in mind something much more testing of a man's courage, and much more interesting for

everyone. But I cannot imagine there will be anyone here brave enough to take me on."

"We'll see about that," the High King cried, his face flushing with sudden anger at the stranger's insulting tone. "Just get on with it for goodness' sake, and tell us what game it is you want to play. Our soup is getting cold."

The Green Knight laughed. "Why don't we just call it a New Year's game?" he said. "I don't think any of you will ever have played it before, and nor have I. We'll soon see what stuff your Knights of the Round Table are made of, whether you're all you're cracked up to be."

So saying, he held high his great axe. "Here is my battle-axe," he went on. "Is there anyone here in this hall brave enough to take it, I wonder? Whoever does will have one chance, and one

chance only, to strike my head from my shoulders. I shall not resist or fight back. I shall not even flinch, I promise."

"Is that the game?" the High King asked, as incredulous as everyone else in the hall.

"Not quite," replied the Green Knight. "Here's how the game goes. If any knight has the courage to take up the challenge, then he will have to promise, on his honour, that in a year and a day from now he will submit himself to ... let's call it a return match, shall we? Then it will be my turn to strike the same single blow, and it will be one of you who has to kneel there, bare his neck and take it – without resisting, without flinching. Well, who dares?"

If there was a hushed silence when he first came into the hall, the place was now still as death as he glared all around, waiting for someone to speak up. But even the bravest of the knights lowered their eyes. This was one challenge they all wanted to avoid if they could. The Green Knight wheeled his great warhorse and clattered about the hall looking down at them, a supercilious sneer on his lips.

"I thought so. I thought so," he said, his mocking laughter ringing in the air. "Where's your courage now? Where's that spotless honour, that perfect chivalry I've heard so much about? Is there no one here who has the stomach to take me on?"

Still no one spoke. "Chickens, the lot of you. Worse than chickens, too. At least chickens cluck. I can see I'm in the wrong place. This can't be the court of King Arthur. It's a court of cowards."

Stung to fury now the High King had had enough. "Cease your insults!" he

shouted. "None of us here is frightened of you. We're just speechless at the sheer stupidity of such a ridiculous duel. It's obvious that with an axe like that whoever strikes the first blow is bound to be the winner. But since you insist upon it,

and are so brash and rude, I shall take up your challenge myself. So get down off that horse, hand me your axe and I'll give you what you asked for."

And with that, King Arthur sprang down from the dais and strode across the hall towards the Green Knight, who dismounted and at once handed over his axe.

"Make yourself ready, then," cried the High King, swinging the axe above his head, testing his grip, feeling the weight and balance of the weapon.

The Green Knight looked on. He stood head and shoulders above the king, dwarfing him utterly. Unperturbed by the swishing axe, the Green Knight turned down the neck of his tunic and made himself ready.

At that moment Gawain stood up. "No!" he cried. And leaving the table he

hurried across the hall to his uncle's aid. He bowed low before him.

"Let me take your place, uncle. Give me this fight, please, I beg you. I shall teach this green and haughty man that in a fight there are no knights braver than your own. It is true that I am no braver than any other man here, I know that, but I am your nephew. Make this an uncle's gift to his nephew. Because the truth is, good uncle, that if I do lose my life I would not be much missed compared to you. You are our king, and this is too silly, too demeaning a venture for you. Lose you and we lose the kingdom. Lose me and there will always be others to come in my place."

"For goodness' sake make up your minds," said the Green Knight, shaking his head, "I do not have all day."

Ignoring the man's boorishness Gawain

knelt before the king. "Let me prove myself worthy, uncle, worthy of being your Knight and your nephew too."

There was much applause at this and many loud voices raised in support of Sir Gawain's plea. After thinking for a while the High King lifted his hand for silence, and taking Gawain's hand helped him to his feet.

"As you wish, nephew," he said. "There's nothing I'd like better than to separate this man's great green head from his great green shoulders; but I willingly give the

task to you. Strike boldly, nephew. If you do, I really cannot see, short of a miracle, how you will ever have to face him again in a year and a day. Here's the axe. You'll find it a bit heavy and cumbersome, but it'll do the job."

Gawain took the axe from him, gripped it firmly and turned now to face the Green Knight, who stood towering above him, his hands on his hips. To everyone there they looked like David and Goliath – and all were hoping and praying for the same unlikely outcome.

"So," said the giant knight, "so we have a champion at last. Let's get on with it. But before we do I must know your name, and make sure we both understand and agree on the rules of the game."

"My name is Sir Gawain and I already know the rules of your foolish game," came the blunt reply.

"Good Sir Gawain, I'm glad it is you," said the Green Knight then, altogether more polite now than he had been so far. "I'll be honoured to take the first blow from a knight as noble and worthy as yourself, for you are known and revered throughout all Britain as a man of not only the greatest courage, but also the greatest integrity. Believe me, you will need both, and in full measure, for what I have in store for you. And just so there can be no misunderstanding, you must promise on your honour and in the hearing of everyone in this hall that a year and a day from now you will seek me out and find me, so that I can pay you back in kind for whatever you do to me today."

"I promise you willingly, on my honour as a Knight of the Round Table," Gawain replied. "But how shall I be able

to find you? I don't even know your name, nor from what part of the country you come. Just tell me, and I'll be there, you have my word."

"Afterwards. I shall tell you all you need to know afterwards," said the Green Knight. "Once you have done your worst, I'll tell you exactly where to come and who I am."

And with a smile that sent shivers even into brave Gawain's heart he went on, "I'll be looking forward to you calling on me in a year and a day. I'll be looking forward to it very much indeed."

With the smile still on his face, the Green Knight went down on one knee before Gawain, and bared his neck.

"Do the best you can, Sir Gawain," he said. "Remember, you have only one chance."

"Make your peace with your maker,"

Gawain replied, running his finger along the blade.

Then, grasping the handle tight and putting his left foot forward, he took a deep breath and raised the great axe high above his head, the blade flashing blood red in the flames of the fire. Down it came and sliced right through the Green Knight's neck, cutting clean through bone and flesh and skin, severing the terrible head entirely and sending it rolling hideously across the floor towards the lords and ladies at

their table. And the blood was not green, as you might have imagined, but bright red like any man's, and it spurted freely from head and body alike.

But instead of toppling over, as everyone expected, that grotesque headless body rose up onto his feet and strode across the floor to where his head lay bleeding, the eyes closed in death. Snatching the baleful head up by the

hair, he went straight to his horse, set one foot in the stirrup and swung himself up easily into his saddle as if nothing at all had happened. Suddenly those eyes opened and glared most horribly about the hall. Everyone was struck dumb with terror.

But worse was still to come, for then the mouth began to speak. "Well struck, Sir Gawain. Now I'm afraid you have your side of the bargain to keep, a promise you made freely and openly, in front of everyone here and in front of your king too. You must seek me out and find me at the Green Chapel, a year and a day from now. There I shall repay you, a blow for a blow, as we agreed. I am known everywhere as the Knight of the Green Chapel. Look into the sky as you go and follow where your eyes and your ears lead you. I shall be waiting. Be sure you

come, Sir Gawain, or the world will know you for ever as a coward."

He said nothing more, not one goodbye, but, turning his horse about, set spurs to his side and galloped from that hall, sparks flying from the horse's hooves as he went. Where he had come from no one knew; where he went to no one knew. But as you can well imagine, I think, all were glad to see him gone.

It was some time before anyone in the hall found voice to speak, and then it was the High King himself who at last broke the silence. He was as amazed and horrified as everyone else by what they had just witnessed, but he did not like to see his queen and his court so downhearted on this festive evening.

"Come on now, let's not be upset," he said. "After all, this was just such a marvel as we were waiting for, was it not?