# Copyright © Richard Scott-Robinson, 2016

# Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

**The Pearl Poet**

**Late fourteenth century, Middle English**

Sithen the sege and the assaut was sesed at Troye · the burgh brittened and brent to brondes and askes · the tulk that the trammes of tresoun there wroght · was tried for his trecherye, the truest on earthe – Since the siege and the assault of Troy was accomplished and the city burnt to sticks and ashes – and the architect of Troy’s downfall tried for his treachery – it was the noble Aeneas and his fellow Trojan lords who then depressed provinces, conquered lands and claimed well-nigh all the wealth of the west. Romulus quickly founded Rome, with great pomp and pride and gave the city his own name, which it still retains. Ticius went to Tuscany to build a great city, Langaberd to Lombardy, and far over the western sea sailed Felix Brutus, who landed on the broad and inviting shores of Britain to lay claim to an island where joy and wonderment, conflict, disaster and strange events have all appeared by turns, down the ages. After Brutus claimed possession of Britain the land bred warriors who thrived on war, and frequently the mysterious and the supernatural manifested itself, more than in any other land, I believe. And of all Britain’s kings who participated in this, everyone agrees that it was the noble King Arthur who left the greatest legacy.

Therefore I will tell of a strange adventure that some men will think too marvellous to be of this world. It was one of the more remarkable of King Arthur’s dealings with the supernatural and if you will listen to this story for a little while I shall tell it to you just as I heard it; for it is not a crude country tale but fixed in its language, a story of courage set down in firm and faithful words that are true to their ancient tradition.

King Arthur was at Camelot one Christmas with all his knights and noblemen. All the knights of the Round Table were laughing and revelling together in holiday mood, enjoying festivities that were to last for fifteen days! Each had a thrilling time on the tournament field, took his turn to joust, then rode back to the court to the singing and the dancing, with all the food and entertainment that wealth can bring; such noise and such singing in the great hall that it was glorious to hear. Harsh blows in the daytime, then carols and dancing in the evening, when halls and chambers resounded to the sounds of laughter. They all celebrated with the greatest joy and luxury that was to be had on Earth, the most famous knights under Christ’s gaze, the most beautiful women who had ever drawn breath and the finest king who had ever graced a court! For these folk were all young and in their prime, the most fortunate on Earth, their king the most beneficent in the world and it would be hard to have to try to name a finer gathering anywhere, at any time.

Early on the morning of New Year’s Day everyone looked forward to twice the normal amount of food on the tables when the meal was served. The king was already going with his knights into the hall. The service in the chapel had finished and there were loud cries of ‘Noel!’ from clergymen and many others, ‘Noel!’ echoed everywhere and noblemen ran to fetch presents and mistletoe; they cried out ‘New Year’s Gifts’ at the tops of their voices, clasped sprigs in their hands, cajoled and coerced, ladies laughed delightedly when they had a kiss stolen from them and no man who received one was angry, I can tell you! They carried on like this until it was time to sit down to the meal. When they had washed their hands they went to their seats, the best warriors at the highest tables, as was fitting. The beautiful Queen Guinevere sat amongst them on the high platform, beneath a rich canopy of red silk that had been made in southern France, surrounded by finely-woven fabrics and tapestries that were embroidered and adorned with gemstones. This lovely lady sat there, her grey eyes gleaming, and no man could truthfully say that he had ever seen a more beautiful sight.

King Arthur stood beside the high table, speaking about this and that to his noblemen while Sir Gawain took his place beside Queen Guinevere with his brother Sir Agravaine beside him, both of them the king’s nephews and each of them an invincible warrior in his own right. Bishop Baldwin sat down with Sir Yvain, King Urien’s son, as the first course was announced with a fanfare of trumpets, each instrument adorned with a colourful banner. Then the latest music from drums and flutes struck up, lively tunes that awakened conversation and lifted the hearts of those who listened. Delicious dishes were served, freshly killed meat in abundance, and on so many platters that it was difficult to find room on the tables for them all. So many salvers of stews steaming on the cloth! Each knight served himself as he desired; every pair had twelve dishes set before them. The wine was of the finest quality, and the beer was excellent.

Those sitting at the high table were served, then afterwards the knights sitting at the side-tables in the body of the hall, just as excellently. King Arthur would not eat until all his knights and ladies had their food before them. He was happy and boisterous and full of the joys of such a grand occasion, but he loved to be doing something energetic and hated sitting for a long time. He was carried along by his young blood and by an active brain and, on this occasion, impelled by something else as well, for he had a custom that his adventurous personality had moved him to adopt. He would never begin eating upon a feast day such as this until something marvellous had been brought to his attention. A tale of some wonder perhaps, some barely-believable thing, or something that had happened in wars or other adventures, or perhaps a knight might ask the king to nominate an adversary to fight with him, to place himself in grave jeopardy on the jousting field, the fairest to prevail as fortune might decree. This was King Arthur’s custom when he presided over such a banquet as this. So the king waited, proudly, in the freshness of the New Year, amongst all the merriment, waiting to learn of something remarkable.

I will say no more about the service, for everyone will guess that there was nothing lacking. But before the king was ready to give permission for everybody to start fishing with their ladles into the tureens, suddenly a new noise pre-empted everything, a sound of bells and hooves approaching the hall. Scarcely had the assembly fallen silent to hear the king, with the dishes all beautifully served and waiting on the tables, when in at the door appeared one of the tallest men they had ever seen. His upper body was squarely built and very strong and his legs were so long and massive that he seemed to be almost a giant. I would say that this is what he seemed, although a man I must take him to be, and the fittest of his size that could ride a horse. His back and chest were enormous, his waist slim, his belly flat and although he was fearsome to behold, his limbs and features were all in proportion. No, it was the man’s colour that made everybody gasp, for it was clearly visible. Every part of him was bright green!

He was green and all his clothes were green! A tight-fitting coat was covered by a cloak that was trimmed in green ermine and a hood that lay draped in green around his shoulders. From his thighs to his feet he wore fine, green hose and he rode without shoes but wore golden spurs attached to his heels with silken green bands. All his clothes were bright green. Both the buckle of his belt and the glittering gems that were sewn into his clothing, and into the silk around his saddle, were green. And it is too much to describe the birds and the butterflies embroidered in green, the pendants hanging from the front of his horse, the strap from the saddle to his horse’s tail, the knobs on the horse’s bit and all the other trappings. These were enamelled in green. The stirrups that he stood upon were green, as was the saddle and the blanket beneath, which glimmered and glinted as the light twinkled from green gems. And the horse that he rode was a green horse, strong and well-built, a spirited animal and lively, pulling on its decorated bridle as it obeyed every small movement of its rider, whose hair was the same colour as his horse. His well-combed locks hid his shoulders from view, and his bushy beard reached down to his chest. His hair was cut at a length just above his elbows so that the tops of his arms were concealed from view, just as though he was wearing the sort of short cape that a king likes to wear around his neck. And his horse’s mane was groomed just as beautifully as his own hair, combed and plaited with gold thread between each of the green hairs, one of green, one of gold, and its forelock and tail were plaited similarly, bound around with a bright green band and adorned with gems and precious stones within the hair, and held up by intricate thongs were many gold bells that rang as the horse moved. Such a horse, and such a man, had never been seen in this hall before, I can tell you! He shone, as it seemed to everybody, with the brightness of lightening and no man felt himself likely to be able to survive a blow from him, that much was certain.

He wore no protection, no helmet, no shirt of chain mail and no plate armour, he held no shield to shove with nor any lance to thrust towards an enemy; but in his one hand he held a bunch of holly, and in the other hand he held a grotesque axe, a huge and dreadful weapon. The axe head was more than a yard across! Its huge cutting edge was fashioned from green steel and gold – the grayn all of grene stele and of gold hewen – and the blade was polished and as sharp as a razor. This giant gripped it by a strong wooden handle that was bound with iron wire engraved with green designs that were expertly done. A leather thong held the axe head in place and then wrapped itself about the handle with many fine tassels. This nobleman rode fearlessly into the hall straight towards the high table, greeting nobody. But then, looking all around the hall, he said:

‘Where is the leader of this assembly? I would like to see this man, to discuss something with him.’

Then he cast his eyes to left and to right, looking at all the knights, studying them and trying to decide which of them might be of the highest rank. Many returned his stare, long and hard, wondering how such a man and a horse could grow as green as the grass, greener than green enamel on gold! They watched the horse and the rider, and some slowly approached for a better view, wondering what this man’s intentions might be. For they had seen many strange things but never one as strange as this! They took him to be a phantom, a creature of the Otherworld, of the land of Faerie. Not many were inclined to answer him but all were astonished, and stood as still as a stone. The hall fell into dead silence and I don’t think that it was entirely through fear, either, but, for some at least, it was through courtesy. King Arthur should surely be allowed to speak first.

The king watched from the top table, then greeted the visitor in generous terms: ‘Knight, you are welcome,’ he said. ‘My name is Arthur and I preside over this hall. Dismount from your horse and dine with us now, I urge you, and afterwards you can tell us your business.’

‘No,’ replied the stranger. ‘It is not my intention to stay for very long. It is because your city and your knights are held in such high regard, the most valent in the world, that I have sought you out, and because true courtesy is to be found here, as I have heard. You may be assured, by this branch of holly that I am holding, that I come in peace. Had I come here looking for a fight, I have both a helmet and a shirt of chain mail at home, a shield, a sharp spear and many other weapons as well. But because I intend no conflict, I am unarmed. And if you are as courageous as your reputations suggest, you will grant me the game that I will now ask you to play.’

‘Sir courteous knight,’ replied King Arthur. ‘Should you be up for a fight, you will not go away disappointed.’

‘No. I do not seek a fight, in all truth,’ said the man. ‘The warriors sitting here are but beardless children! If I were laced into my armour on a high steed there is no man here who could match me. But I beg this court, rather, for a Christmas game. It is Yule. The New Year is upon us and you are all brave young men. Is there anyone in this hall who believes himself to be so courageous, and so sharp in his wits as to agree to strike a single blow in return for another? If so, I will give him this axe, which is heavy with gold. I shall suffer the first blow from him, as unarmed as I am now. And if any knight is hardy enough to accept these terms, let him come quickly over and snatch this axe from my grasp. He can keep it as his own! I will let him give me a stroke with it without flinching, here in this floor. But you, Sir king, will command him at once to suffer a return stroke from me, not immediately but in a year’s time. Now make haste and let’s quickly see, does anyone dare play this game with me?’

If they had been astonished before, they were astounded now! This man turned about in his saddle menacingly and cast the gaze of his red eyes to left and to right; he arched his bright green eyebrows questioningly and waited to see if any might rise. When no one in the hall seemed the slightest bit inclined to answer him, he coughed and drew himself up to speak:

‘Is this really King Arthur’s hall?’ he asked, mockingly. ‘The court whose fame is spread far and wide? Where is your pride then, now, and your victories, your ferocity, your anger and your triumphant words? The prosperity and the reputation of the Round Table is destroyed, by the words of a single man! You are all cowering in fear without a blow having been delivered!’ And he laughed out loud.

King Arthur was mortified. His face reddened with shame and a storm of rage overcame him. Everyone in the hall grew angry. ‘Nobleman, by heaven, your request is just too stupid for words!’ he cried, approaching this man who was still seated on his horse. ‘This is why everyone is silent! But I can see no man in this hall who is afraid. Give me the axe and I will do as you have asked.’

King Arthur strode up to the man and snatched away his weapon. Then, as the green knight dismounted from his horse, King Arthur swung the axe about in the air as though preparing to strike the man with it. The huge man stood facing him, raised himself to his fullest height and everyone could see that he was taller than any other knight standing in the hall by a foot or more. He stood stroking his beard and then, in all seriousness, began to take off his coat. He seemed to be no more daunted than if a knight from one of the benches was offering him a glass of wine. Sir Gawain, who was sitting beside the queen, quickly rose to address the king.

‘Sir, I beseech you,’ he warned. ‘Will it please you to invite me, my lord, to get up from this seat and come over to where you are standing so that I can leave this table without any discourtesy, with Queen Guinevere’s permission? Because I don’t think that it is right, when so many brave knights are sitting on the benches around you, and none of them less eager nor less capable of performing this strange request, that you should take it on yourself. I am not the strongest nor the cleverest here but perhaps the least in love with his own life, if you would know the truth, and so my lord, let this contest be mine. My worth is only because I am your nephew, and this game is so ridiculous that it should not fall upon you to carry it out. I ask you for it, and nobody has spoken before me. Give this game to me! If I am speaking out of turn, then let this hall decide the issue.’

The knights all conferred together and were unanimous in offering the stroke to Sir Gawain. King Arthur commanded Sir Gawain to rise; he did so, sprang quickly to the king’s side, knelt at his feet and took the axe from him. The king graciously withdrew, raised a hand towards Sir Gawain, gave him God’s blessing and urged both his heart and his arm to be strong.

‘And be careful, nephew,’ warned the king. ‘But if you take pains to deliver a single, well-aimed blow with this axe, I expect you to be able to survive any return blow he may have vowed to give you!’

Sir Gawain, axe in hand, walked over to the green knight.

‘Let’s go over the terms again,’ said this knight, as Sir Gawain stood before him. ‘But before we do, I would like to ask you, so that I may know, nobleman, what is your name?’

‘My name is Gawain, and in good faith I offer you this stroke of the axe. And I agree that in a year’s time I shall suffer a similar blow from you, alone, and with whatever weapon you may wish to use.’

‘Sir Gawain, I am delighted that it is you who has agreed to strike this blow! By God, Sir Gawain, I am so pleased that I shall receive it from your hand. And you have faithfully recounted the agreement that I offered to the king, except for one small thing: that you shall promise me, Sir knight, by your integrity, that you will come alone to look for me wherever you think I may be found, to receive a blow like the one you choose to give to me today in front of this noble assembly.’

‘But I don’t know where you live,’ replied Sir Gawain, ‘and I have no idea who you are. Tell me these things. Tell me what name you are known by and where your lands are, and I shall do all I can to find you in a year’s time. This I swear by my honour, and by my integrity as a knight.’

‘I have told you enough for a New Year’s Day,’ said the green knight. ‘I will speak further of these things once I have received this blow from you. Strike me with strength and precision. I will tell you my name and where you can come to find me after the blow has fallen. Then you can keep to your side of the bargain. And if the blow incapacitates me, then your obligation shall be so much the lighter for it! But enough. Take up this axe and let’s see how hard a tap on the neck you can give to me with it.’

‘Gladly, Sir!’ replied Sir Gawain, running his hand up and down the handle.

The green knight knelt upon the ground, bowed low and raised his fine, long hair up over his head, exposing his neck for all to see. Sir Gawain gripped the axe, raised it resolutely into the air, set his left foot to the fore and swung the grim implement downwards with all his strength. Bones shattered as the blade passed through living flesh and bit into the stone floor. The head fell to the ground and all the knights kicked it with their feet as it rolled under their table. Blood sprayed from the torso and shone upon the green of flesh and clothes; but the body did not falter, it did not fall but stood sturdily on its stout legs, reached out to where the knights were standing at the tables, picked up its severed head, raised it into the air, turned to the green horse, caught it by its bridle, stepped into a stirrup and climbed into the saddle. Holding his head by the hair, the green knight sat firmly on his horse as if nothing was the matter. Then, although he was headless, he urged his horse to turn. Many would have been frightened had his intentions not been made clear. The green knight held his head by the hair so that it faced all those on the high table. Then its eyelids lifted and he gave them a hard stare, and his mouth began to move:

‘Sir Gawain,’ spoke the head. ‘See that you are ready to do as you have promised. Search for the Green Chapel and there receive the same blow that you have given to me here today – a beheading, you may imagine – to be promptly administered to you on the morning of New Year’s Day. I am known by many as the Knight of the Green Chapel, and it should not be hard for you to find me. Be there, or else be known as a recreant and a coward.’

Then he pulled fiercely at his reins, turned his horse sharply and rode out of the door of the hall with his head in his hand, so quickly that sparks flew from the horse’s shoes against the stone flags of the floor. And where he was off to, nobody knew, any more than they had the slightest idea where he had come from in the first place.

King Arthur and Sir Gawain smiled and laughed, and acknowledged openly that a marvel had just taken place. And although King Arthur did not understand what he had just seen, he betrayed no sign of it but said courteously and in a clear voice to Queen Guinevere:

‘My dear, don’t let this distress you. It is quite appropriate that such things should happen at a Christmas feast. Amusements, dramatic interludes, laughing and the telling of stories. I have seen a strange wonder, so let us now eat. There need be no more delay. Sir Gawain, hang up your axe. It has done enough work!’

The axe was strung up above the high table in a wicker basket, so that all could look upon it in wonder and speak of this marvel with the proof of it in sight. Then, with their heads lowered, these warriors, King Arthur and Sir Gawain, got stuck into the banquet. They were served with rare sauces and with fine delicacies, double helpings of the best food that could be had, indulged in all manner of cuisine, as well as song and storytelling, and passed the day surrounded by a wealth of abundance that would last until the day the kingdom fell. But take care Sir Gawain, that you do not shrink from this adventure. Carry out what you have promised to do, and be sure that you follow it through to the bitter end!

This unexpected show on New Year’s Morning was one of King Arthur’s first adventures, and he loved to see and hear of such challenges. But nothing more was said as they got to grips with their meal. Sir Gawain made light of it. But although men will make a joke of things when the beer and wine is plentiful, a year runs swiftly enough through its course, and things rarely end the way we expect.

After Christmas came the harsh, bitter season of Lent, replacing meat with fish and other simple foods. The cold winter weather gusted and swirled, ice froze everything to the ground, clouds melted it again, bright showers of warm rain fell upon the countryside, flowers appeared and the fields and the woods put on their green clothes. Birds fluttered about finding things for their nests, singing vigorously to one another in anticipation of the soft summer sun, their beautiful notes heard warbling beside banks, by hedgerows and in the fair woodlands. Summer arrived with its soft breezes. Zephyrus brushed gently against seeds and stems and the moistening dew dripped off luxuriant leaves as the delightful growth waited for the morning to advance and the warmth of the bright sun. But harvest soon approached, ripening the seeds, promising sustenance for winter, blowing dry soil off the fields as an angry wind wrestled with the sun, then the leaves began to fall from the trees and litter the ground. The grass, which had been so green, became grey and lifeless. All the crops ripened, stubble rotted and the year looked back sadly to its lost days of summer as autumn came around again, as is Nature’s way, there is no avoiding it. And in a cold and wet Michaelmas season, Sir Gawain remembered his obligation.

And yet he remained another month with King Arthur, until Halloween, the eve of the old New Year. King Arthur put on a banquet that day for Sir Gawain, with many knights of the Round Table in attendance and some fine entertainment. Courteous knights and beautiful ladies were outwardly jolly and lighthearted but all secretly very concerned for King Arthur’s nephew. Many of those who were worried made jokes to disguise their anxiety. But after the meal Sir Gawain addressed his uncle: ‘My liege lord,’ he said. ‘I must ask your permission to set out on this journey. You know the seriousness of the situation and I have no need to tell you what may happen. But I intend to set off early tomorrow morning to seek out the Knight of the Green Chapel, may God be my guide.’

All the finest knights gathered around uncle and nephew, Sir Yvain, Sir Erik, Sir Dodinas le Savage, the Duke of Clarence, Sir Lancelot, Sir Lionel, Sir Lucan the Good, the mighty Sir Bors and Sir Bedivere, Sir Mador de la Porte and many others. There was a great deal of unexpressed grief in that hall, that such a fine knight as Sir Gawain should have to set out to receive a stroke of the axe and have no defence against it! But Sir Gawain made light of it. He spent the rest of the day with his comrades in the hall and early the following morning he asked for his armour. It was brought to him. But first a red carpet was spread over the floor, then a mountain of steel armour was placed upon it, glittering with gold. Sir Gawain stepped onto this carpet, felt the steel and first accepted a shirt made from a magnificent fabric, then a cunning hood to go over his head, lined with fur. Then he received some steel shoes, had his legs enclosed in steel, the polished segments over his knees hinged with gold rivets. Then some fine plate armour to cover his thighs, cleverly constructed and fastened with stout laces, then over all this the bright steel rings of a wonderful hauberk of chain mail, a magnificent piece of craftsmanship! Then he had plate armour fitted to his arms, brightly polished and with good elbow-pieces, and gauntlets, all the fine equipment that would stand him in good stead for his journey. And over all this he put on a costly surcoat with a bright, heraldic emblem, some golden spurs, and then he selected a trustworthy sword and a silken sash.

Dressed in this fashion, Sir Gawain made for a magnificent sight. The least of the loops and fastenings of his armour shone with the brightness of gold. Armed as he was, he went to hear Mass, made an offering and worshipped at the high altar, then returned to King Arthur and to his friends at court to take his leave of them all. Knights and ladies kissed him, commended him to Christ and accompanied him out of the hall to where Gringolet, his horse, was already prepared and saddled. The steed’s trappings gleamed with many gold furnishings and new leather, firmly fastened with gold studs. The bridle was decorated with stripes of bright gold and Gringolet’s under blanket matched the saddle perfectly, adorned with red gold that glinted like the sun. Sir Gawain took up his helmet and kissed it. It was firmly riveted, padded within and protected behind by a neck-guard of chain mail over which a band of silk held straps to attach helmet to hauberk, set with the finest jewels and embroidered with parrots and seashells, flowers and doves, picked out so beautifully that a great number of women must have laboured for many years to make it! Around the top of his helmet he wore a circlet studded with diamonds.

Then Sir Gawain was given a bright red shield with a pentangle depicted on it, in gold. He took hold of this shield and, grasping it by the strap, placed it around his neck. It suited him very well. But why a pentangle? I will tell you.

The pentangle is a symbol that Solomon once devised to represent truth. It is a geometrical figure with five points and each line crosses the others so that there is no beginning and no end to their course and in English, I believe, it is called an endless knot. Therefore it was appropriate for Sir Gawain to carry this emblem, for he was faithful to the number five: his five senses were faultless, his five fingers never failed him, he put all his trust in the five wounds that Christ received on the cross, and whenever Sir Gawain was in battle, his thought, above all other things, was on the knowledge that the strength and endurance he was able to draw upon was through the five joys that Mary, the noble Queen of Heaven, had derived from her child. For this reason, Sir Gawain chose to depict her image very beautifully on the inside of his shield, so that when he glanced at it in battle his strength would not falter. And more deeply ingrained in Sir Gawain than in any other knight were the five virtues of friendship, generosity, courtesy, mercy and purity of heart. These five, and these five lots of five that I have just explained, were perfect in this knight, each entwined around the other so that no end could be discerned, fixed in the five points but without an end at any point or angle. Therefore he bore the pentangle on his shield and on his tunic, the endless knot, royally fashioned in red gold against a bright red background, as a man of the greatest honesty and the most courteous of speech.

Sir Gawain was fully fitted out. He took up his lance, wished all those around him a good day and then set out upon his uncertain journey. He spurred his horse and cantered off so quickly that the stones flew from the ground as Gringolet’s hooves kicked determinedly over them. All who watched him galloping away sighed inwardly for sorrow, their minds thinking the same: ‘What a disaster! That you should be lost to us, Sir Gawain!’ And they whispered to one another: ‘By Christ! Sir Gawain has been a shining leader of men. Would it not have shown more intelligence for King Arthur to have made him a duke rather than to send him off to be beheaded by a fiend, just to save the king’s pride! When before has any king ever conducted his affairs of state according to the bets and wagers of knights at Christmas games?’ Many warm tears trickled down faces when Sir Gawain took his leave of them that morning. That wonderful knight did not prolong his departure, but valiantly set off.

Sir Gawain rode along many lonely and secluded paths through the kingdom of Logres, as I have heard the book tell. He took no pleasure from the journey and often spent the night entirely alone, with nothing to eat except food that he greatly disliked. He had no squire to serve him and only his horse for company as he rode through forests and over hills with only his thoughts to sustain him on the lonely roads, until he came at last into North Wales. Leaving the Isle of Anglesey on his left side he forded the streams and rivers near headlands, crossed the river Dee at a holy place and came into the wilderness of the Wirral. Few indeed live here whom God or any man bear the slightest affection for! And always, as he travelled, he asked the people that he saw if they knew of a green knight or had heard any mention of the Green Chapel and they always said no, never in their lives had they ever seen a knight who was bright green in colour!

Sir Gawain travelled some lonely and forbidding paths and was often not in the best of humour, looking for the Green Chapel. He scrambled over cliffs in some inhospitable country, riding alone and far from his friends. And at each river crossing or ford that he came to, he found an adversary, it was all very strange, and each was so foul and wild that he had to do battle with them. He came across so many marvels on the high fells that it would be difficult to relate a tenth part of what he had to endure. Sometimes he fought with serpents, or with wolves, sometimes with elves and trolls who lived amongst the crags, with frenzied bulls, bears and with wild boar. And he fought giants who chased him off the highest parts of the mountains and had he not been so strong and fit and resolute, and served God, doubtless he would have been killed many times over. But to be honest, the constant fighting worried him less than the onset of winter, as icy rain fell from the clouds and turned to snow. Frozen almost to death, he often slept in his armour out in the sleet and snow, beside naked rocks where streams cascaded down from the fells, or hung in icicles above his head as he sheltered from the wind. In hardship and distress Sir Gawain roamed these northern districts of the kingdom of Logres alone, until on Christmas Eve he made a complaint to Mary: ‘Show me, sweet Lady, the way to somewhere warm to stay for the night!’

Later that morning, from the foot of a high crag, Sir Gawain rode down into a deep forest. It was in a long, wide valley with high fells rising up on either side of it, a dense forest of ancient oaks, huge trees by the hundred, hazel and hawthorn tangled together with ragged moss on the forest floor and many miserable birds perched on bare twigs, twittering their own complaints about the cold. Sir Gawain and Gringolet made their way beneath them, through many a puddle that was the size of a pond! Sir Gawain was concerned that he would have to spend Christmas Eve without hearing the church service that celebrates the birth of Christ. Sighing to himself, he exclaimed: ‘I beseech you, Lord! And Mary, mildest and dearest mother, I ask you meekly, find me some refuge where I might hear Mass and attend Matins tomorrow! I will show you how anxious I am by quickly saying my ‘Our Father’, my ‘Ave’ and my ‘Creed’.’ And he rode along, praying, weeping for his sins and making the sign of the cross, exclaiming: ‘Cross of Christ, guide me!’

Barely had he made this sign three times when he saw through the trees a castle on a low hill above a broad clearing in the forest. It was surrounded on all sides by the massive branches of huge oaks growing beside the banks and the moat, the most magnificent castle that he had ever seen. It stood within a stunning area of parkland, the trees and pasture enclosed by a great fence that surrounded the castle for more than two miles. Sir Gawain gazed at this property from where he had emerged from the forest, as it shimmered and gleamed through the scattered trees, and he took off his helmet and cried out his devoted thanks to Christ and to Saint Julian, for listening to his plea and for bringing him to this place!

‘Now, fair castle!’ cried Sir Gawain. ‘Allow me lodgings, if you please!’

Sir Gawain spurred Gringolet and by good fortune came quickly to the main entrance of the castle where the drawbridge was. But the bridge was strongly secured in the upright position and the gates were firmly closed. The walls were so strong that they had no need to fear any winter storms! Sir Gawain rode Gringolet up to the top of the first bank of ground and found himself separated from the castle walls by a double moat, The far wall plunged deep into the water and rose high above it, dressed stone right up to the cornice and laid in horizontal courses beneath a battlement that was constructed in the most impressive fashion, with turrets at intervals that incorporated slit windows and firm shutters. Sir Gawain had never seen such a fine outer wall to any castle, anywhere! Beyond it he could see the roof of the main hall, augmented with high towers and matching pinnacles that were wonderfully tall. Chalk-white chimneys rose from tower roofs that were equally white, and so many cleverly constructed pinnacles were scattered thickly among the battlements everywhere that they seemed to have been cut out of paper! Sir Gawain thought it would be pleasant indeed if he might be able to gain access to the courtyard beyond these walls. He called out, and soon there appeared on the wall a porter who spoke very courteously and hailed Sir Gawain.

‘Good sir!’ Sir Gawain replied. ‘Would you mind taking a message for me to the lord of this fine house, asking for lodgings?’

‘Of course! And I expect, Sir knight, that you will be very welcome to stay for as long as you like.’

The man quickly disappeared and shortly returned again with some people. They let down the drawbridge, crossed over the moat and went down on their knees upon the cold earth, in welcome. They yielded the gate to him, which was already raised up high, and Sir Gawain urged them to stand, very courteously, and he rode over the bridge with them. Knights and squires appeared, to take Sir Gawain into the hall. Strong men held his saddle for him as he dismounted and then went off to attend to Gringolet in the stables. When Sir Gawain took off his helmet there was no shortage of noblemen there to relieve him of its weight. They took his sword and his shield, eager to be of service, and Sir Gawain thanked each one of them as courteously as he knew how. They were dressed in their festive clothes and led him into the hall where a blazing fire burned in a hearth upon the floor. Then the lord of the castle appeared from an upper floor, to greet his guest with honour.

‘You are welcome to stay for as long as you like,’ he said. ‘All that you see, consider it your own! Do with it as you wish!’

‘May Christ reward you,’ replied Sir Gawain. And like good friends, they clasped one another in their arms. Sir Gawain sized up the man who was greeting him and thought that the castle was owned by a fine nobleman, a magnificent lord in the prime of life with a face that was full of fire and ferocity and a beard that shone reddish-brown, a man who stood with authority and conversed with an ease of speech that made it fitting, Sir Gawain thought, that he should lead a company of knights in such imposing surroundings. The lord returned to a chamber, quickly instructing that someone should be appointed to stay with Sir Gawain and to serve him. There were many ready to do this. Sir Gawain was led into a well-lit chamber where he found some fine bedding, silk curtains with gold hems, unusual bedspreads doubled over with soft fur and embroidery, curtains suspended from cords, gold curtain-rings, tapestries and carpets hanging on the wall, and spread across the floor! There Sir Gawain was allowed to undress while talking happily with those around him, removing his chain mail and his underclothes. Fine new robes were quickly brought to him by knights, so that he could choose a garment that he liked. He chose one that was generously tailored, suited him and fitted him well. It seemed to all those looking on as though the springtime had burst out prematurely in a blaze of colour, framing the grandeur of Sir Gawain’s physique to fine effect. A more gallant-looking knight had never set foot on Christ’s Earth, they all thought! Sir Gawain looked magnificent.

A chair was prepared for Sir Gawain in front of the fireplace, with a quilted cover and a cushion, both beautifully made. They cast a brown cloak over his shoulders, richly embroidered and lined with ermine, and similarly the hood. Sir Gawain sat very comfortably in this chair and warmed himself up in front of the fire, and then his mood improved! Soon a table was erected upon trestles and spread with a white tablecloth, then a salt-cellar and silver spoons were placed on top. Sir Gawain was brought water to wash his hands in and then invited to sit at the table. Then some excellent stews appeared, giving off a delightful aroma of herbs. There were ample portions, as was fitting for a guest, all sorts of fish, some baked in bread, some cooked over hot coals, some poached, some simmered in the broth and flavoured with herbs and spices, and with all the kinds of sauces that Sir Gawain liked best. He gave many fine complements, and just as courteously, the knights encouraged him to eat it all up!

‘Receive this penance of fish for Christmas Eve!’ they joked. ‘Tomorrow we shall reward you with a proper feast!’

Sir Gawain began to get quite merry for all the wine they were plying him with. And soon, by discrete inquiries and by quiet encouragements, they had learned that he was from the court of King Arthur, that the king counted him a knight of the Round Table and then, by chance, that it was no less a person than Sir Gawain himself, sitting there enjoying the Christmas fare! When the lord of the castle discovered that he was entertaining King Arthur’s nephew, he laughed out loud. All the men in the castle joyfully converged upon the room where Sir Gawain sat, to introduce themselves to this renowned knight who, before all men on Earth, was praised as the finest! Everyone quietly turned to his companions and whispered: ‘Now we shall see some masterful etiquette and hear some impeccable language. We will learn some clever phrases just by listening, since here amongst us is the paragon of refinement. God has indeed graced us that such a noble guest as Sir Gawain should arrive, just as we prepare to rejoice in celebration of his birth. This knight will teach us some noble etiquette, and perhaps, if we’re lucky, the correct way to speak intimately to ladies as well.’

By now, Sir Gawain had finished eating and had risen from the table. It was already dark outside and chaplains were making their way to the chapel. The bells started ringing with gusto, summoning all to the evensong service that would celebrate Christmas Eve. The lord of the castle came down with his lady and she entered a small enclosed pew. Sir Gawain entered the chapel and made his way down the aisle, where the lord of the castle caught his arm and guided him to a seat next to him with a great show of friendliness and said that he was the most welcome guest that they had ever had. They embraced one another and then sat together throughout the service. The lady stole glances at Sir Gawain many times as they sang and prayed, and when the service was over she came out of her closet with many companions and maids and rushed through the chancel to catch up with Sir Gawain, leading another lady by the left hand, a much older lady, very old, and greatly honoured by the knights around her. The lady herself was very beautiful, she had a fine complexion, a lovely figure and all other qualities as well; she was more beautiful even than Queen Guinevere, Sir Gawain thought. She and the lady she was leading were both totally different to look at. The one was fresh and beautiful, with a healthy complexion, the other yellow with age, her cheeks wrinkled and grey. The one wore brightly-coloured scarves and pearls, her pale neck brighter than the snow on a hillside, her alluring cleavage openly displayed, the other was wrapped in clothes that completely enclosed her neck, her black chin was clasped about with white veils, her bosom enfolded in silk, everywhere covered, hems ornamented with pearls and nothing of her skin visible except for a part of her face, and that was ugly! She was a very old woman, short and stout with disproportionately wide hips. More lovely to look at by far was the lady beside her.

When Sir Gawain caught sight of the pretty lady looking at him, he turned around and, begging leave of the lord of the castle, bowed low to honour the elderly lady and then lightly embraced the younger, kissing her on the cheek and introducing himself courteously. They asked to have his acquaintance and he, in turn, asked to be their obedient servant, if they would allow this. The lord and lady then took him between them and, deep in conversation, led him to a chamber and a fireplace and quickly asked for wine to be brought, and as much ginger and liquorice as Sir Gawain might wish for. Then the lord urged everyone to join in a game, took off his hood and hung it aloft on a spear, then jumped up and down in the air with it, challenging all the knights to try to get hold of it, to liven up the Christmas celebrations.

‘I will have contended with the finest of you all before I lose this garment!’ he cried, challengingly. And with much laughter they played this game until Sir Gawain took his leave of them all and went to bed.

On the morning when every man celebrates the birth of Christ, joy is everywhere for his sake and so it was in this castle, with delightful food and merry conversation. Knights sat at the high table, dressed in their finest attire. The elderly lady presided over the top place, with the lord of the castle beside her, as I believe. Sir Gawain and the lord’s lovely wife sat together near the middle of the table as the food was served, first at the high table then throughout the hall. Everyone was quickly attended to; there was food, there was laughter, there was so much happiness that I shall attempt to describe it no further. And yet I will say that Sir Gawain and the beautiful lady were so engrossed in each other’s company, and conversed so politely and intimately together, that it surpassed any sport for them that princes might play. There was music, there was chatter, and as each man attended to his conversation, so they attended to theirs.

The day after was similarly packed with festivity, and the day after that as well. It was the feast of Saint James and the final day of the celebration. Guests would be leaving the following morning, so they all stayed up late, drinking wine and dancing carols to the music of the minstrels until they were exhausted. Then all those who would be leaving in the morning said goodbye to the lord of the castle. Sir Gawain thanked the lord, who embraced him and led him to his own chamber, to the fireplace, where he courteously thanked Sir Gawain for the honour he had shown to him by gracing his Christmas celebrations and tried hard to persuade him to change his mind about leaving.

‘Sir, it will have been to my credit to have entertained you at my Christmas celebrations, this much I know.’

‘I hardly deserve this complement,’ replied Sir Gawain, courteously. ‘But in good faith, all the honour you may receive is through your own merit and none of mine, and may King Arthur readily grant it to you. I am, Sir, your obedient servant, to do with as you wish, since I am still a guest in your castle.’

The lord did all he could to try to persuade Sir Gawain to stay a little longer, but Sir Gawain insisted that that was impossible. The lord asked what important business it could be that prevented him from attending King Arthur’s Christmas celebrations and now forced him to ride away from his own?

‘In truth, Sir, it is an important errand and an urgent one. For I am summoned to search for a place that I have no idea how to find. I would give all the wealth in the kingdom of Logres to discover where it is by New Year’s morning, so help me God! And I would like to put this question to you, Sir, if I may: could you tell me truly whether you have ever heard of the ‘Green Chapel’ and if you have heard of it, could you tell me where it is? For I have sworn that I will seek out the Knight of the Green Chapel, if there is still breath left in my body to do so, and only a little time remains now until New Year’s morning. So by your leave, Sir, I must continue my journey, for I have barely three days left in which to look, and I would rather die than have my word mean nothing.’

‘But then you can stay!’ laughed the lord. ‘Don’t worry any more about the Green Chapel! You can lie in on New Year’s morning, then dress, ride out to that place and be there before noon, to fulfil whatever obligation it is that you have. Remain here until New Year’s Day and go then. Men will be able to direct you there quickly, for it is barely two miles away!’

Sir Gawain was delighted and laughed heartily: ‘Thank you from the bottom of my heart!’ he said.

The lord took Sir Gawain by the shoulders, set him down beside him and then sent for the ladies, and Sir Gawain and the lord’s wife resumed their innocent and courteous intimacy with one another. The lord called for music and song. Then, as though troubled by some sudden thought: ‘You have decided to stay, but will you promise me something else?’ he asked.

‘Yes, Sir, for certain,’ replied the honourable Sir Gawain. ‘While I am a guest in your castle I shall do as you wish.’

‘Then I am aware that, because you have journeyed here from a long way away and stayed up with me late into the night, you cannot have rested properly nor recovered yet from the hunger and deprivation that you have had to endure. Tomorrow you shall lie in bed and stay there for as long as you like, ignoring the call to hear Mass. Rise when you want to and go to eat in the hall with my wife, who will sit with you and keep you company until I return. I shall get up early and go hunting. You stay in bed.’

Sir Gawain agreed to this, and the lord complemented him on his fine nobility: ‘But moreover,’ he continued, ‘let us agree to this as well: that whatever I win in the forest shall be yours to keep, and that whatever you are fortunate enough to win here in this castle, you shall give promptly to me. My good friend, let us swap things around in this way. Swear that you will do this for me, whoever should get the best deal out of it, or the worst!’

‘By God!’ replied Sir Gawain. ‘I agree! I am delighted that you wish to have some fun.’

‘Then bring a cup of wine, somebody, and we shall seal this bargain,’ cried the lord.

They laughed and drank together a little more and everybody chatted with one another and talked about this agreement; then, with perfect etiquette and pleasant words, the lords and ladies drew their conversations to a close, spoke softly to one another, kissed and said their goodbyes, and many cheerful souls carried torches to their beds. This lord certainly knew how to entertain!

Everybody got up before the sun had arisen and those who had to leave called to their servants. Horses were groomed and saddled, bags secured, everything prepared and loaded, and then all those who were due to depart leapt up into the saddle and took the route away from the castle that suited each of them best. The lord of the castle was not the last to be ready to set out either. He heard Mass, then quickly ate a hunk of bread soaked in wine, the bugle was sounded and he rode out into the parkland surrounding the castle. By the time the sun had risen, the hounds had been called out of their kennels, put on their leashes, and three long calls had been sounded on the hunting horn. Hunting dogs barked loudly and ran about on their leads, this way and that, sniffing for scents with a hundred of the best huntsmen, as men with greyhounds went to their stations in the forest, before releasing their dogs from their leads. Four long blasts were sounded on the hunting horn, and the forest was at once filled with noise.

At the first blast of this call the deer were startled and ran wildly through the woodland, witless with fear. Those that made for the high ground were fiercely repulsed by the beaters shouting ‘Hey!’ and ‘Wowgh!’ as the deer ran towards them. But the stags with great antlers were let through this cordon, and the young bucks as well, for the lord had forbidden any male deer to be killed during the winter season. But the hinds and the does were shouted away and driven back into the deep wooded valleys where they slipped and staggered as arrows with broad tips flew through the branches and brought them down. The deer brayed and cried, fell down bleeding on banks and by streams, or were chased delightedly by the greyhounds, and in turn by the huntsmen, with their hunting horns trumpeting such fearful blasts that it seemed that the cliffs on the valley sides would shatter and fall! The deer that escaped this ambush were shouted off the high ground by the beaters once again and chased into the streams where the men who were stationed below were so skilful, and their dogs so strong and fast, that there was not a moment when a man might not see a deer being brought down by a greyhound somewhere on the valley floor. The lord delightedly rode and dismounted, and mounted again, pursuing the excitement of the day with great joy as he pursued the deer.

As the lord enjoyed himself in the forest, meanwhile, Sir Gawain lay snuggled up in bed, lurking under the bedclothes as the morning sun shone on the walls, under a clean coverlet and enclosed by curtains. As he dozed, he heard a tiny noise at his door, and then the sound of the door opening. He raised his head from under the bedclothes, lifted a little corner of the curtain that surrounded his bed and cautiously looked to see who it was, watching to see who might come into view. It was the lord’s beautiful lady who closed the door softly behind her and moved slowly towards the bed. Sir Gawain hardly knew what to do when he realised this and, for shame, he lay back again and pretended to be asleep. The lady stepped quietly forwards and stole to his bed, lifted the curtain, climbed in and lay down on the bed beside him. She lay there for a long time, waiting for him to wake up.

Sir Gawain’s thoughts raced around in his head as he tried to weigh up in his mind what her motives might be for doing this. Finally he thought to himself: ‘It would be more seemly for me to speak with her and to find out, rather than lying here like an idiot.’ So he pretended to wake up, stretched, turned towards her, opened his eyes, acted as though he was startled, uttered a blessing and crossed himself. She looked happy, and very beautiful.

‘Good morning, Sir Gawain,’ she said. ‘You are a sound sleeper I must say, that someone can come into your bed like this and you don’t even notice. But now you are mine, unless we can come to some arrangement. I shall tie you up in your bed, be sure of it.’ She said this laughing.

‘Good morning to you,’ replied Sir Gawain, playfully. ‘I am yours to command, my lady, much to my good fortune! I surrender completely, as this is all I can do, for you have captured me entirely.’ So Sir Gawain joined in the joke and laughed with her: ‘But if you would be so gracious, lovely lady, as to open your prison and let your prisoner get up, he could arise from his bed and we would have more comfort to continue this lovely conversation.’

‘No, in truth, good Sir,’ she replied, ‘you shall not get out of this bed so easily, I assure you! I shall fasten your arm here, and this other arm here, and then speak with my knight whom I have captured. For you are Sir Gawain, whom all the world worships. Your courtesy and your honour are praised by lords and ladies everywhere. And now you are mine! My lord and all his huntsmen have gone for a long day’s hunting, all the other men are in their beds, and my ladies also, the door is closed and fastened with a strong catch, and I shall use this opportunity to my advantage. You are welcome to do with my body whatever you wish to do. I am completely at your bidding.’

‘In good faith,’ gasped Sir Gawain. ‘This *is* my lucky day! Although I cannot claim to be able to live up to this glowing description you have given of me. But should you think it fitting, I would be delighted to bring pleasure to your ladyship through conversation, or in any other way that I can. It would be pure joy to do so.’

‘But how churlish would it be of me if I ignored the fine reputation that you enjoy everywhere?’ replied the lady. ‘Sir Gawain, there are ladies enough who would rather have you locked in their prisons than possess all the wealth imaginable, and I praise God that, through his grace, I have the very thing that they all desire! I have you, to converse with, to be refreshed by and to cause all my anxieties to be eased away.’

She was so beautiful, and such good company, but Sir Gawain cheerfully deflected every advance she made with courtesy and restraint. ‘Madam,’ he said, laughingly, ‘may Mary reward you! I have seized upon your noble generosity in good faith, and many others here have been so very kind to me as well, and not so much through any merit of my own but because of the honour it does to you, my lady. You, who would find it impossible to behave in any other way but well.’

‘Mary!’ exclaimed this noble lady. ‘I beg to differ! If I possessed the whole world and I was looking for a man to love, then there would be no man upon Earth I would chose before you.’

‘But I can assure you that you have already chosen better than I, my lady. And I am proud to be valued so highly by you. I am your true servant and hold you to be my sovereign in all things. I am your knight, and may Christ reward you!’

They conversed playfully with each other like this until the middle of the morning, and always the lady let Sir Gawain believe that she was in love with him, and spun complements about the qualities that she had already seen him display, his good looks, his courtesy, his manliness, his lively and playful demeanour and all that she had ever heard spoken about him and knew to be true. And he defended himself nobly and acted properly, although she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his entire life. But his mind was on the Green Chapel. He preferred not to carry any more commitment in his baggage on such an anxious journey as the one upon which he was embarked. Finally, the lady asked his leave to go. He granted it with some relief.

She bid him a good day, laughed and said: ‘May he who oversees every conversation award you this one. But that you are indeed Sir Gawain? I cannot bring myself to believe it.’

‘Why!’ exclaimed Sir Gawain anxiously, as though fearing that he may have spoken out of turn in some way. But the lady blessed him and said:

‘Because a knight with so fine a reputation as Sir Gawain, with courtesy so completely contained within him, could not easily have spoken so long with a lady without finding an opportunity, at some brief moment in the conversation, to ask for a kiss.’

‘It is a knight’s duty to do willingly what a lady asks,’ said Sir Gawain, ‘and I shall kiss you more willingly still, lest it should displease you.’ She took a pace towards him, took him into her arms and kissed him. They commended one another to Christ and she went to the door without another word.

Sir Gawain prepared to get up, hurried out of bed, called to his chamberlain, chose the clothes that he wanted to wear and when he was ready, virtuously went to hear Mass before going to have something to eat. The rest of the day he spent merrily enough in the company of the two ladies, the elder and the younger, until the moon arose. Never has a knight been so graciously received, a guest between two such distinguished ladies and in such pleasant company.

All this while, the lord of the district was engaged in hunting the barren hinds in the forest and on the lower slopes of the fells. So many had been killed by the time the afternoon began to draw in that it would be a job to tally it all up! As the air began to chill, all the men flocked down to where the carcasses lay, piled them all in a heap and the most skilful amongst them began to butcher the animals. There was no shortage of people willing to help. They selected the largest deer first, took a knife to them and found at least two fingers depth of fat on them all. Then they cut the windpipe, caught hold of the gullet, cleaned it with a sharp knife, tied a knot in it, then cut off the four legs and skinned the hide. Next they cut open the belly, releasing the offal so as not to disturb the knot where the gullet was secured, then released the gullet and separating it from the wind-pipe, drew out all the guts cleanly in a mass.

Then with sharp knives they carved out the shoulders of meat in such a way that the sides of the carcass and the ribs beneath were left whole, then broke the chest and cut it in two, slit the throat from the windpipe down to the breastbone, took out the lungs, windpipe and all the membranes attaching to the stomach wall, removed it all cleanly as a piece, cutting it away; and this portion is called the numbles, I believe. Then they cleaned out the stomach cavity from the backbone to the hindquarters, cut through the flesh of the groin up to the backbone and removed the thighs, leaving the spine exposed. Then they cut off the head and the neck and then removed the sides of the carcass from the backbone, throwing the spine with its meat up into the trees as the ‘ravens’ portion’. Then they pierced each side of rib with a hook, attached a leg to it and the whole parcel became the payment to a huntsman for his day’s work, leaving the shoulders and the loins for the lord. Next, they laid out the skin and put the dogs’ portion on it, the liver, the numbles and the belly, along with bread soaked in blood. Then they blew the hunting horns, rounded up the dogs when they had finished eating, gathered the meat and wrapped it up to take home with them. The horns blew frantically with pleasure and by the time the light was fading all the men were back inside the castle, where Sir Gawain was already sitting quietly beside a roaring fire. The lord entered the hall and when Sir Gawain saw him, they greeted each other with much joy.

All the men of the castle were commanded to come into the hall and all the ladies were invited to come down from the higher chambers, and when everyone was assembled, the lord asked for all the venison to be brought before him. He called upon Sir Gawain to count it all up with him, and showed him the flesh of some fine, large deer cut properly from the bone.

‘How do you rate all this?’ he asked. ‘Have I done well? Do I deserve thanks for all this effort?’

‘Yes, for sure!’ replied Sir Gawain. ‘There is more quality game lying here than I have seen in seven years, from a winter hunt.’

‘And the terms of our agreement stipulate that it is all yours, Sir Gawain,’ said the lord.

‘This is true,’ said Sir Gawain. ‘And by the same token, what I have won within these walls is owing to you, and I hand it over with equal pleasure,’ and Sir Gawain clasped his hands around the lord’s neck and kissed him. ‘This is all that I have, I’m afraid. If it was more, you can be sure that I would have given it to you.’

‘It is good,’ said the lord. ‘But it would be better still if you could tell me where you obtained this treasure.’

‘That was not a part of our agreement,’ said Sir Gawain. ‘Ask me no more. You have taken what is yours.’

They laughed, and joked with one another, and then went quickly to supper, to a very nicely presented meal. Then they retired to a chamber beside a roaring fire. Fine wine was brought to them in good supply, and they agreed to do the same the next day, that whatever fortune brought to each of them should be given to the other in the evening. They shook hands on this deal before all the men in the room, wine was brought to them and the contract sealed with another drink. Then, at last, they graciously took their leave of one another and each hurried quickly to his room.

When the cock had crowed three times the lord jumped from his bed, and all his men from theirs, and when they had heard Mass, and eaten some food, they leapt straight onto their horses and away again for another day’s hunting! The sun had barely risen above the horizon as they climbed up onto the open fells with their horns blowing festively. The dogs were unleashed and began rushing delightedly through the prickly scrub and the thorn bushes, sniffing for a scent.

It was not long before a sound of excited barking came from the foot of a rocky hillside where small trees and rank bushes wallowed in a marsh. The huntsmen urged on the dogs that had the scent and there was some wild shouting and loud encouragement as the other dogs rushed to where the noise was coming from and quickly picked up the scent, forty at a time. There was such a din from the pack of dogs that the rocky hillsides rung with the noise. The huntsmen urged on the hounds with their horns and with their voices as dogs poured down the slope between a high rocky crag and the marsh, and stayed as a pack at the edge of this boggy tarn where the hillside was strewn with boulders, searching for the trail.

They hunted all around the crag and at the edge of the marsh along to where the tarn, a small lake, sent a stream down into the forest, and the men knew from the lack of scent, now, and the bloodhounds’ confusion, that the animal must have taken refuge in the marsh. So they beat at the bushes and the small trees and invited the creature to show himself, which he did, charging through the line of men, aiming to take out as many of them as he could in a single rush! A huge boar! A brute of a beast, he came rushing out, larger than any they had ever seen before. He was no adolescent! This boar caused grief at once, thrusting three men to the ground in a single charge, then turned to do the same again. Men cried: ‘Hey!’ put horns to their mouths, sounded the call for the hounds to be gathered and many were the happy men and dogs who chased after this boar with a great noise and hullabaloo! Often he survived being cornered or surrounded, hurting many hounds and maiming others so that they yelped piteously and howled in pain. The men began to shoot at him with their bows and arrows, hitting him many times, but none of the arrowheads could pierce through the skin of his head or through the tough hide of his shoulders; the arrows splintered on impact and the arrowheads bounced off wherever they hit. But when the boar grew tired of being incessantly bruised and cut by these arrows, mad with fear and anger, he rushed at the men once more, injuring one with each charge. Many of the huntsmen became afraid, and backed off. But the lord galloped after the boar on a swift steed as though he was on the battlefield, blowing the call to regather the hounds once again, while chasing the beast along barely-discernable paths, through thorn bushes and gorse, scrubland and harsh undergrowth, pursuing this wild pig.

This was how he spent the morning, while our splendid knight lay in his bed, Sir Gawain, languishing in the castle under richly-coloured bedclothes!

The lady did not forget to greet her knight, though. She made her way to his room early, in the hope that he might have changed his mind. She went to the curtain and looked in at Sir Gawain, who greeted her courteously. Then, accepting an invitation that he had not given, she joined him on the bed and with gentle words, lay softly by his side, laughed easily and genuinely and with a playful smile said: ‘Sir, are you really Sir Gawain! A man renowned for his courtesy? Have you already forgotten everything that I taught you yesterday?’

‘What did you teach me?’ asked Sir Gawain. ‘I am sorry but I can’t remember.’

‘I taught you about kissing,’ said this beautiful woman. ‘You do it to demonstrate affection for a person, and it is proper that a knight who would claim to be well-versed in courtesy should know this.’

‘I’m afraid that I must contradict you,’ said Sir Gawain. ‘Courtesy prevents me from kissing you, for fear of a rebuff. If I were to try to kiss you and be refused, I would be blamed for having been too presumptuous and I would be greatly at fault.’

‘Good grief!’ replied the lord’s wife. ‘Who would refuse *you*? You are strong enough to force a woman if you wanted to, if any woman was stupid enough not to want to be kissed by you!’

‘By God, that would be very courteous!’ replied Sir Gawain. ‘Unsolicited advances are considered wrong in the land where I come from, especially if backed up by violence! However, I am ready to kiss you, and you may kiss me whenever you like, and leave whenever you want.’

The lady leaned over and gently kissed his face.

They spoke for a while more, and then: ‘I hope this does not make you angry,’ said the lady at last, ‘but I would like to know – what sense does it make that so young and fit a knight as you, and one so courteous, valent and refined as you are deemed to be, should act in this way? ? In all the stories of true knights, we see it written in clear letters how they risk their lives and endure terrible hardship for the love of their lady, and afterwards they reap their reward by sharing joy in the bed chamber together. This is the very rock upon which chivalry rests: love and loyalty, the very doctrine of arms. You are the most good-looking knight of your generation. There is not a maiden anywhere who does not fall to the ground in a swoon at the very mention of your name. And yet twice now I have lain beside you in this bed and you have not spoken a single word to me about love. Not a single word! You, who are so courteous and skilled in persuasion. You ought to be eager to show off these skills to a lady. You, who are so famed for it! Can’t you do it? Is it because you think I am too stupid to respond to such advances? For shame! I lie here alone beside you, hoping to learn something about love. Show me some interest, while my husband is away!’

‘It is a great delight and fine sport to me that such a beautiful lady as yourself should choose to come here and spend her time with such an unworthy man,’ replied Sir Gawain. ‘That you should choose to give your knight any kind of favour at all is very gratifying. But to trouble myself with having to explain the art of true love, and to discuss the themes that are woven into stories of arms and romance, to you whom I know to be a hundred times more knowledgeable in these matters than I am, and will ever be, would be a folly. But I will do all you desire, to the best of my ability, as I am obliged to, and I shall remain your servant, so save me God.’

And so the lady persevered, trying to lead Sir Gawain to his doom, however else she might have viewed it. But he defended himself so well that nothing untoward happened to either of them, and they both began to enjoy themselves very much in each other’s company. They laughed and talked and flirted together incessantly, and at last she leant over and kissed him again, then she took her leave and left the room.

Sir Gawain got up and went to hear Mass. Then a meal was prepared for them, graciously served and he spent the rest of the day amusing himself with the ladies.

Meanwhile, the lord was galloping over the fells, pursuing the gigantic wild boar. It rushed over the hillsides and then grievously bit the backs of his finest dogs as it defended itself in a corner, until bowmen forced it out into the open once more. And yet the boar made the bravest retreat, until at last he was so exhausted that he could flee no more and with all the remaining strength that he could muster, he ran into a small confinement of cliffs and boulders beside a raging torrent. With a sheer wall behind him he whet his tusks in anger and frothed at the mouth. All the men surrounding him were tired of shooting at this animal from a distance, but none had the courage to approach too closely. The boar had hurt too many men already, and it was foolish to risk any more huntsmen and dogs against a creature that was so massively strong, and so angry.

The lord arrived. He saw that the animal was trapped and that his men were too frightened to go in for the kill, so he quickly dismounted, drew a shining sword and, leaving his horse where it was, strode purposefully forwards, splashing through the raging torrent of the river. The wild boar was immediately aware of the man wielding a weapon; his bristles stood on end, he grunted loudly and then launched himself at the knight like a rock from a trebuchet! All the men stood in fear for their lord, as he and the boar collided in the midst of the white water that was rushing down the hillside. But the boar received the worst of it, for the lord thrust his sword into the boar’s throat and run it right up to the hilt and into the animal’s heart as they met. The boar snarled in submission and yielding, fell into the water and was carried swiftly downstream where a hundred hounds seized him and bit him with all their might! Then the men carried the boar back onto open ground, where the dogs finished him off.

Then there was a blowing of the kill from many a hunting horn! A whooping and cheering by all those who didn’t have a horn to their lips! The dogs barked excitedly, urged on by their masters who had been foremost in the chase. A man who was skilled in forest crafts began to butcher the boar, first cutting off the head and setting it high on a pole. then cutting the sides of the beast roughly away from the backbone, taking out the entrails and placing them over a large fire that had already been kindled in order to cook them, mixed with bread, as a reward for the dogs. Then he sliced great fillets of flesh and removed the heart and liver and kidneys; and then very expertly tied all this meat together into a great bundle and hung it all, together with the two sides of the animal, from a large carrying-pole. And with the meat of a great boar on their shoulders, they set off for home. The boar’s head was carried in front of the lord, whose bravery and strength, in the raging torrent of a cascading river pouring down from the fells, had caused the demise of a very fine animal.

They arrived at the castle and the lord made his way quickly to the hall where he called Sir Gawain over to receive what was his, with excited accounts and a great deal of pleasure and laughter. The ladies were sent for and the huntsmen gathered around. The lord showed to Sir Gawain the huge sides of flesh and narrated the story of the chase they had had that day, the hugeness of the boar, his speed, his ferocity and his strength, as he recounted the battle they had had with him in the woods and on the fells. Sir Gawain congratulated the lord on his skill and valour and said what a magnificent achievement it was to have brought down such a huge animal, for he had never seen so large a boar as this in all his life. They inspected the gigantic head, touched it, measured it, and Sir Gawain expressed his praise through some choice expletives, for the lord’s benefit.

‘Now, Sir Gawain,’ said the lord. ‘This meat is yours, by force of the agreement that we have made.’

‘You are correct,’ replied Sir Gawain. ‘And just as certainly, all that I have received I must now give to you.’ And he clasped the lord around the neck and graciously kissed him, then gave him another kiss as well.

‘Now we are even,’ Sir Gawain assured him. ‘Our obligations are fully discharged.’

‘By Saint Giles, though!’ exclaimed the lord. ‘You must be the best merchant I know. If you keep this exchange up any longer you will be rich!’

Tables were raised upon trestles, covered with cloths, and bright light from wax torches on the walls illuminated everything as the men sat, or served, in the hall. Soon there was a noise of merriment at the tables surrounding the fire. Many were the topics of conversation, and there were many noble songs, some fine new carols to dance to, verses to sing and all the customary mirth of a Christmas feast. Sir Gawain spent the evening beside the lord’s lovely lady, who behaved very properly. She avoided eye-contact with Sir Gawain and made such polite, discrete and formal conversation that he found himself wondering why she was doing this, and became quite annoyed and upset. But he exchanged only quiet pleasantries with her in return, however much it saddened and perplexed him. And when all the merriment in the hall had come to an end, the lord called Sir Gawain to his chamber and to the fire, for some more private and convivial conversation.

There they drank and talked, and the lord suggested that they play the same game yet again on New Year’s Eve. But Sir Gawain at once begged leave to ride out the next morning, for it was nearly time for him to prepare for his obligation at the Green Chapel. The lord wouldn’t hear of it though: ‘As I am a true knight,’ he insisted, ‘I give you my word that you shall arrive at the Green Chapel as soon as it is light on the morning of New Year’s Day, to do whatever it is you have to do. Therefore, lie in your bed and rest in the meantime. I shall hunt in this forest, and let us keep once more to our bargain. We shall exchange all that we have each gained when I return in the evening. Twice we have agreed to this and both times you have been true to your word. Now, perhaps, for me, it will be third time lucky! Remember this, tomorrow morning! But let us be merry while we may, and think only of happiness. A man never has far to look to find sorrow, if that’s what he wants.’

Sir Gawain agreed to stay. A toast was quickly brought to them and they drank to seal the bargain, then each took a lighted taper and went to bed.

Sir Gawain slept soundly all night. But the lord rose early the next morning to go hunting. After hearing Mass, he had a bite to eat with his huntsmen, then asked for his horse. Noblemen were already waiting on their hunting steeds outside the main door of the hall, and everyone was in good spirits. The countryside looked beautiful. There was a heavy frost and the sky was ablaze in reds and yellows as the sun rose above the horizon, then the huntsmen unleashed the hounds at the edge of the forest and the rock-strewn hillside rung with the noise of the horns.

Some of the dogs quickly fell upon a scent near to a fox’s lair, weaving this way and that as they followed the trail into some farmland. A small hound began to bark excitedly, the men pursuing the hounds shouted encouragement, the other dogs rushed over to see what was going on and they all set off in a panting rabble after the scent; then they spotted the fox and tore after the creature as he hurried away, frightening him with their dreadful noise. The fox dodged this way and that and doubled back through many dense thickets, stopped to listen many times beside hedges and at last, leaped across a little ditch and crept out softly by the edge of a small wood, thinking to escape the hounds by stealth. But then, before he realised it, he ran straight into an ambush. Three greyhounds set upon him at once. He turned and fled away in a new direction, towards the forest. Then it was a joy to hear the hounds, as they all formed into a pack once again to chase after him. Such abuse they hurled at him with their yelping and barking that it seemed that the rocky scrambles and rough cliffs would collapse into heaps of rubble at the noise! The men whooped at the fox when they saw him, shouted at him with menacing words, threatened him, called him a thief, and always the hounds were so close behind him that he had no time to stop. The dogs chased after Reynard through the forest and then out again onto the open fells, then he would dodge back into the woodland again, he was so wily. He led them this dance, the lord and his huntsmen, beside the high fells, while Sir Gawain slept soundly behind his lovely curtains, on that cold morning.

The lord’s wife arose as soon as it was light and, when she had prepared herself, put on a fine skirt trimmed with expensive fur that trailed upon the floor. Then she made her way to the chamber where Sir Gawain lay, for she had set her heart upon something this morning and did not want to see it fail. On her head she wore a net studded with precious stones, twenty or more in each cluster. Her face and neck were bare, and so were her breasts and her back. She opened the door to Sir Gawain’s chamber, closed it behind her, then threw up a window and called to him: ‘Ah! Man! How can you sleep? This morning is so beautiful!’

Sir Gawain stirred out of a troubled dream, mumbled heavily to himself and when he heard her voice he began to wake. His mind was filled with oppressive thoughts of a Green Chapel where he was to meet a knight and receive the stroke of an axe; but when he became aware of that lovely lady, he recovered his wits, pulled himself from his dream and answered her politely. The lady went over to him and, laughing, leaned over his face and gently kissed him. He welcomed her with a broad smile. She was so beautiful, so alluringly clad, her face was so lovely and her breasts so perfect that a vigorous upwelling of delight warmed his heart and his loins. With gentle smiles, they both burst into laughter. Joy and happiness filled them and possessed them entirely. They exchanged some carefree thoughts.

Great peril threatens, if Mary does not look after her knight! The beautiful lady presses Sir Gawain so hard that he can see no other way out except to accede willingly to her advances or else to be brutally rude to her. Sir Gawain cares for his reputation for courtesy and is loathe to be abrupt to her, but he worries even more about the harm he will receive if he does as the lady wishes, and is then rightfully accused of deceiving the lord of the castle.

‘God shield me!’ he thought to himself.

With great deftness he parried all the leading questions and invitations with courtesy and good humour, until she exclaimed: ‘I believe you have a woman whom you prefer to me. Be open about it! Tell me the truth. How else could you not deserve to be rebuked for failing to make love to a lady who lies beside you with a heart that pains her more for desire than does any other woman’s in the world!’

‘I have no lover,’ replied Sir Gawain, smiling warmly back at her, ‘and no intention of finding one at the moment.’

‘Then this is the worst possible news,’ replied the lady.

‘But I have my answer, much to my misfortune. Kiss me now, gently, and I shall go. But I shall grieve like a love-stricken girl, since that is all that is left for me to do.’ And sighing, she bent over and kissed Sir Gawain gently, then pulled herself away, and as she stood she said: ‘My love, at our parting, at least give me something of yours to hold as a keepsake, a glove perhaps, to remind me of you and to ease the pain I shall feel when I think of you, alone in my room.’

‘I wish I had the most valuable thing that I possess with me, for you have deserved more reward than I can offer you at the moment. And to give you some worthless token – well, it will not honour you to receive just a glove from the store of gifts that Sir Gawain is able to bestow. But I am here on business in unknown lands and have no men to lead pack horses or to carry bags full of valuable things for me to give out as presents, much to my sorrow. One can do only the best that one can in the circumstances. Please accept this.’

‘No gift then?’ replied the lady, sadly. ‘Then although I am to receive nothing of yours, you shall have something of mine.’ She produced a fine ring of red gold set with a large raised diamond that sparkled with beams of light as though they came from the sun itself. Make no mistake, this ring was valuable! But Sir Gawain refused it.

‘I desire no gifts on this occasion,’ he insisted. ‘I have none to give and can accept none.’

She tried desperately to persuade him but he stood firm.

‘If you refuse my ring because it is too expensive,’ she said at last, ‘then I have something of less value. Take my cloth waistband instead,’ and she softly grasped the material of a silken band that was clasped around her waist over the linen underskirt below her gown. It was of green silk with gold threads, embroidered sparingly around the hem. She proffered this to Sir Gawain and urged him, although it was less than he deserved, to take it. But he refused once again and explained that he could not accept any gifts at all, until, through God’s grace, he might have endured the adventure and the obligation that he had shortly to face.

‘And therefore, I ask you,’ he said, ‘in all humility, please do not be offended but stop this game, for I shall not accept anything from you. But I am greatly in your debt because of the hospitality and friendliness you have shown to me, and I will be your true servant always.’

‘You refuse this because it is such a small gift?’ asked the lady. ‘Well, it might seem so to you, but although it is small, it is nevertheless valuable, and if you knew its qualities you would praise it more highly. For the man who wears this green waistband need fear no man on Earth nor any blow that he might suffer, for nothing on Earth can kill him.’

Sir Gawain paused. Then he conceded the struggle at once and allowed the lady quickly to remove her waistband and to give it to him. For it came into his mind that this might be a godsend when he arrived at the Green Chapel to receive whatever fortune decreed that he must; and if he could avoid being killed without reneging upon the bargain that he had made, this would not amount to dishonour. She gave it to him with pleasure. He accepted it graciously. She asked for her sake that he keep it a secret and not to tell her husband about it. Sir Gawain promised that nobody would learn a thing. Only he and she would know about it. Then he thanked her many times, most sincerely, and for a third time, she kissed her handsome knight. Then she took her leave and left the room, for she could see that this was all that she was going to get from Sir Gawain.

When the lady had gone, Sir Gawain quickly got dressed into some fine clothes, found a safe hiding-place for the waistband and then made his way quickly to the chapel where he found a priest. Asking this priest if he would hear his confession and guide him into better ways, Sir Gawain confessed and the priest pointed out all his misdeeds, the large and the small, and implored God to have mercy upon Sir Gawain so that his soul might be safe when he rode from the castle the next day. Then Sir Gawain mingled with the ladies and danced carols and other entertainments, joyfully and with carefree abandon, until it was nearly dark. Everybody was delighted with his company. He was happier now than he had been throughout his whole stay.

Let Sir Gawain remain in the care of the ladies, for the lord is in a forest clearing now, having just killed the fox that they had been pursuing. As he rode across a bridge to catch up with the thief, he had heard the hounds coming towards him again and suddenly Reynard had come racing through a rough thicket with a rabble of dogs streaming behind him, close at his heels. The lord had spotted the fox, drawn his sword, swung it at him, the animal had flinched, changed direction to avoid the blade and run right across the path of one of the hounds who had caught him in its mouth. Then all the dogs fell on Reynard!

The lord swiftly dismounted, snatched the fox away from the dogs’ teeth and holding him high over his head, gave out a whoop! The dogs barked excitedly in response. Huntsmen hurried to the scene, blowing the signal for the dogs to regather until they saw their lord holding the fox and realised their mistake. Then they all assembled and those carrying bugles blew them with all their might and all the others shouted and cheered. It was a merry sound they all raised there for Reynard’s soul! The hounds were rewarded with a lot of fuss and a rubbing of faces and necks. Then they pulled off Reynard’s coat.

By now it was nearly dark and, blowing loudly on their hunting horns, they made for home. The lord arrived at his castle and found the hall fire lit and Sir Gawain beside it, surrounded by many beautiful women, looking very contented and pleased with himself. He wore a blue robe that reached to the floor, a stylish and well-fitting overgarment lined with ermine and a hood of similar style draped over his shoulders. They greeted one another very jovially, then Sir Gawain said: ‘Let me fulfil at once the agreement that we made last night.’ He embraced the lord and kissed him three times, as deeply and lingeringly as he could.

‘By Christ! You will sell a lot of that merchandise if you price it correctly! All I have to show for a day’s hunting is this lousy fox skin, the devil take it! It is a poor payment for three such fine kisses.’

‘Enough!’ said Sir Gawain. ‘I thank you, by the Cross of Jesus!’ And then the lord related to him the tale of the day’s hunt.

With merriment and song, and every delicious morsel that they could possibly imagine, they spent the evening very happily. The ladies laughed at the men’s jokes and the lord and Sir Gawain were in fine spirits; they all laughed so much it was as though they were all delirious, or drunk! But at last the evening drew to a close and the thoughts of the men turned to their beds. Sir Gawain took his leave first of all, thanking the lord profusely and in all humility for such a wonderful stay.

‘Thank you for such fine hospitality, and for entertaining me at your Christmas feast. May God reward you with honour! But tomorrow, as you know, I must depart, and I will count myself your true servant, if it pleases you, and if you would provide me with a man as you promised, to guide me to the Green Chapel where I must suffer my fate tomorrow morning.’

‘I will be pleased to,’ replied the lord, and he at once instructed a servant to accompany Sir Gawain the following day, going by way of the open fells, which was the quickest way, then down through the forest. Sir Gawain thanked the lord for his generosity and then took his leave of the noble ladies, with much kissing and affection, and he offered them all a thousand thanks and they in return commended him to Christ. There were some sad sighs! Then he took his leave of every man he came to, thanking him for the trouble that he had gone to on his behalf and the effort they had all taken to make him so welcome. And they were all sorry to say goodbye to him, as sorry as they would have been if Sir Gawain had been living with them all his life! Then, with men and light, he was led to his chamber and cheerfully prepared for bed, and sleep. But I cannot say if he slept or not, for he had some serious business to attend to in the morning. The moment he has been seeking is close now. And if you will all be quiet for a little longer, I shall tell you how he got on.

The night passed, and then the sky began to lighten, as God willed. But the weather had worsened. The clouds hung menacingly over a bitterly cold, dark landscape with enough cruel northern chill to freeze an unwary traveller. It began to snow, and soon the landscape was gripped in a blizzard. The whining wind whipped down from the fells and stung the air, driving the snow into drifts in every dale. Sir Gawain listened to all of this as he lay in his bed, and although he had his eyes shut, he slept little. Each cock crow told him how much nearer it was to dawn, and before the sun rose – for there was light in his chamber from a lamp – he called to his chamberlain, who answered him promptly. Sir Gawain asked that his coat of chain mail and his saddle be brought to him. The man quickly got up, fetched all Sir Gawain’s equipment and began to help him to dress. First he gave him warm woollen garments to put on, then his armour which had been carefully stored and cared for, the plate polished and the mail rolled and brushed to remove any sign of rust. It all looked as good as new. Sir Gawain was quick to show his gratitude as each polished piece was firmly and properly tied into place, until he looked to be the most magnificent knight in all of Christendom! Then Sir Gawain asked that his horse be prepared while he finished dressing, and he slipped on his surcoat with its heraldic arms, finely stitched and lined with costly fur, the pentangle embroidered upon velvet, and all the precious stones with protective properties of their own. And neither did Sir Gawain forget the waistband. He remembered that!

When his sword was buckled about his hips, he wound the girdle tightly around his waist. This waistband of green silk looked very fine on him, standing out as it did against the red of his surcoat. And he did not wear it for ostentation or through pride of the gems hanging from it, although they did, and they were fine, but he wore it because it might offer him protection when the time came for him to suffer that stroke that he had to face, from whatever weapon it might be.

Gringolet was readied. Then Sir Gawain made his way quickly down from his room, thanking many times those of the lord’s retinue whom he met on the way. When he approached Gringolet, he looked at the horse’s face and at his coat and his mane and said soberly to himself: ‘The men in this castle certainly know how to behave with nobility. May God reward them. May he reward all of you! And if I live a little longer, I shall find some way of rewarding you as well, if I can.’ Then he stepped into a stirrup and raised himself up into the saddle. His man passed him his shield and he hung it from his shoulder. Then Sir Gawain spurred Gringolet and the horse trotted off at once, across the stone ground, eager to be away. He was a huge steed, and had been stabled with every care and attention, and with every comfort, but now all he wanted was to be able to gallop over some open ground! Sir Gawain’s noble guide mounted his own horse, carrying the knight’s spear and lance.

‘I commend this castle to Christ!’ Sir Gawain called out. ‘May all who live within it enjoy peace and good fortune!’

The drawbridge was let down and the wide gates unbolted and opened. Sir Gawain crossed himself and urged Gringolet to trot over the planks, then he thanked the gatekeeper, who knelt as he passed. Sir Gawain wished him a good day and commended him to Christ for his goodwill in letting him in on that first day. Then he rode off with his companion, towards the perilous place where he was to receive the dreadful blow.

They rode beneath the leafless trees and then climbed the slopes up onto the fells, past craggy outcrops which were white with frost, beneath a menacing sky. Away in the distance, across the forest, the high hills were crowned with scudding clouds so that each peak was shrouded and looked as though it was wearing a hat. The air was damp, with patches of cold mist here and there, and streams tumbled down from the higher slopes of the fells in a noisy clatter of white, bubbling water and rock. It was a devious route they were taking around the forest. When the sun arose, they were on a hillside, surrounded by snow. The man who was riding with Sir Gawain signaled him to stop.

‘You are not far, now, from where you want to be,’ said the man. ‘But I will tell you the truth, since I have come to know you, and to admire you, so take my advice. The place that you seek is perilous. The man who lives there is larger than any other man on this Earth, heavier than the four finest knights at King Arthur’s court, bigger, indeed, than Hector who fought against the Greeks! He is unpleasant and strong, loves violence and indulges his blood-lust at the Green Chapel, for nobody passes that place without receiving his death blow. He is merciless! Be he a labourer or a well-armed knight, a monk, a priest or anybody else who rides past this chapel, he thinks that it is as wonderful to kill them as it is to be alive! I tell you, as surely as you sit there in your saddle, this knight will kill you even if you have twenty lives to spend! He has been here a very long time, and there is no defense against his blows. So leave him alone! Choose another route. Ride to some other district. I’ll go back to the castle, and I swear by God that I’ll cover for you. I’ll never breathe a word that you took another path when I told you who it was you were going to meet with.’

‘Goodness!’ exclaimed Sir Gawain, in genuine surprise. ‘Good luck to you, man, that you wish me such happiness. I truly believe that you would lie for me. But if I were to hurry away from here through fear of what you have just told me, I would rightly be called a coward. So I’ll go to this chapel, even if I find a giant standing there with an enormous club! Almighty God knows how to place his servants in his care.’

‘Mary!’ exclaimed the other man in reply. ‘Well, if *you* don’t care whether you live or die, then why should I? Here is your helmet and your spear. Follow this path down beside these cliffs until you come to the bottom of the valley. Then search for a clearing in the forest on your left hand side and there you will find the chapel you seek, and the grim fellow who looks after it. Now farewell, and may God protect you, noble Sir Gawain! I wouldn’t go down there with you if you paid me all the gold in the world.’

With this, the man spurred his horse with all his might, galloped across the grass towards some trees and disappeared from sight, leaving Sir Gawain alone.

‘I shall not succumb to fear,’ thought Sir Gawain, ‘nor to self-pity. I will do as God wills, since I am fully absolved.’

Sir Gawain urged Gringolet on, and following the path down into the forest, riding over rugged ground down through the trees, following the valley to the very bottom, he looked about at the ancient woodland and could see no sign of any habitation whatsoever. Hillsides rose up from where he was riding in steep craggy edifices that looked, as he gazed upwards, as though the clouds were rolling along the tops of them. Sir Gawain searched through the forest looking for the Green Chapel, his mood alternating between hope and despair. In a clearing, he came at last across a low mound, a barrow, beside the banks of a stretch of water that formed an arm of a lake into which a stream was discharging noisily. Sir Gawain rode Gringolet up to this barrow and dismounted, secured his reins to a lime tree that was growing there and used one of its branches to haul himself up onto the mound. Then he walked about on top of it, wondering what on Earth it could be. It had stones at one end with gaps that seemed to lead into a cavity, and it was all overgrown with grass. It was nothing but an old cave. Or a crevice in an old crag, perhaps? He really had no idea what it was.

‘Well Lord!’ he thought to himself. ‘Is this the Green Chapel? God, it is desolate here. I can well imagine the green knight performing his devotions in this dreadful place, or the devil himself conducting a service here at midnight, amongst this grass and these weeds. This is the most cursed chapel I’ve ever seen!’

With his helmet set firmly on his head and a spear in his hand, Sir Gawain walked to the far end of the barrow, which was slightly higher. All of a sudden a great noise rang out, reverberating off all the crags high around the valley, a noise that seemed to be emanating from a rocky slope beyond the bubbling stream. What was this! The sound clattered around the valley so loudly that the cliffs seemed about to burst into fragments; a rushing and a ringing, like water going through a mill, a whirring and a grinding and a scraping, like someone sharpening a scythe, or putting a keen edge to an axe!

‘By God!’ exclaimed Sir Gawain. ‘It sounds as though an implement is being sharpened in my honour.’ Then he raised his voice: ‘Who is it, in this wilderness? Sir Gawain has come, as he promised. If you have business with me, then be quick. Move fast! It’s now or never!’

‘Wait!’ came a voice on the far hillside, shouting down at Sir Gawain. ‘You shall suffer what we agreed upon quickly enough!’

And yet he continued to grind and sharpen as he said this, turned back to his whetstone for a few moments more, then emerged deftly from a crevice beside a cliff, as though from a cave, whirling a horrible weapon around his head. It was a very new-looking Danish battle axe, and the blade that curved away was four feet in breadth. I swear by the waistband that surrounds Sir Gawain’s midriff, it was this big! The giant stood with a green face, green legs, green hair and a green beard. The only difference from a year ago is that this delightful man is now on foot. He used the axe as a walking stick to scramble down the rocks and when he came to the stream he declined to wade through it but jumped across instead, using the axe as a vaulting pole! Then he approached Sir Gawain fiercely and confidently across the grass of a broad clearing that was covered in a thin layer of snow. Sir Gawain jumped down off the barrow to meet him. He did not bow in greeting.

‘Sir Gallant!’ cried the giant. ‘One may truly rely upon your word. May God keep you. Welcome to my abode! You have kept your appointment, as I might have expected. But you know the agreement we made. You pledged to be here in a year’s time so that I could have my redress. And now we are alone in this valley, just you and I, and there are no noblemen, now, to separate us. So take off your helmet and receive your due. Waste no more time now than I did, when you wapped off my head in one swipe, in King Arthur’s hall.’

‘I shall bear you no malice for any blow you deliver,’ declared Sir Gawain. ‘But apply yourself to one single stroke. I shall stand, and make no attempt to avoid it.’

Sir Gawain leaned his neck forwards and bowed, revealing his bare flesh. He did not shake or betray any outward sign of fear. The man in green quickly gathered himself, heaved up the grim implement with all his strength and, holding the axe poised high in the air, began to bring it down in a way that would have cleaved Sir Gawain’s neck instantly had he brought it down as swiftly as he threatened, but Sir Gawain flinched away as the blade approached and ducked from the path of the sharp iron. The green knight abruptly snatched the stroke away from its deadly trajectory and cried: ‘You are not Sir Gawain! That valent knight has never been frightened, however many warriors he faced! You try to flee before sustaining the slightest injury. Sir Gawain would not show such cowardice. Did I flinch when you raised the axe against me in King Arthur’s hall? My head flew to the floor and yet, did I move? I should be acknowledged the better knight, therefore.’

‘I flinched once,’ replied Sir Gawain ashamedly, ‘but I will not do so again, although I have no power to restore *my* head to my shoulders when it hits the snow! So get on with it, knight, by my faith, and bring this affair to a close. Do it at once. I shall remain still until the axe has struck me, you have my word.’

‘Then try this for size!’ cried the knight. He raised the axe aloft once more and paused as fiercely as though he was a madman, then brought the axe down – and swung it away at the last moment without touching Sir Gawain. Sir Gawain bravely endured this feint without moving a muscle. He stood as still as a tree stump with a hundred strong roots twisting through the rocky ground.

‘Now you have found your courage!’ quipped the man in green, merrily. ‘Then I will be able to hit you, since you are now equal to the high honour that King Arthur has bestowed upon you. Let’s see if you can keep your head at this next blow.’

‘Man!’ exclaimed Sir Gawain angrily. ‘Strike, you bastard! These threats have gone on for too long. I may even start to believe that you are frightened of doing it.’

‘Really?’ replied the green knight. ‘You utter strong words. Then let’s see if it’s true.’

The green knight took up a proper stance with which to deliver his next blow, knitted his brows in concentration and set his face sternly. Then he raised the axe aloft and at once brought it quickly down so that the sharp, far point of the sweeping blade cut against Sir Gawain’s neck. Although the man had swung the axe vigorously, it did no more injury than this, cutting through a little skin and flesh and nicking Sir Gawain on the one side as it passed. Blood ran over Sir Gawain’s shoulders, though, and dripped onto the ground. When Sir Gawain saw his own blood glistening in the snow he leaped backwards with a standing jump more than the length of a lance! He seized his helmet, put it onto his head, hurriedly jerked his shield over his shoulder and drew his sword. Never, since he had been born, had he moved so quickly!

‘Stop! No more strokes!’ he shouted. ‘I have taken a blow from you without any resistance and if you swing for me once more I will give you the same again in return, and much more, I promise you. One single swing was the bargain we struck in King Arthur’s hall.’

The man relaxed his posture, set the handle of his axe on the ground and leaning against the blade, looked at Sir Gawain standing on the snow-covered grass, saw how fearless and strong he looked and took pleasure from the sight. Then he said cheerfully:

‘Bold knight, don’t be so fierce! I promised you a stroke of the axe and you have received it. No one has done you any injustice. I release you now from all your obligations. But if I were less generous, I might have given you a blow to make you angrier. I threatened you at first with a feint only, one that gave you no injury, as was right, for you properly adhered to the agreement that we came to on that first night and gave me all that you had achieved. The second feint I made was for the morning when you kissed my fair wife, and then gave me those kisses in the evening. For those two days I gave you two feigned strokes that did you no harm. But on the third day you failed me. It is my waistband that you wear. My wife gave it to you, and true men are true to their word – then they fear no reprisal. I sent my wife to test you. But, truly, I think you are the most virtuous knight who has ever set foot on this Earth! As a pearl set beside white peas, so does Sir Gawain compare to all other knights. Only in this one thing have you failed. It was not to gain some advantage over my wife in bed, nor for a love of costly garments, but only because you love your life, and for this I can forgive you.’

Sir Gawain stood silently in thought, angry with himself, so angry that all the blood rushed into his face. He blushed a bright scarlet and bowed his head for shame.

‘A love of possessions is as hateful as cowardice,’ he replied. Then he grabbed at the knot that secured the waistband and flung the thing at the green knight.

‘Take this article of treachery!’ he cried. ‘A desire to escape your blow has taught me cowardice and a concern for possessions, when my knightly vows should have impelled me instead towards giving. I have been dishonest, I who have always been afraid of using deception.’

The other man laughed and said: ‘Consider your faults acknowledged, Sir Gawain, and the injury you have done to me, fully forgiven. You have already suffered penance from the point of my axe! I consider you now to be as pure of soul as though you had never done anything wrong in your entire life. And I give to you this gold-hemmed waistband. Sir, it is as green as my own garments and will remind you of this contest when you play among princes. It shall be a token of the adventure of the Green Chapel.’

Then the lord invited Sir Gawain to return to the castle with him: ‘Come back with me this New Year’s morning!’ he insisted. ‘We shall continue our Christmas celebrations, and I and my wife shall reconcile you with a lady who has been your enemy but will now be your friend.’

‘I am afraid that I cannot,’ replied Sir Gawain, as he courteously removed his helmet. ‘May all good fortune be yours, and may God and King Arthur reward you. Remember me to your courteous and beautiful wife – and to the other lady, I honour them both – and tell your wife that she successfully tricked her knight, and is it any surprise that a fool should be brought to sorrow through the scheming of a woman? For Adam was so beguiled, as was Solomon and after him Sampson and King David, who was deluded by Bethsheeba. These men were all afflicted by a woman’s schemes, and it is a huge advantage to be able both to love them and to disbelieve them at the same time! These men were all the finest in ancient times, and the most intelligent, and they were all beguiled by women, so what chance did I have?

‘But your waistband,’ continued Sir Gawain, ‘God reward you for it! I will wear it with pleasure, and not for the fine gold nor the quality of the tailoring nor the silk nor the gems, nor for the skilful embroidery, and neither for its costliness nor for the prestige it will bring, but only so that it will remind me of my transgression and be constantly in my sight. When my prowess at arms might impel me towards arrogance, the sight of this waistband will keep me in mind of my guilt, and bring me back down to Earth.

‘But one thing I would ask, if it does not displease you, since you have entertained me as your guest and you are the lord of this distant land in which I have sojourned, may the man who upholds the heavens and sits enthroned on high strengthen your hold over it. But what is your correct name?’

‘I shall tell you truly,’ replied the lord. ‘Bercilak of the High Kingdom I am called in these parts, through the power of Morgan la Fay who resides in my castle and has mastered many of Merlin’s mysteries, by her skill in learning and her understanding of what she has learned. For she once had a serious love affair with Merlin, that excellent scholar who is so well known among all the knights at King Arthur’s court. And therefore she is called Morgan the Goddess, and no one is so haughty that she cannot bring them under her control! She sent me, regarding this, to your delightful hall to inspect all the pride within it and to see if it truly deserves all its renown. She sent me there to frighten Queen Guinevere, and to terrify you all out of your wits. This is the woman whom you saw in the castle, the ancient lady. She is your aunt, Gawain, King Arthur’s half-sister, the daughter of the Duchess of Tintagel, whom dear Uther Pendragon fathered Arthur upon, who is now king, and whom he later married. Therefore I urge you, Sir Gawain! Meet again with your aunt. Enjoy yourself in my castle. My men adore you! You are as welcome as any man under God, by my faith!’

But Sir Gawain refused his invitation. He would not accept it. So they embraced and kissed, commended one another to God and parted on that snow-covered field. Sir Gawain rode Gringolet boldly and happily back towards King Arthur’s court, while the green knight went off to wherever it was he wanted to be.

Along wild pathways rides Sir Gawain, whom God has granted his life.

Often he found lodgings in a house or a castle, but just as often he and Gringolet spent the night in the open. Many adventures came his way, and I am not going to relate any of these to you now. The injury to his neck soon healed, and he wore the waistband like a sash, slantwise around his body and fastened under his left arm in a knot. He wore it to remind himself of his guilt. He arrived at last at King Arthur’s court, safe and sound.

When all the knights realised that Sir Gawain had returned safely, the hall was in uproar! King Arthur kissed his nephew, Queen Guinevere kissed him and then many fine knights welcomed him back and tried to get him to tell them all at once what had happened! And he told them the truth, every hardship, every strange encounter, the adventure of the Green Chapel, the hospitality of the lord, the love of his lady and at last, he told them about the green waistband. He showed them the scar on his neck – he winced as he spoke of his failing, groaned and blushed in mortification as he showed them the evidence that he bore on his neck.

‘Lord,’ he said, grasping the green sash. ‘This is the reason for the cowardice and the desire to possess that took possession of me! This is my symbol of shame, my emblem of dishonesty! I must wear it for as long as I live, because no one can hide his guilt without doing great harm to himself, and a deed once done cannot be undone.’

King Arthur comforted his nephew, and all the knights joined in. They laughed and joked and soon they had amiably agreed that all the knights of the Round Table should wear a similar sash, a band of bright green for the sake of Sir Gawain. They would all wear one. This was decided, to the renown of the Round Table, and King Arthur honoured all those who wore the green sash from this time onwards, as is told in the best books of romance.

This adventure took place in the days of King Arthur, as the chronicles of the Trojan Brutus make clear. After the siege and the assault of Troy by the ancient Greeks, Brutus came to these shores and many adventures took place in Britain like this one. Now may he who bore the crown of thorns, bring us to heaven.

Amen.

Evil be to him who evil thinks.