Yvain and Gawain

anon

*a fourteenth century Middle English verse romance, based upon Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth century Arthurian story of the Knight of the Lion*

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This story has been translated and retold from: Mary Flowers Braswell, 1995. Sir Perceval of Galles, and Yvain and Gawain. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. The text is taken from the only surviving copy in British Library MS Cotton Galba E.ix, dated to the early-fifteenth century.


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Here bigyns Yvain and Gawain · Almyghti God that made manskyn · He schilde His servandes out of syn · And mayntene tham with myght and mayne · That herkens Ywayne and Gawayne · Thai war knightes of the Tably Rownde · Tharfore listens a lytel stownde – Almighty God, who made mankind, shield us from sin and keep safe in your protection all who listen to this story of Yvain and Gawain. They were knights of the Round Table, therefore listen for a moment.

Arthur, the King of England, who conquered all of Wales and all of Scotland, as the book says – and many other lands, if you will look – was the finest of all knights. There was none so knowing nor so wise, nor so true to his word. And as it happened, he arranged a feast for Whit Sunday, at Cardiff in Wales, and after the meal the hall was full of lords and ladies and young knights and dam-sels. Everybody danced and joked, and some spoke of adventures that had happened to them, or of great hunts that they had been on or deeds of arms they had seen, or heard about; for there were many accomplished knights at this time, men of great honour. And to be honest, more truth was told in those days than is heard now, for truth and love have now been abandoned and men use another craft. People believe in the written word, but their faith is nothing but illusion. Men preach, but it is not the truth.

But I shall stop all this and begin my tale of King Arthur. After dinner with his distinguished and courteous knights, King Arthur retired to his chamber to sleep, and the queen also. And as they slept, some knights assembled outside the door to keep watch. Sir Dedine, Sir Segramour, Sir Gawain and Sir Kay were all there. Also, Sir Yvain and the mighty Colgrevance. And this knight Colgrevance began to tell of an adventure that he had had. And as it happened, the queen heard the story as it was being told, opened the door and sat down quietly amongst them in order to listen to it. Colgrevance was the quickest to spot this and sprang to his feet to acknowledge her presence. Sir Kay was the slowest to rise.

‘Are you not aware that it is the height of bad manners to rise suddenly without waiting for others to do so!’ exclaimed Sir Kay, indignantly. ‘You are always the first to rise and
I imagine you seek to gain preferment from it.’

‘Sir Kay,’ interrupted the queen, ‘I know perfectly well you would have risen had you seen me and I would thank you to leave your backbiting until later.’

‘Then tell Colgrevance to continue with his story,” said Sir Kay.

‘Your words no more menace me than the bite of a fly,’ said Sir Colgrevance. ‘It is only right that a badger among men should give away his presence by his stink, and as for the rest of the story I was telling, Sir Kay, you can sing for it’

‘Colgrevance,’ said the queen, ‘please take no notice of Sir Kay; he has a wicked tongue and reprimands have no effect upon him. Therefore, I ask you, continue your story and tell it to me, and to all these other friends of yours. Do it for me – for love of me.’

‘Then I shall describe to you something you will never have heard of before,’ said Colgrevance. ‘You will have heard of nothing like it, anywhere. Six years ago I rode alone in search of adventure, and in a forest I found a path; it was overgrown and untrodden, with briars, thorns and other rank bushes. Despite this, I followed it all day and at last it led me out onto a plain, and here I saw a castle. It had battlements and high walls, and a moat, and on the drawbridge stood a knight with a falcon resting on his arm. I greeted him courteously and he returned my greeting, took hold of my stirrup and invited me to dismount. I did as he asked and was led into his hall.

‘He led my horse by the reins, and the most amazing thing was that inside the castle hung a board that was made of a material I had never seen before. It wasn’t wood and neither was it any sort of metal that I knew. Beside it hung a mallet. The knight hit this board three times with the mallet and at once a throng of courteous and friendly people emerged from every side, and my horse was led to a stable.

‘A damsel came up to me, the most beautiful I have ever seen. She took me graciously by the hand and proceeded to unlace all my armour. Then she led me into a chamber and dressed me in some fine clothes, and last of all she gave me a purple mantle to wear, lined with ermine. Everyone had gone by now, and we were alone. She spoke very eloquently and her manners were impeccable. I had no thoughts of leaving that place in a hurry, I can tell you!

‘When it was time for supper, that lovely maiden led me down into the hall. We were served a beautiful meal, the damsel sitting in front of me and carving; we lacked for nothing and afterwards my host asked me if I would return to his castle when I had completed my search for adventure in that part of the world, and I said: ‘Yes! Gladly, Sir, if I may!’ It would have been discourteous to have said ‘no’, after all!
‘I slept soundly that night, and so did my horse. But as soon as it was light, I took my leave and rode off. Soon I came to a forest, and I was suddenly fearful that my luck had changed. The woodland was full of leopards, lions, bears and wild bulls, roaring and bellowing. Trying to escape, I came upon a clearing, and here stood the ugliest man I have ever seen. He held a club in his hand, his head was twice the size of a man’s and his hair hung to his waist. His ears were like an elephant’s! His face was flat with a nose like a cat’s and his eyebrows were like thorn bushes. And his clothes were very peculiar; they were not made of wool, but neither were they made of linen.

‘What are you, my friend?’ I asked.

‘I am a man,’ he replied.

‘I have never seen one like you before.’

‘I look after the animals. I am master of them all.’

‘I have never heard of any man who keeps wild animals, unless they are confined in stables and pens,’ I replied. Then he asked me who I was.

‘A knight seeking adventure,’ I said. ‘I wish to test myself in combat and to seek marvels. Can you guide me to any?’

‘Nearby there is a spring,’ he replied. ‘Make your way there and you will meet with some marvels! The spring lies under the most beautiful tree in this land and not far from it is a chapel, a fine and lovely building. Beside the spring is a stone and a gold basin on a chain that will reach into the water. Take up the basin and throw water at the stone, and soon you will see something you will never have seen before. A storm will blow up from all directions, thunder will crack and roar and the wind will howl, lightning will flash, freezing rain will fall, sleet and hail, so heavily that you will barely be able to stand, and if you survive all this, you will have a fairer chance than anyone of finding combat.’

‘I took my leave of him and followed the path until midday. And then I came upon the place he had described. I saw the chapel and the tree. It was the most beautiful thorn tree I had ever seen; so covered with leaves that not a drop of rain could penetrate, and it was evergreen. I found the basin and the cold spring, and saw the stone and laughed for joy when I saw it! So I took the basin and poured some water onto it. Suddenly, clouds gathered, the sky blackened and thunder cracked. Then rain fell, and hail, so that I could hardly stand upright, and the wind blew harder than I had ever known it to before. I was blasted with snow and freezing rain, and fought to remain on my feet. Lightening flashed so close to me that I could feel the heat. I didn’t know what to do. And truly, if it had lasted any longer than it did, it would have been the end of me, I know. But through God’s might the storm abated suddenly and the weather brightened; and the greatest
pleasure, I can tell you, is to be found in safety following danger!

‘Then I saw a lovely sight. For so many birds flew down and perched on the tree that hardly a leaf could be seen for them. They started to sing, and all the woods around me rang out with melodious birdsong. No man has ever heard anything like it, unless it was this very same thing. And when they finished singing, I heard another sound – the sound of a horse approaching. I saw a knight riding towards me in fine armour, and when I saw him I took up my shield and lance. He galloped towards me and called out, asking me why I did him such dishonour as to awaken him with storms and cause such havoc in his forest. He said I had acted unreasonably in causing such destruction and that I had better defend myself. And by the power of his blow he knocked me out of my saddle the length of his spear, down onto the ground. I knew that he was stronger than I am and his horse made mine look like a foal! I lay unconscious for a while, I think, and when I came to, I was in a very sorry state and hardly knew what month it was. I had no inclination to follow him and besides, I had no idea where he had gone. He had simply taken my horse and vanished.

‘But I remembered that I had promised to return to my host in his castle, so I made my way back on foot, leaving my armour lying where I had fallen, discarded. It was the only way I could get back. They were delighted to see me, made me very welcome and withheld nothing they had offered to me the previous night. They asked where I had been, and when I told them, they said they had never seen a knight ever return from that spring.’

‘Honestly,’ said Sir Yvain, when Colgrevance had finished speaking. ‘It was foolish of you not to tell me of this incident before! You are my cousin, and I would have sought vengeance on your behalf straight away. And so shall I yet, if I possibly can.’

‘It’s clear that there’s more idle boasting to be found in a pot of wine than in a side of beef!’ exclaimed Sir Kay. ‘Arm yourself quickly, then, Sir Yvain, now that the meal is finished and the wine has all been drunk. And when you go I urge you to carry a big banner so we can all see you, and make sure you have said goodbye to all your friends and told them what you are doing. And if you happen to defeat any warrior, or scare yourself witless, in your dreams tonight…’

‘Sir Kay!’ interrupted the queen. ‘What the devil has got into you? Can you not stop slandering your friends? Your tongue does you great dishonour and you should not look upon it as your friend.’

Sir Yvain replied courteously: ‘Madam,’ he said to the queen. ‘There will be no argument between us. It is said that retaliation is the beginning of all conflict. So let him say what he likes.’

As they were speaking, the door opened and the king emerged. All who were there quickly stood up. He asked them all to sit down again and the queen told him every-
thing that had happened to Sir Colgrevance. When the king had heard the whole story, he swore by his crown, and upon the soul of his father Uther Pendragon, that he would see this strange and antique place for himself, within the next fortnight. On Saint John’s Eve, on Midsummer’s Eve, he would see it.

‘Everybody who wants to come with me to see this wonder,’ he announced, ‘should make ready to ride with me.’

Soon the king’s intention was widely known throughout the court and there was nobody at all who did not want to accompany the king on his journey. Knights and squires were all wild with enthusiasm. The only one not to be filled with delight was Sir Yvain. Inwardly he seethed with indignation, for he wanted to go alone and hated the idea of travelling with the king, for he knew that Sir Kay would ask to face this knight at the spring, or else that valiant knight Sir Gawain, and either would be sure to be given the battle in preference to him.

Sir Yvain felt that he could not leave it to chance that the king would allow him the combat, so early one morning he decided to set out alone. ‘Go quickly and saddle my hunting horse immediately,’ he told a young squire, ‘and then get ready my warhorse and gather up all my armour. I will ride through that gate over there and wait for you outside the city. Follow after me quickly, for I must make a journey. You will return with my hunting horse and say nothing of what I have asked you to do. If you wish to see me again, say nothing of what I have told you. And if any man asks, be sure not to tell him the truth!’

‘Of course, Sir. I shall do as you say.’

So off Sir Yvain rides, intending to avenge his cousin. When he was outside the city he got down from his hunting horse, and when the squire arrived he put on his armour and leaped up onto his warhorse. Then, taking up his shield and lance, he galloped off without any further delay, and rode until nightfall.

He passed many mountain ranges and crossed many plains, until he came at last to the secluded and hidden path. Then he found himself approaching the castle and galloped up to it. The courtesy, comfort and honour he found there was many times more even than Colgrevance had described. But the next morning he continued along the path, and soon came to such a hideous sight that fear and uncertainty flooded into his heart. He paused there wondering how Nature could have made such a foul creature! But he rode quickly past, arrived at the spring and dismounted. Taking the basin, he cast water over the stone and immediately – thunder, lightning, wind and hail! When it had finished, birds flew down and sang beautifully upon the thorn tree, just as Colgrevance
had described.

Shortly afterwards, a black knight appeared, riding as quickly as a bird in flight. Sir Yvain turned his horse into the attack and each rushed towards the other ferociously; their shields split with the impact and their lances splintered to the very hilt. Both knights were superb riders and managed to stay in the saddle, so they drew their swords and dealt each other great strokes of steel. Shields were torn to pieces, bits flying everywhere, and in their hatred for one another each knight’s helmet received such blows that sparks flew out as though from flint. Each knight gave a good account of himself, and neither felt at all inclined to dismount. Eager to show off his might, each hewed at the other mercilessly until blood reddened their chain mail. And because they stayed on their horses and manoeuvred them so expertly, the fight was all the more impressive. But after a while, Sir Yvain’s superiority began to show. At last, he hit his adversary so hard upon the head that the knight’s helmet shattered and blood poured from a hideous wound. The knight knew that he had received a mortal blow, turned his horse and galloped away. Sir Yvain urged his own steed after him in an attempt to capture the knight, dead or alive, but to his dismay he could not overtake him. A drawbridge lay open into a castle and the knight made for this. There was nobody else in sight. At both ends of the bridge hung an iron portcullis, and too late did Sir Yvain see a concealed trip mechanism. As his horse entered the bridge he triggered a device and sent both gates crashing down. The near gate struck his horse just behind the saddle, cutting the animal clean in two.

The spurs on Sir Yvain’s heels were cut in half, much to Sir Yvain’s dismay! He made a dash on foot across the bridge, but the other portcullis came crashing down in front of him. Despite this, Sir Yvain was happy just to be alive. But his predicament soon sunk in. He was trapped between the two gates.

As he stood there, not knowing what to do, he heard a door open in the wall and a damsel stepped out. She shut the door carefully behind her and spoke courteously to him.

‘Sir,’ she said, ‘by Saint Michael, these are poor lodgings you have found. You will be killed for the death of my lord. It is certain that he will die; my lady grieves already and so does everybody else. You have made a lot of enemies here and they are baying for your blood. There is no way out of this place for you, and since everyone knows this, you are a dead man.’

‘They will not kill me,’ replied Sir Yvain, defiantly.

‘Not if I have anything to do with it, I agree,’ the damsel replied. ‘I owe you a debt of honour. When I was a little younger, I was sent to King Arthur’s court as a messenger,
although I wasn’t yet very adept at diplomacy and I was ignored by almost everybody, except for you, Sir knight. You did me a great honour and I shall now return it. You are the son of King Urien and your name is Sir Yvain. You can trust me. I will lend you my ring. I ask only that you return it to me when it has saved you from this predicament. Just as bark conceals a tree, when you have this stone in your hand you will be safe, for the gem is of such power that it will render you completely invisible.’

Believe me, Sir Yvain was very pleased to hear this. The damsel led him through the doorway and invited him to sit upon her bed. There was a very expensive eiderdown quilt lying over it. She told him that if he wanted anything, it would be his. Sir Yvain told her that he was hungry, and food was soon brought to him – a roast duck, some bread and a cloth, a pot of fine wine and a goblet. He ate and drank merrily.

When he had finished the meal a great noise erupted within the castle. Everybody was searching for him with murderous intent, eager to kill him before they buried their lord.

‘They want to seize and kill you,’ explained the damsel. ‘If somebody enters this room, don’t be frightened and above all, do not move from this bed. Be still and do not worry. They won’t be able to see you. Here you will be safe. Your enemies will be blind, as they search around you. Now I must go.’

When she stepped outside, the damsel saw many armed men running about, looking for Sir Yvain. They had already discovered the two halves of his horse inside the gate, but of the knight there was no sign. They were perplexed. He must be here somewhere, they insisted, unless he has made himself disappear by witchcraft, or unless he had wings! So they all went to look for him in the maidens’ hall and in the private rooms around and above it. Sir Yvain remained motionless upon the damsel’s bed. They entered the room and beat upon the walls and the drapes fiercely with their swords, but no blows were aimed at the eiderdown. There was great consternation that they were unable to avenge their lord. They went away angrily, and shortly afterwards the funeral procession began. Sir Yvain heard the lady of the castle weeping, in great distress.

Lunette stood there amongst all the mourners thinking about Sir Yvain, and as soon as she could she returned quickly to him.

‘Sir,’ she said, ‘I expect you were frightened.’

‘I have never been so scared in all my life!’ admitted Sir Yvain.

The damsel unlatched a private door and let Sir Yvain peer out. There he saw the lady crying out her lamentations to God. She was tearing at her hair and wringing her hands so much that she was making her fingers bleed. And she was very, very, beautiful. ‘Have mercy upon his soul,’ she wailed, ‘and pardon him for his sins, for there was no more handsome knight in the entire world, nor will there ever be again! None so gentlemanly nor courteous in all the world!’ And when she had said this, she fell in a faint.
But let us leave this lady and speak of Sir Yvain. Love, that powerful drug, has found easy ingress into his wounded body and now the lady who is his enemy has captured his heart entirely. He waits helplessly, not knowing what to do. All at the funeral take their leave of the lady and leave her at the graveside. The lady is alone with her maids and with those closest to her. She began to cry once again, for the soul of he who was so dear to her. She pressed her hand against the words of a prayer book and began to recite a psalm, taking no notice of anything else.

Sir Yvain found himself, against all reason, sowing his love where it seemed destined only to wither untended upon his own grave. He vowed that he would marry her or die! As he sat moping and staring into space, the damsel returned.

‘How have you got on since I left you?’ she asked. She could see from his pale complexion what was wrong. ‘I think you are in love,’ she declared.

The damsel went quickly to her lady, for she was able to speak her mind quite openly to her. ‘Madam,’ she said, ‘I am amazed that you grieve so much. For God’s sake, put an end to it. You should be thinking of King Arthur’s imminent arrival. Alas! Who shall now defend you, your land and all that is within it, since you will not stop weeping? Madam, listen to me. There is no knight in this entire district who dares offer himself to protect you, nor to pitch himself against King Arthur and his knights in single combat. And if King Arthur finds nobody to face him, your lands will be lost. This much is certain.’

The lady understood full well what Lunette was driving at and sent her away scoldingly, forbidding her ever to speak to her in that way again. She was extremely upset. ‘Leave me at once!’ she exclaimed.

‘Madam,’ replied the damsel, ‘a woman will often censure someone for telling them the truth.’ But she did as she was told. And when the lady was alone, she pondered on what Lunette had told her and could see nothing untrue in what she had said.

The lady spent all night worrying that she had no knight who was able to protect her land from King Arthur and his forces. She began to blame herself for this, and to wish that she had not spoken so angrily to Lunette. ‘I was wrong to shout at her,’ she told herself. ‘Now she will think that I shall never again love her as much as I have in the past. But I shall love her even more, for what she has told me is the truth.’

The next morning the maiden rose and went to her lady’s chamber. There she found her hanging her head despondently. Lunette repeated exactly what she had told her the evening before.
‘I am sorry that I spoke to you as I did, yesterday,’ the lady replied. ‘I would like to hear of this knight, whom you tell me has proved himself to be even stronger than my late husband. Who is he and where is he? I admit that I have been wrong, and from now on I will do as you advise me. Tell me truthfully, is he a nobleman?’

‘Madam, I give you my opinion that there is no finer nobleman living. You will find him the most gracious and courteous gentleman alive.’

‘What is his name?’

‘Sir Yvain. He is the son of King Urien.’

The lady was delighted to hear that he was the son of a king. ‘Bring him to me. I long to see him. If you can bring him this very night, please do so.’

‘Madam, I can’t,’ replied Lunette. ‘He is a long way away, more than a day’s journey. But I have a page who is quick on a horse and who can set off immediately and have him here by tomorrow night. And in the meantime, convene a meeting of your noblemen and ask who will defend you, your spring, your castle and your lands, against the noble King Arthur. For none of them will undertake to fight in single combat on your behalf, I am sure. So you can then say: ‘In that case, I will have to find myself a lord who will.’ But say also that you will abide by their advice. They will like that.’

‘By almighty God, I shall put this to them tonight. But why are you still here?’ She clapped her hands. ‘Go and send the messenger!’

The lady was now very happy and did exactly as Lunette had advised. She made arrangements for her noblemen to meet in council as quickly as possible. And the next day, the maiden arranged for Sir Yvain to bathe and then dressed him in a fine robe of scarlet, lined with fur and adorned with gold, and put around him a waistband studded with diamonds. Then she instructed him in what he should say when he was brought before the lady. And when he was ready, Lunette went off to tell her lady that the messenger had arrived back.

‘Madam, I can bring Sir Yvain before you at once.’

‘Bring him discreetly, so that only you and I know about it.’

Lunette took the knight by the hand and led him into her lady’s room. The lady greeted him courteously. But Sir Yvain remained apprehensive. The floor and the bed were both covered in cloth-of-gold and he was too awe-struck to say anything. Lunette could not help laughing. ‘May shame befall the knight who has a beautiful lady before him and cannot think of anything to say!’ she exclaimed.
Sir Yvain fell upon his knees. ‘Madam, I offer myself to you, to do with as you please. I shall not flee.’

‘Why would you wish to flee?’ she asked. ‘It would do me little good to kill you now. And because you put yourself in my mercy, I forgive you.’

‘Madam,’ he said, ‘with a single glimpse of your beauty, you have captured my heart. Since this first sight of you I have loved you with every fibre of my body. I shall never love anybody else. I am ready to live or to die for your love.’

‘Do you have the courage to bring peace to my land and to defend my spring against King Arthur?’

‘I do.’

‘Then, Sir, we are at one.’

The damsel Lunette has now accomplished all that she intended. She has brought Sir Yvain out of danger. The lady led him down into the hall. All the noblemen stood as he entered. The lady sat at the highest chair, commanded silence and asked her steward to say a few words.

‘Sirs,’ the steward cried, ‘You must understand that war has erupted in our land. King Arthur is expected to arrive within a fortnight, and he and his knights intend to win this land if they can. They may already know that our late lord is dead and believe that there is nobody here to take his place. Women cannot fight, they need a champion. Therefore it is imperative that my lady marries at once. But she will do nothing that you do not give your assent to.’

All the noblemen gave their assurances that they would be happy for her to marry again.

‘How about this knight here?’ asked the lady. ‘He professes his love for me in no uncertain terms and offers to serve me in every way. Although I have seen him only for the first time today, he is courteous, intelligent and wishes fervently to marry me, and I am told that he is the son of King Urien, so he is therefore hightborn, and he has already proved his valour.’

With one voice they all shouted: ‘Marry him!’

So they made their way to the church and Sir Yvain and the lady were married. And in this way, Alundine, the daughter of the Duke of Landuit, saved her lands from catastrophe. Great joy was had that day, and a wonderful feast was prepared. Their former lord
was forgotten. Their lord was dead – long live their lord! This new one was worth three of the old!

‘Where is that knight who made such a great boast about coming here and avenging his cousin?’ asked Sir Kay. ‘His words were all hot air!’

‘For God’s love!’ exclaimed Sir Gawain.

The king cast some water on the stone and immediately an icy gale blew. King Arthur and his knights thought that they would all die in that place! Rain fell in torrents, hail and sleet. Sir Yvain quickly dressed himself in his armour, took a shield and a lance and mounted his warhorse. He felt as light as a bird in flight as he galloped as fast as he could to the spring, and when he came within sight of it, Sir Kay asked King Arthur if the battle could be his.

‘It may, by all means,’ replied the king.

Sir Yvain was delighted to see Sir Kay riding to meet him, although Sir Kay had no idea who the other horseman was. They rode together ferociously and Sir Kay was knocked from his saddle. He crashed awkwardly and heavily to the ground, and his helmet bit a foot deep into the earth.

Sir Yvain has done all that he intended to do! He dismounted, caught hold of Sir Kay’s horse and presented it to the king. Everyone was delighted to see Sir Kay struggling to extricate his head from the soft turf.

‘Sir king, I present to you this horse,’ said Sir Yvain. ‘It would grieve me to take away anything that belonged to you.’

‘Then who are you?’ asked the king. ‘I can’t see who you are unless you lift your visor.

‘Lord,’ he said, ‘I am Sir Yvain.’

The king was overjoyed. Sir Kay lay on the ground with his head in his arms, but the king was delighted to be reunited with Sir Yvain, and so, especially, was Sir Gawain, for of all the knights at court, Sir Yvain was his closest friend. The king soon persuaded Sir Yvain to tell him what had happened and Sir Yvain told the whole story – how he had defeated the Knight of the Spring and married the lady Alundine, and how the damsel Lunette had helped him. He told the king everything.

‘Sir king,’ he said, ‘I invite you to accompany me to my new castle. I implore you, please come. It would be a great honour for me.’

The king accepted his invitation. Sir Yvain thanked him, and the knights were all delighted to go with Sir Yvain, so he sent a squire to warn his lady of their imminent ar-
rival. And when the lady heard this, she instructed all her men to dress themselves in their finest regalia and to ride out to meet the king. On many a noble steed, they welcomed King Arthur, greeted him with every courtesy, and all his knights as well; there was great joy, make no mistake. Banners and flags adorned every street as they returned, maidens danced to the sound of flutes, pipes and trumpets and the castle and the city rang with merry song and minstrelsy. The lady came out to meet the king, along with all her barons, clothed in purple and ermine. A great crowd thronged about her and sang out: ‘Welcome, King Arthur! You are the finest king in the entire world. King of all kings!’

‘A thousand times welcome!’ the lady cried, happily.

‘May God give you joy and honour,’ replied the king, and he took her in his arms and hugged her. Many saw this. The joy of the occasion cannot be properly described. Sir Yvain was delighted to be entertaining the king in his house, and the lady also. The king and his knights remained for eight days and Yvain kept them entertained with all sorts of games and amusements. Every day was filled with pleasurable pursuits, with hunting, and hawking beside the river, for it was a lovely country that Sir Yvain had acquired through his marriage, with many woods, some fine parkland and many stone castles.

Throughout his stay, Sir Gawain tried to persuade Sir Yvain to return with them. ‘If you lie around at home,’ he said, ‘men will not think well of you. It is a poor knight who abandons his chivalry to spend all day in bed with his wife. When a man is at the peak of his prowess, then is the time for him to win repute. His wife takes more notice of him when he is active on the tournament field, and loves him all the more for it. Therefore, do not shun arms in diverse lands. You are wealthy enough, so frequent tournaments! You and I shall travel together, and I shall fight alongside your banner.’

Sir Gawain was so persistent and so persuasive that Sir Yvain agreed to go to his lady and broach the matter, though he was loath to hurt her. Finding her alone, he took her in his arms and said: ‘My darling, my love, my joy, my comfort, I have to ask you something, for your honour and for mine also. I ask that I might return with the king and with my friends, and spend a little time bearing arms. I will be the butt of courtly jokes if I stay with you here.’

The lady had no desire to hurt Sir Yvain. ‘Sir,’ she said, ‘I give you leave, but you must promise to return at the end of a year. Sir, if you love me, be here again in twelve months’ time, for if you have not returned by then, you will lose me forever. Today is Saint John’s Eve, Midsummer’s Eve; I warn you, return by this day next year.

‘Take this ring,’ she said. ‘It is very dear to me. Look upon it and think of me. There is virtue in the stone, a magic that means that there is no prison that can hold you and no
sickness that can grip you while you wear it. And no blood of yours can ever be spilt, nor can you be taken in battle while you wear it and think of me. I have never before given this ring to any knight, but through love I give it to you now. Take care of it.’

Sir Yvain made arrangements for all his armour and other gear to be readied, strong horses, lances and shields, squires and servants. Sir Gawain was delighted to see all this. Then Sir Yvain mounted his horse and said goodbye to his lady. Many were sad to see him go. The lady Alundine took her leave of the king, and with tears trickling down her cheeks, she begged Sir Yvain not to forget the day by which he must return. And so the knights all rode off, to their jousts and their tournaments.

The king at that time held court at Chester, and Sir Yvain and Sir Gawain rode out to many different kingdoms to wield arms and to perform mighty deeds together. They spent the entire year in this way, Sir Yvain often winning the prize and gaining a formidable reputation for himself in the process. Word of these two invincible knights spread everywhere. They pursued this way of life until Saint John’s Day had come and gone. Then they made their way home to the king at Chester, where a great feast was held for all his knights of the Round Table.

Sir Yvain suddenly remembered his wife. He could hardly prevent himself from weeping openly in anguish. As he stood in this sudden shock of recollection, a damsel rode into the court, riding a handsome pony. She dismounted without any assistance, took off her outer garment and walked into the hall.

‘Sir king,’ she said. ‘May God keep you. My lady sends her greetings to you and to Sir Gawain, and to all your other knights except for Sir Yvain, for he is an evil traitor and my lady is now aware of this. He gave her his word, but it has proved to be worthless. He will pay for this. It is certain that so untrustworthy a man could not be the son of a king – to forget so quickly a wife who loved him better than her own life!’

She turned to Sir Yvain. ‘You are a traitor, a stranger, untamed and unworthy. Give to me my lady’s ring! She went up to him with a piercing look, snatched the ring from him and immediately took her leave of the king and remounted her pony. Without a word more, she went quickly away without any squire or page, and disappeared from view.

Sir Yvain wept quietly to himself and made such a pitiful noise that he gave every impression that he was going insane. There was nothing he could do. The damsel’s words had been final.

‘Alas that I was born!’ he cried at last. ‘I have forgotten my wife! Only my death can possibly end this agony!’ Suddenly, with the ring now gone, something gripped his whole body, his eyes stared wildly and like a lunatic he made quickly for the forest. Soon, despite searches, no one had any idea what had become of him. He roamed about in the woodland like a wild animal. His men searched everywhere, but they could find no trace of him.
As Sir Yvain ran about the forest one day, he encountered a man carrying some hunting arrows. Yvain rushed at this man, seized his arrows and his bow, and every day afterwards, Yvain would shoot at some wild beast and catch meat for himself, and he never lost an arrow. In this way Sir Yvain spent a whole season, living on roots and raw venison. He drank warm blood, like an animal.

Then, as he roamed further into the forest he came across a little hermitage. The hermit caught sight of this naked man, assumed that he was a madman and decided to take refuge inside his dwelling. He locked his gate, but because he thought it would be a kindly act, he put some bread and water outside his window first – but then he ran inside again as fast as he could go! Yvain ate the coarse barley bread thankfully, although he had never eaten such a bare meal before in all his life. He drank the water, finished the bread, then ran back into the forest.

But however demented a man is, he will come to where he can find comfort and sustenance, and certainly Yvain did, for he returned every day with fresh venison, laid it at the hermit’s gate, ate the bread and went away. As soon as he was gone, the hermit would take the meat, skin it and boil it, and at every meal Yvain ate stewed venison with his bread. Then the hermit would go to the nearest town, sell the deer skins and buy some better bread, and Yvain would find beside the gate stewed venison and a fresh wheat loaf. He led this life for many years.

Then as Yvain lay asleep beneath a tree one day, a lady came riding by with two damsels. ‘I can see a naked man!’ exclaimed one of the damsels. I shall go over and see who he is.’

She dismounted, walked over and took a close look at him. On his face was a horrible scar, completely healed, but the maiden recognised it. ‘By God!’ she cried. ‘It’s Sir Yvain. Alas! How can he have got himself into such a terrible state?’ She was so concerned for him that tears fell down her cheeks.

‘Madam,’ she told her lady, ‘We have found Sir Yvain, the best knight in the world!’

‘If this is Yvain,’ replied the lady, ‘I think we can restore him to his wits. At home I have an ointment that Morgan Le Fay gave to me. Let us go quickly and fetch it.’

Her castle was only half a mile away, and soon the lady had the pot of ointment in her hand. ‘Take this,’ she said to the damsel. ‘It is very precious to me. Go back to the knight
and see that you do not waste any. Use only what you need and bring the rest back to me.’

The maiden quickly gathered up shoes and leggings, shirt and underwear, and a fine robe. Also a good horse. When she had ridden back to where Sir Yvain lay, she found him still asleep, so she tied the two ponies to a tree and bravely approached the dishevelled form. She rubbed his head with ointment, and to tell the truth, she rubbed his entire body as well. Disregarding her lady’s instructions, she used up all the ointment. Everywhere! She thought Sir Yvain was worth it.

Leaving the clothes lying beside him so that he would be able to dress himself, she stole away. The damsel watched him closely. After a little while, Sir Yvain awoke. ‘Mary!’ he exclaimed. ‘What has happened to me?’

He sat for a while staring at the pile of clothes, then tried to get up, but his strength was not equal to the task and he collapsed in a heap. And yet he managed to put on the clothes at last. Then he turned his mind to finding some help. The damsel saw this, leaped up onto her pony and leading the other one, rode towards Sir Yvain, making out as though she had no idea he was there. When Yvain caught sight of her he called out, and she pretended to be startled and to wonder where the sound was coming from.

‘I am here!’ he cried.

The damsel rode up to him. ‘What do you want?’ she asked.

‘Please could you help me,’ replied Sir Yvain, ‘I am disorientated. I have no idea how I come to be here. For charity, please lend me that pony you are leading and take me to some town.’

‘Sir, if you will come with me I will gladly help you in whichever way you desire,’ she said, courteously. She helped him up onto the pony. Then they rode quickly and soon came to the castle gate. Here they alighted and led their ponies in. The damsel went at once to the private chambers.

‘Where is the ointment?’ the lady asked.

‘I will tell you the truth,’ replied the damsel. ‘My pony stumbled as we were crossing a bridge, he fell flat onto his belly and the pot flew out of my hand. If I hadn’t quickly grabbed hold of his mane, the water would have claimed me as well!’

‘This is dreadful news!’ cried the lady. ‘That ointment was very valuable. But it is better that the two of you are safe. Go to the knight and see if he wants anything.’

‘Madam, it would grieve me to do anything else.’
She went back to Sir Yvain, insisted upon washing him in a bath, then fed him until he had regained his strength. Sir Yvain’s strength was not slow in returning.

One day, as he lay in the castle, the earl Sir Allers, along with knights, squires and sergeants-at-arms, with a wagon-train full of stores, laid siege to the castle. The lady arranged for armour to be brought to Sir Yvain, and a good horse. Sir Yvain took the armour, and all the other equipment. Then he rode out with a company of knights to face Sir Allers in the field. A knight rode over to meet Sir Yvain; their shields met, and soon the knight lay dead on the ground. Then another, then a third, and then a fourth lay dead. Yvain was so moved to anger that he killed a man with every blow! He lost some men, but the earl lost ten times as many. Every knight fled when he saw Sir Yvain approaching, and Yvain gave such heart to his own side that the least amongst them fought as bravely as a lion.

The lady watched all this and said: ‘He is indeed a mighty warrior. Such a strong and courageous knight fully deserves praise.’

‘Without doubt,’ replied the damsel. ‘Your ointment has not been wasted. See how he gallops across the battlefield! See how many men he kills! Everyone he strikes, falls dead from the blow. Certainly, we will quickly see the earl discomfited. Madam, by God, if only he would marry you and rule here.’

Everybody in the castle was filled with joy when they learned that the earl had been captured. When they saw him approaching, they all issued out to seize him. Sir Yvain greeted the lady as she approached.

‘Madam, throw this man into your prison!’ he cried.

But Sir Yvain has no desire to stay himself. He prepares to leave at once, and takes his leave of the lady. She is not at all happy to see him go.

‘Sir, if it should be your desire, I would ask you to stay here with me. I will yield to you my body, and all my lands.’ She pleaded with him, but to no avail. His heart lay elsewhere.

Sir Yvain rode with a heavy and sorrowful heart along a narrow path through a forest. Suddenly, he heard a hideous cry and came upon a dragon attacking a wild lion. The dragon was doing great damage with its tail, and with the fire that issued from its mouth, and the poor lion seemed to be getting the worst of it. Sir Yvain decided to lend the creature a hand, so placing his shield in front of his face, he thrust his sword into the dragon’s mouth so hard that the point emerged out of its belly! Then he cut at the dragon’s throat and severed its head from its body. However, the jaws still held firmly onto the lion’s tail, so Yvain cut the end of the tail, allowing the head to roll free. ‘If the lion now attacks me,’ thought Sir Yvain, ‘I am ready for him!’

But the lion showed no inclination to attack Sir Yvain; instead he fawned up to the
knight and licked the broken hairs at the end of his tail. Then he sat on his hind legs and raised his paws in a show of submission, for though he could not speak, he made it clear in other ways that he was thanking Sir Yvain for saving his life. The lion crouched down and licked Sir Yvain’s feet.

When Sir Yvain saw this, he felt a great affection for the animal. When he rode off, the lion ran along beside him, and all day the lion followed Sir Yvain through the forest and would not be parted from him for a moment. And while in the forest, this hungry lion caught the scent of a wild beast; he gave signs that he intended to go after it, so that Sir Yvain would not be offended, and then bounded away for a few hundred yards, found a deer and killed it, drank the blood while it was still warm, then caught up the carcass in his mouth and carried it back to Sir Yvain, like a sack of wheat. By this time, it was getting dark so Sir Yvain made a shelter of branches, took out his flint and fire-iron and made a fire out of some dry moss and sticks. Meanwhile, the lion dismembered the deer, then Sir Yvain spitted some meat on long sticks and roasted it above the fire. The lion lay quietly and made no attempt to eat until Sir Yvain had finished his own meal. The lion was very hungry, make no mistake, and when Sir Yvain had finished eating, he gobbled down the rest of the carcass, raw meat, bones and all!

A fortnight passed, and then one day, Sir Yvain came upon the spring where the thorn tree grew and where the stone and the basin were, the very place where he had fought and become the Knight of the Spring. He saw the tree and the chapel, and when he saw the stone he collapsed in a faint. As he fell, his sword slipped from its scabbard, its pommel dropped to the ground and point upwards it caught him in the throat, cutting his neck. When the lion saw the blood, he roared like a demented thing, for he firmly believed that his master had been fatally injured. It was pitiful to hear the sorrow and the anguish! Incredibly, the lion grasped the sword between his two paws, set the hilt against a stone and tried to kill himself with it. And he would have done, for certain, there was such affinity between them both, had not Sir Yvain at this very moment been able to raise himself from the ground. The lion saw this and joyfully licked Sir Yvain’s hands and his feet.

‘Alas!’ cried Sir Yvain. ‘How can I bear this? How can I bear to see again this chapel, this spring, this beautiful tree, this marvellous stone? A wild beast would have killed himself for love of me, so then how much more justified am I in taking my own life, for the love that I have lost?’

While Sir Yvain was lamenting and crying all this aloud, someone inside the chapel heard him. ‘Who is that outside, moaning so loudly?’ came a voice.

‘A man,’ replied Sir Yvain. ‘I was once a man. Who are you?’

‘The sorriest creature that ever lived.’

‘I doubt it. I doubt that your sorrow is the equal of mine,’ he replied. ‘I was once a man, but now I am not one. I was a noble knight and a man of great valour. I had knights of
my own, and great wealth, expansive lands, but through stupidity I lost it all. Most of all, I have lost the lady I love.’

‘Alas!’ cried the other, ‘my plight is the more to be pitied. I have been accused of treason and tomorrow I am going to be burned at the stake.’

‘Can you not find a knight willing to fight for you in single combat?’

‘Sir, there are in this land only two knights who can help me. The one has gone I know not where, the other knows nothing of my predicament. The one is called Sir Gawain and the other Sir Yvain, and it is because of him that I am to be burned.’

‘By Christ!’ exclaimed Sir Yvain. ‘You are Lunette who helped me once when I was in dire peril. I am Sir Yvain! Tell me, why are you accused of treason?’

‘They say that my lady loves me so much she does everything that I advise her to, and so I am guilty of treason and the steward and his two brothers hate me for it. I said that it wasn’t true and foolishly offered to find a champion to fight all three of them, to prove my innocence in a trial by combat. They granted me forty days to find one. But Sir Gawain is not at court; he has gone off to look for Queen Guinevere in a land from which no stranger returns.’

‘As I am a true knight,’ said Sir Yvain, ‘I shall be ready tomorrow to fight with all three of them, for your love. I will not fail to give my utmost for you. But come what may, when anybody asks who I am, conceal my identity. Give some other name. Say that you do not know. Tell nobody who I am.’

S

searching for somewhere to spend the night, Sir Yvain had not ridden far when he saw a magnificent castle and rode up to it. When he arrived at the castle gates he found four porters. They lowered the drawbridge and then fled because of the lion. ‘Sir,’ they all cried, ‘we must ask you to leave the lion outside!’

‘Sirs,’ replied Sir Yvain, ‘so help me God, my lion and I may not be separated. I love him as well, I must tell you, as I do myself. Either both of us will enter, or we will both make our way somewhere else.’

The lord of the castle appeared and seemed pleased to receive them both. Sir Yvain was led into a chamber, his armour was removed and he was given a fine new set of clothes to wear. Many knights, squires, ladies and damsels greeted him. But there were moments when everybody seemed to be weeping. Then, in his presence, they seemed cheerful and joyful enough. Sir Yvain was astounded to be in the midst of such apparent, if veiled, sadness.

‘Sir, if it is your desire,’ he said, ‘I would like to know why you are so unhappy.’

‘The joy we have at your arrival, Sir, cannot mask the despair we feel at the terror that will unfold tomorrow,’ replied the lord of the castle. ‘A giant lives nearby, a haughty devil
called Harpin of the Mountain. It is because of him that our sorrows are magnified. He has robbed me of my lands and my wealth, and now all I have left is this castle. I had six sons, all of them knights, and now two of them are dead, slain before my very eyes, and the others will be killed tomorrow. And all because I will not agree to him marrying my daughter. For this reason he has sworn to win her by force and then to give her to his ill-bred scullions to take their full sexual gratification from, unless I can find a knight by tomorrow morning who dares to meet him in single-combat. And I have nobody.’

Sir Yvain listened to this in silence.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘I think it a wonder that you haven’t been to King Arthur’s court for help.’

‘Sir, so God help me, I sent a messenger to the king’s court to ask for help from Sir Gawain, for he is my brother-in-law. But Sir Gawain was not there.’

Sir Yvain sighed. ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘for Sir Gawain’s sake, I shall undertake this battle with the giant, but on these terms: that if he does not show up by midmorning I shall depart, for I have other things to do. I have something that must be attended to before midday.’

‘Sir!’ the lord cried. ‘May God reward you for this!’ All the people in the hall fell upon their knees in thanks. Then a damsel approached him, a beautiful young lady, accompanied by her mother, and they fell on their knees before him and thanked him profusely. But: ‘God forbid,’ cried Sir Yvain, ‘that Sir Gawain’s sister should kneel before me!’ He quickly raised them up onto their feet again and begged them to be of good heart.

When it was time to retire for the night, the lady led Sir Yvain to his bed. But she was very frightened of the lion. No one dared go near the room, and Sir Yvain and his lion spent the night there together.

When morning broke, the lady and her daughter went to Sir Yvain’s room and unlocked the door. Sir Yvain first of all went to hear Mass in the church, then went to the lord and said: ‘Sir, I must depart soon. I can stay no longer, for I am needed somewhere else.’

The other knight was overwhelmed with grief. ‘Sir,’ he implored, ‘for the love of Sir Gawain, please stay a little longer. Help us before you go. I will give to you half my lands if you will help us!’

It was heartrending to see the lamentations that ensued. Sir Yvain was torn apart with pity, his heart felt as though it would break into three pieces, but he was very worried for the damsel Lunette.
Just then, a young man came running up to tell them that the giant had made an appearance. ‘He is driving your sons in front of him,’ he said, ‘and they are all naked.’

The giant was huge and carried an iron club in his hand which he was using to hit them with. It was pitiful to hear them cry out. They had no protection, and on the other side of them was a dwarf carrying a whip with ten knotted cords. Every blow drew fresh blood, and when they arrived at the walls of the castle the giant cried: ‘If you want your sons back, deliver to me your daughter so that I can give her to my foulest sex-starved scullions to do with as they wish. She’ll no longer be a virgin when they’ve finished with her, I’m certain of that!’

When the lord heard this, he cried out as though he had lost his mind.

‘This is a very cruel and uncouth giant,’ said Sir Yvain. ‘I will rescue your daughter from this terrible fate or shortly die myself.

Soon Sir Yvain was armed and all the ladies delighted in seeing it. They helped to lace him into his armour, then he leapt up onto his horse. The drawbridges were let down and Sir Yvain rode over with his lion. Many distressed and anxious men were left behind in the castle, praying on their knees for a happy outcome.

Sir Yvain rode onto the plain and the giant advanced towards him. His club was long and heavy and his arms were muscular and strong.

‘Who made you so brave as to come out of the castle?’ he asked, tauntingly. ‘Whoever sent you has little love for you!’

The giant wore only leather for protection. Sir Yvain galloped quickly forwards and struck him in the chest with his lance. The weapon was strong and the blow pierced the giant’s clothing. Where the point entered, blood spurted out. The giant stumbled from the impact, but then aimed a blow at Sir Yvain, and it is a wonder that the knight’s shield remained in one piece! Sir Yvain dropped his lance, took out his sword, and the giant swung again with his club. The battle raged on, until Sir Yvain found need to rest for a moment. His lion saw this, saw that Sir Yvain’s head had dropped, and thinking that his lord was hurt he bounded suddenly into the fray. Seizing the giant in his jaws, the lion ripped the skin from the giant’s neck to his thighs, exposing all his ribs to the bone. Sir Yvain recovered his strength enough to slice off the giant’s cheek with his sword. Then he cut through his shoulder, so that both club and arm fell to the ground. Finally, Sir Yvain thrust his sword into the giant’s heart. The giant fell like a heavy tree, dead to the ground. The battle was over.

Everybody in the castle was delighted. The gates were thrown open and the lord ran out to congratulate and to thank Sir Yvain, followed by his lady, his daughter and everybody else.

‘Goodbye!’ cried Sir Yvain. ‘Live happily, for I must go.’

Sir Yvain took the shortest way to the chapel and soon came upon a roaring fire and the
beautiful Lunette standing beside it, dressed in a simple smock and tied up, ready to be cast into the flames.

‘However formidable and numerous her enemies are,’ thought Sir Yvain, ‘I shall not flinch through cowardice, for both God and right are on my side, and they will both support me. And my lion also, he will help, so we are four against their three.’

Sir Yvain rode up and cried: ‘Wait, I command you! You must be mad to think of burning this innocent damsel. You will not do it, so God help me!’ His lion was beside him. Lunette was standing with her hands tied behind her back. Sir Yvain was so distressed to see this that he could hardly stay on his horse. Nobody recognised him.

While Sir Yvain’s horse stood, Lunette knelt before the priest, confessed her sins and received absolution. Sir Yvain rode up, dismounted, took her by the hand and lifted her from the ground.

‘Where are your enemies?’ he asked.

‘Sir, they are over there, waiting for me to die. They have falsely accused me of treason. Sir, you have arrived not a moment too soon.’

The steward heard this and hurried over. ‘You lie, you harlot!’ he cried. ‘You stand here rightly accused of treason. She has betrayed her lady,’ he turned to Sir Yvain, ‘and she will do the same to you, Sir. Therefore I advise you to go back the way you came. You take very poor advice if you intend to lay your life on the line for this damsel.’

‘I have already had some success this morning,’ replied Sir Yvain, ‘and despite my exertions, I shall continue along the path I have chosen, and shall not fail.’

Sir Yvain told his lion to go over and lie down, and the beast obediently lay in front of them all with his tail between his legs. The three knights came galloping into the attack, all at the same time, and Sir Yvain rode against them ferociously, for one of his blows was worth three of theirs! He struck the steward so hard on the shield that he fell to the ground, but the steward managed to get up and began to attack Sir Yvain with his sword. At this the lion became very agitated and would not lie still. While all the ladies were praying fervently for Sir Yvain, the lion bounded over towards his master.

Rushing towards the steward, the lion attacked the man viciously, tearing at him with tooth and claw, at armour, cloth and bare flesh, mauling him from the shoulder down to the knee. The man’s entrails poured out onto the ground and he fell in a heap, dead. There was no sound of anybody mourning. Sir Yvain did his best to discipline his lion and to get him to return, but the lion would not lie down and despite Sir Yvain’s commands thought that his master was well pleased with his help. The two remaining knights struck the lion from all sides and gave the beast many wounds, and when Yvain saw this, he attacked them so ferociously and so grievously that both of them were toppled to the ground. They soon surrendered to Sir Yvain. Then everybody cheered with delight. Sir Yvain threw the two knights into the fire.
'He who accuses falsely, shall suffer as the accused would have done!' he cried, judiciously.

Everybody was eager to offer their services to Sir Yvain, and to honour him. None of them except for Lunette had any inkling that this knight was their lord. The lady, who was Lunette’s mistress and Yvain’s wife, invited him to come back with her and to stay for a while, until his wounds were healed. But he set not a straw by his wounds, he said. He was, however, very concerned for his lion.

‘Madam,’ he said, ‘thank you, but I cannot stay.’

‘Sir, as you must leave us, tell me your name.’

‘Madam,’ he replied, ‘I am called the Knight of the Lion.’

‘We have not seen you before now, nor have we ever heard of you.’

‘I am not widely known in these parts,’ he replied.

Sir Yvain set off despondently and no one knew who he was, except for Lunette, who was sworn to secrecy.

The Knight of the Lion took his leave with a sorrowful heart. His lion was so badly injured that soon he could go no further. Sir Yvain tore up handfuls of grass, lined his shield with it and lay his lion upon it. Then he hitched the shield to his horse as a litter and rode through forest and heath until he came to a castle. He called out, and quickly the porter unlocked the gate.

‘Sir, you are welcome here,’ the man cried.

‘May God reward you, for I have need of shelter.’ Sir Yvain rode in at the gate and was greeted by a throng of good folk. They took his shield and his lion and laid the poor animal down gently. Some took care of his horse, others helped Sir Yvain to get out of his armour, then they informed their lord of the knight’s arrival and he came with his lady and with his sons and daughters to greet Sir Yvain. They were delighted that this knight had chosen their castle to visit. They led him to a private room where a bed was made up for him and his lion was laid beside it. He wanted for nothing. Soon they had healed all of his wounds, and those of his lion also.

Now, I cannot tell you how long it was after Sir Yvain’s arrival, but while he was there, it happened that a great lord died leaving behind two beautiful daughters as his heirs. As soon as he was buried, the elder sister declared her intention to go to King Arthur’s court to claim all the inheritance, and find a knight to support her, at the expense of her sister. This younger sister saw that she would have to find a knight to champion her against her
sister, in defence of her rights, and in the ensuing scramble to King Arthur’s court, the elder sister managed to arrive first and obtain the support of Sir Gawain.

‘But no one must know anything of this but you and I,’ he told her. ‘If you breathe a word about it, you will have lost my help.’

The very next day the younger sister arrived and went to Sir Gawain as well.

‘I am afraid that I cannot do it,’ he told her, in response to her solicitation. She wept and wrung her hands. But then came word that a knight with a lion had killed a hideous giant. This news was carried by the lord who was married to Sir Gawain’s sister; his wife and sons were with him, and they had brought along the giant’s dwarf as well. They all told Sir Gawain how the Knight of the Lion had delivered his nephews out of prison and how he had taken on the battle for Sir Gawain’s sake.

‘I do not know this knight,’ replied Sir Gawain.

Travelling day and night, the younger sister scoured the entire land, looking for the Knight of the Lion to ask him if he would fight her cause in mortal combat against her sister’s champion. She searched far and wide, but could find no sign of him. No one could tell her where he was. And she became so distressed and so concerned that the forty days King Arthur had given her to find a champion would soon be up, that she made herself ill with worry and fatigue. But still she searched; and at last she came to the castle where Sir Yvain had been cured of his madness. She was well-known there and received almost as family. They were delighted to see her and welcomed her with great joy. She explained her mission, and at once they offered her every assistance while she rested and regained her health.

While doctors attended her, the maiden who had rubbed Sir Yvain all over with the magic ointment undertook to continue her journey to see if she could discover any news of the whereabouts of the Knight of the Lion. After much searching, she entered the district where the spring, the basin and the stone were, and came to the castle. Lunette told her what the Knight of the Lion had done, and took her to the plain where she had parted from him. ‘But he was badly injured,’ she said. Lunette returned, and the damsel quickly came to the castle where Sir Yvain’s wounds had been healed. The lord of the castle came out to welcome her, along with all his knights and ladies. She greeted them all courteously and asked if they knew where she could find a knight with a lion.

‘By sweet Jesus!’ exclaimed the lord of the castle. ‘He’s only just left here! Look, here are the fresh hoof-prints that his horse has just made. Follow them, and you’ll be sure to catch up with him.’ She took her leave at once and journeyed on with no thought to save
her horse from her spurs, riding with all her strength, until she caught sight of him in
the distance, with his lion. She whooped with joy and galloped so fast that soon she had
overtaken them both. She greeted Sir Yvain joyfully, and he returned her greeting.

‘Sir, I have searched far and wide for you, and not for myself but for a noble damsel. She
is honourable and intelligent, but her heritage is in danger of being snatched away from
her and there is no one in this land whom she trusts but only God and you. With your
help she can win back her rights. She says that there is no knight living who can give her
half the help that you can, and you will win great renown for yourself if you can restore
to her her heritage.’

‘The knight who likes to rest idly seldom wins any prizes!’ retorted Sir Yvain. ‘I will go
with you gladly!’

Thus thaire wai forth gan thai hald · Until a kastel that was cald · The Castel of the Hevy Sorow – They
rode on until they came to a castle called the ‘Castle of the Heavy Sorrow’. The sun
was nearing the horizon and Sir Yvain thought it best to lodge there for the night. But
his request was met with incredulity by the people in the town outside.

‘Are you a fool?’ they cried. ‘Why do you want to stay there? You’ll be lucky to leave
unharmed!’

‘For all that you say, I shall enter this stronghold,’ replied Sir Yvain, defiantly.

Sir Yvain, his lion and the maiden took the road into the castle, and as soon as the porter
cought sight of them, he cried: ‘Come in, all of you. How lovely that misfortune should
have brought you here!’ This was their welcome at the gate, but they entered nonethe-
less. And as Sir Yvain approached the hall he caught sight of a building surrounded by
a high wooden fence. Peering through the slats of this fence, he saw a crowd of women
and girls, all working at embroidery and sewing with silk and gold thread. But they
themselves were wearing rags, and they all looked very dirty and undernourished.

Sir Yvain returned to the gate, but found that it was now barred with some formidable
locks.

‘Sir, go back into the castle,’ said the porter. ‘I believe that you wish to leave, but you
will not find any gate open to you. You must stay until tomorrow, when you will receive
great sorrow. You are among enemies here!’

‘This is not the first time that I have been surrounded by enemies, and overcome them,
but tell me, my friend, who are those maidens who work all that costly cloth?’

‘Sir,’ replied the porter, ‘if you wish to know more, you must go and see for yourself.’

Sir Yvain accepted this advice. ‘Tell me how you come to be here,’ Sir Yvain asked the
damsels, ‘and I shall release you if I can.’
‘Sir, we shall conceal nothing from you. We are all of us from the Land of Maidens. Our king travelled through many countries in order to do chivalrous deeds and to test himself fully in battle. And once, he took lodgings here, to our downfall! Alas, that you passed through these gates! Our king was very strong and courageous and only fourteen years old when he was made to fight with them. Two champions are here; some say that they are sons of the devil, fathered by a ram upon a woman! When our king surrendered to them, in return for his life he agreed to send thirty maidens here every year, the fairest and the noblest in all his land; to this he swore, and the obligation will last for as long as these two fiends remain alive and undefeated. Only then will we all be free to leave. But there is no use in telling you this, for there is no one in the whole world who can defeat them. So we sit here sewing silk and silver and gold, the finest thread on Earth, dressed only in the rags you see us in, and in great hunger. For the best seamstress here earns only fourpence a week. I defy anyone to clothe and feed themselves on that! We are worth at least forty shillings a week. But what use is it telling you this? There is no hope of any relief.’

‘Almighty God shall strengthen me against these devils,’ replied Sir Yvain, ‘and deliver you from these enemies.’

He took his leave and went to the hall, but the only people he could find were unfriendly servants. But they were willing enough to take his horse and the damsel’s pony to the stables to give them good barley and hay, for they thought it unlikely that these guests would ever be needing the animals again. Sir Yvain and the maiden walked through the hall and came into an orchard, where they saw a knight lying beneath a tree on a cloth of gold. In front of him was sitting a beautiful damsel and they were accompanied by a lady. The damsel was reading to them both from a book; it was a romance, but I do not know who it was about. She was only about fifteen years old. The knight was the lord of that castle and she was his daughter and his heir. She was a fair and gracious child, and when they saw Sir Yvain they all rose, and the lord took Sir Yvain by the hand and exclaimed joyfully: ‘Sir! By sweet Jesus! You are welcome!’

The damsel was eager to take off Sir Yvain’s armour. She fetched a shirt and some undergarments that were as soft as silk and as white as milk, and brought some expensive clothes to put over these as well. Soon they went to supper. Then they were taken to their room and Sir Yvain rested with the damsel, and with his lion, until daybreak.

When the light began to shine through the windows, they arose, dressed themselves and went quickly to the chapel where they heard Mass, and after the service Sir Yvain took his leave of the lord of the castle and thanked him for his hospitality.

‘Please do not take this the wrong way,’ replied the lord, ‘but you are not going anywhere yet! There is an unusual custom in this castle that dates back a long way, and which must be complied with. I shall bring you before two strong and mighty warriors, and if you overcome them, then you shall win my daughter’s hand in marriage. And all my lands as well.’
‘In all truth!’ replied Sir Yvain, ‘you can keep your daughter!’

‘No knight shall leave here without fighting with these two champions.’

‘Since this is the case, I shall test myself against them and take the grace that God shall send.’

The champions were brought forward. ‘By Christ!’ exclaimed Sir Yvain. Each carried a huge round shield and a club bound with many a leather binding. Both wore a great deal of body armour, but each kept his head bare. The lion stared at the fiends with hatred in his eyes, wagging his tail in anger. The champions looked a little concerned.

‘Sir knight,’ they said. ‘It is necessary that you remove your lion.’

‘Where would you like me to take him?’

‘Lock him into a room with some very strong bolts.’

So Sir Yvain led his lion into a room. Then he leapt onto his horse and charged towards the two fiends. His damsel was terrified and prayed fervently that God might help him. The two champions struck Sir Yvain so hard upon the shield with their clubs that it fell to pieces. Great need had Sir Yvain of help! He had never before been in such dire peril. But he gathered all his strength and offered as good as he got.

The lion all this while was restless and anxious. His thoughts were filled with how Sir Yvain had helped him when he had had most need of it, and how he was now unable to return this help in his master’s hour of need. If he could only get out of the chamber he would be able to help him. He heard the blows of battle and searched every corner for a way of escaping. But the room was not easy to get out of. In one place, however, stone gave way to earth and the lion dug as quickly as four men would have been able to with spades and shovels, and soon he had made a big hole. But meanwhile, Sir Yvain was in great difficulty. He did not seem able to wound his adversaries. No blow he could give seemed able to strike so much as a splinter from their shields. Sir Yvain could think of no way of overcoming them, and prepared himself for death.

The lion has broken free!

He ran wildly into the fray, intent upon havoc. He jumped at one of the vile knights and brought him down. All the onlookers cheered to see this! The other champion tried to pull his comrade to his feet and as he stooped, Sir Yvain swung his sword and severed his head from his body. The head rolled across the sand, and thus Sir Yvain gained the advantage! When he had killed the one knight, he dismounted. His lion was sitting on the other champion.
‘Sir knight,’ cried the champion, ‘for your honour, I beg for mercy! It is honourable to spare a man his life when he begs for it.’

‘I grant it,’ replied Sir Yvain, ‘provided you declare before everybody here that you are defeated.’

‘I declare it! I am overcome. Vanquished. Beaten!’

Then all the people who had been looking on came running into the arena. The lord of the castle put his arm around Sir Yvain’s shoulders and congratulated him.

‘Sir, now you shall marry my daughter and be lord and ruler of this land.

‘Since you give her to me, I must return her to you. She is free of me forever. Please do not take offence. But I ask this of you – that all the prisoners be freed. God has granted that I should deliver them from their penury.’

‘I grant you this,’ replied the lord. ‘And I urge you to take my daughter. She should not be humiliated by rejection.’

‘Sir, I mean her no criticism nor dishonour.’

The lord of the castle saw that it was of no use. So he gave Sir Yvain leave to go, although he would much rather that he had stayed.

Sir Yvain then released all the prisoners. He waited at the castle gate until they had all gone at last into freedom. Hand in hand they issued out joyfully. If God himself had come down from heaven and walked among them they could not have been more joyful! People came from the town to give thanks for the day that Sir Yvain had been born. They were well pleased with what he had done.

‘Maidens,’ said Sir Yvain, ‘may God smile upon you.’ Then he and the damsel went on their way.

Sir Yvain and the maiden who had rubbed him with ointment when he was a mad derelict travelled for many days more. She knew the way very well and brought him at last to the castle where the sick damsel lay. The maiden was still in her bed, but when they told her that her messenger had returned with the knight she was seeking, she was so joyful that she immediately regained her health completely!

‘Now my sister will have to give me what is rightfully mine!’ she cried. She felt quite light-hearted and greeted the knight courteously. ‘Sir,’ she said, ‘may God reward you for coming to my aid.’

Everybody in the castle welcomed him joyfully. I cannot describe half the delight they felt. Sir Yvain had every comfort and rested himself mightily! As soon as dawn broke the next morning, however, they made ready to travel onwards.
The Knight of the Lion rode hard with the younger sister until they came to the town where King Arthur was in residence. And there was the elder sister, waiting for the forty days to expire. She put all her trust in Sir Gawain, but for the last seven days Sir Gawain had not been seen. He was in another town, for he intended to come on the appointed day in such a way that no man would see his face; the arms he bore were not his own. He did not want to be recognised.

Sir Yvain and his damsel took lodgings in the town. And there Sir Yvain kept his head down, so that nobody would know that he was the Knight of the Lion. If they had delayed for a day more, the younger sister would have lost her lands. Sir Yvain rested for the night, and in the morning he armed himself. They left the lion sleeping. It was both her desire and his that Sir Yvain should come to court as an unknown knight.

About midmorning, Sir Gawain left his secret lodgings and made his way quickly to the field where the combat was to take place. He was well-armed, with lance and shield. Nobody knew who he was except for the elder sister. This damsel went to the king’s court and asked King Arthur for his decision.

‘I have come with my knight,’ she said, ‘and I am ready to defend my rights. The appointed day has arrived. My sister has travelled far and wide but has obviously been unable to find a knight who dares to champion her. I have therefore won my land without a blow being struck. Sir king, as this is the case, give your judgement and let us be on our way.’

‘Madam, wait a moment,’ said the king. ‘It is the custom here that when awaiting justice one must let the due period elapse.’

When the king had said this, immediately, they caught sight of the younger sister and her knight riding over a hill towards them. The eldest sister was very unhappy to see them approaching. The king laughed, for he had very little desire to give judgement in her favour, and was happy to see the younger maiden appearing suddenly in such fine form. She rode into the court and said: ‘May God who governs all things, save you and keep you, King Arthur, Sir king, and all your knights. Into your court, Sir, I have brought a knight whom you do not know. He says that he will undertake this combat on my behalf. He has a great deal of business elsewhere, in other lands, but he is prepared to help me in my need, may God reward him for it.

‘For the love of Christ, give me what is rightfully mine!’ cried this damsel to her elder sister. ‘Don’t let a man be killed for our sake.’
‘You have no rights, for all is mine,’ replied the elder sister. ‘You can stand there lecturing me all day, but you will walk away empty-handed.’

The two knights came before the king and soon a great assembly had gathered. Everyone hurried to the court to see what would happen. It was ridiculous, that neither of the knights knew who the other was, when there was such great love between them. The king had no idea who they were either, for they would not show their faces. Both knights cast a glove on behalf of their respective maidens, then, armed with shield and lance, they rode onto the field of combat. Each spurred his horse with his heart filled with hatred for the other, although had either known who the other really was he would have cast his arms around him for love! The combat began grievously. Lances splintered against shields. Had they told one another who they were, no lances would have been broken, but it was the truth at this moment that both fervently wished to bring about the death of the other. They drew their swords and swung them viciously, unafraid of injury. Their shields were shattered, their helmets damaged, and some mighty blows were now exchanged, massive strokes to helmet and body, so that the precious stones and ornaments were soon covered in blood. Their chain mail was quickly torn, their shields lay in pieces on the ground, and by mutual agreement they both paused to recover their breath. But they did not rest for long before they were swinging their swords at each other again. Never was seen such a hard battle. The king had never seen such a ferocious combat in all his life. Knights did their utmost to try to bring the sisters to some sort of agreement, so that the fighting could be stopped, but the elder sister was so ungracious that they could find no mercy in her at all.

All the knights implored the king to intervene, whatever the wishes of the elder sister, and to apportion the disputed land equally between them, or in any way that he saw fit. ‘It is beyond all doubt a sin,’ they urged, ‘that one of them should kill the other, for there is not in the whole world two other knights like these.’ All who witnessed this battle were astonished at the strength and valour that was being displayed. Never before had they seen two such accomplished knights, nor two so evenly matched.

Sir Gawain was keen to know who he was fighting with and Sir Yvain was intrigued to learn who his adversary was. The fight had lasted from midmorning until dusk, and both warriors were tired and very sore, I can tell you! They had lost so much blood that it was remarkable they were both still able to stay in the saddle.

But before darkness descended it was possible to glimpse a great joy and also a compassion, one for the other. Sir Gawain’s voice could not be recognised he was so hoarse and he spoke so softly. He was exhausted, through all the strokes he had given and received. Sir Yvain was exhausted also.

‘Sir, said Sir Yvain, ‘since the light fails us, nobody will blame us for abandoning our combat. I have never met with a man so accomplished in arms.’

‘I doubt you are as tired as I am,’ replied Sir Gawain. ‘I hold no hope at all of harming you now. I have been holding nothing back for your sake, I promise you.’
'For Christ’s love, tell me your name!’ cried Sir Yvain.

‘My name is Sir Gawain.’

Sir Yvain was aghast. He threw his sword away from him and quickly jumped down off his horse. ‘This has all been a dreadful mistake!’ he cried. ‘Sir, had I known who you were, there would have been no battle. I would have yielded to you at once.’

‘Then who are you?’ asked Sir Gawain.

‘Sir Yvain,’ came the reply. ‘I am Sir Yvain, your greatest friend! Many times have you helped me out of difficulty and shown me great courtesy, and for this reason I shall do you the honour of yielding to you. You have taken me. I am overcome.’

‘You shall not do this,’ replied Sir Gawain. ‘This honour shall not be mine when it rightly belongs to you. I give you the victory. I accept that I am defeated.’

Sir Gawain dismounted, as the book says, and each took the other in his arms and kissed him. They were both very happy to have found out who the other was. They stood in each other’s arms until the king came riding towards them. King Arthur was eager to learn who they were, and why they were suddenly being so friendly to one another when only a short while before they had been intent upon doing each other the greatest harm. The king asked – why this sudden change of heart?

‘Sir king,’ said Sir Gawain, ‘I will tell you. We fought here through ignorance. I am Sir Gawain, your own nephew, and this is Sir Yvain. And through his strength and by his skill I know that I would have been killed had the battle gone on any longer.’

Sir Yvain was disheartened to hear this. ‘Sir, this is not true!’ he exclaimed. ‘There can be no question but that I am defeated in this battle.’

‘Certainly not. I am!’ insisted Sir Gawain.

Thus, neither would accept the other’s defeat. ‘Now it can clearly be seen what good friends you are,’ cried the king. ‘Welcome home, Sir Yvain!’ for it was a long time since he had seen him. ‘I advise you both to abide by my judgement. I shall close matters in such a way that both of you will receive honour.’

They both agreed to be bound in this way, as long as the two maidens were agreed as well. The king sent two knights off to fetch them.

When the sisters were brought before him, he spoke his mind. ‘Listen to me, gracious maidens,’ he said. ‘Your squabbling must finish. Matters must be brought to a conclusion. This is what will happen. All your lands shall be divided equally.’

‘This is a great outrage!’ exclaimed the elder sister.

‘For the benefit of you both,’ continued the king, turning to the elder sister, ‘your younger sister shall hold her lands from you and be your tenant. She shall love you as her lady and you will show her courtesy and love her in return.’
Then the king invited Sir Gawain and Sir Yvain to remove their armour, for they were both in great need of doing so. And as they stood there in the field, the lion broke out of the room that he had been shut in, and as they unlaced their armour he came bounding up. He was overjoyed to see his master. Everywhere could be seen knights running off in the direction of the town, frightened out of their wits! ‘Come back!’ cried Sir Yvain. ‘I give you my word that this beast shall do you no harm! Believe me, this lion and I are good friends.’

‘He is the Knight of the Lion!’ they all cried.

‘Then mercy, Sir Yvain!’ cried Sir Gawain. ‘I have wronged you. You helped my niece and my nephews when they were in great difficulty and now look how I have rewarded you! You risked your life! My sister said that you told her we had been friends for a long time.’

When they had undone all their armour, everybody noticed how the lion attempted to heal his master by licking his hands and his feet. The lion seemed very happy to see him again. And when the knights were at last brought into the hall, King Arthur sent for the finest physicians to attend to their wounds.

Soon they had recovered completely and Sir Yvain went off again, for love so completely consumed him that he knew he could find no rest until he had reconciled himself with his lady. So, secretly, he stole out of court without a word to anybody and rode once more to the spring, accompanied by his lion. He threw water upon the stone. Immediately, a storm arose, thunder burst all around and it sounded as though the entire forest was about to sink into hell.

The lady stood terrified in her castle, for it seemed as if the walls were about to crumble. Rooms and halls shook as though they were about to collapse. Never on Middle Earth had a castle seemed to be in such danger. Lunette guessed at once what was happening.

‘Madam,’ she said, ‘you have no knight who will dare to go out to the spring to fight this assailant, and if no one comes to do battle with him, your honour will be destroyed forever. I don’t know what to do.’

The lady said she would rather die than let this happen. And thinking quickly, Lunette said: ‘Madam, perhaps some of your knights might happen to return home today and be able to defend you.’

‘Ah! Lunette, don’t. Do not speak to me of my knights. God knows, I have no knight able to defend me.’

‘Madam,’ replied Lunette, ‘there’s that knight who defeated the steward and freed me from the stake, the Knight of the Lion. He would be able to defend you against this knight who is causing such havoc at your spring. But I have heard that he and his lady
are estranged, and have been for a long time. He has vowed not to champion any lady unless she brings about a reconciliation between them.’

‘I shall agree to try to do this for him, willingly,’ she replied.

‘Madam, do not be angry, but I must have a formal oath from you, so that I may be certain.’

‘Gladly.’

Lunette brought some relics, a communion cup and a Mass book; the lady knelt and laid her hand upon the book.

‘Madam,’ said Lunette, ‘you shall swear that you will do all in your power, both day and night, and with all your strength, to restore to their former happiness the Knight of the Lion and his honoured lady, and that you will do this to the best of your ability.’

‘I grant all this,’ said the lady. Lunette was satisfied.

Soon, she was seated upon her pony and riding as fast as she could. She took the shortest way to the spring and found Sir Yvain sitting beneath the thorn tree with his lion at his feet. She recognised him by his lion and quickly dismounted.

‘Thanks be to loving God that I have found you so soon!’ she cried. ‘And I have news. Either my lady will break an oath sworn on relics, or you will soon be friends with one another again!’

Sir Yvain was delighted and thanked her profusely for the friendship she had shown to him, and she thanked him in turn for all the things he had done for her. Thus was each repaid of the other.

‘Did you tell her my name?’ he asked.

‘No I didn’t. I knew it would be wrong. She shall not know it from me, until you have greeted one another and she has acknowledged her pledge.’

They rode towards the town with the lion running alongside them. When they came to the castle gates, they went in without saying a word to anybody. As soon as news reached the lady that her damsel had returned with a knight and a lion, her heart became light indeed. She wanted very much to know who he was. When Sir Yvain and his lady came face to face, he fell down upon his knees at once.

‘Take up this knight, madam, as we agreed,’ said Lunette. ‘Make peace with him before he goes to the spring.’

The lady took him by the hand and invited him to rise.

‘Sir, she said, ‘I will do my utmost, by all means, to reconcile you with your lady.’

‘Madam,’ said Lunette, ‘no one but you can do it, in all honesty, and it is time to tell you the truth. This is my lord Sir Yvain!’
The lady was taken aback. She stood for a long while before she spoke. Then she said: ‘How can this be? And how could you force me to love a man who has brought me so much anguish? But whether for good or ill, I shall hold to my promise.’

Sir Yvain was delighted to hear her say this, make no mistake! ‘Madam,’ he said, ‘I have done wrong and have paid a high price for it. I acted like a fool when I ignored the agreement I made with you, and certainly, anyone in the same position would have found themselves as distraught as I was afterwards. But by the grace of God, I swear that it shall never happen again, and when a man swears by the name of God for mercy, it should be granted to him.’

She agreed to be reconciled. Sir Yvain took her into his arms and kissed her many times.

It was the happiest day of his life!