

From: Book IX of Arthur Rex

by

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Now a twelvemonth¹ having passed, it was time for Sir Gawaine to go and keep his fell appointment with the Green Knight. Therefore he bade good-by to his brothers, his friend Launcelot, and Arthur his king and uncle. And to all he said, "God alone knows when we shall meet again, whether on earth or in Heaven."

For he believed it likely that in return for beheading the Green Knight he would lose his own head, and his own could not be returned to his neck.

Now, as in all true quests, though he had no precise sense of where the Green Knight could be sought, he knew he would find him eventually by allowing his horse its head, and when at dawn he reached a castle, before which his steed stopped and pawed the ground and neighed, he applied for entrance to it.

But when the drawbridge was lowered and the portcullis raised, and he rode within, he was greeted not by the Green Knight but rather by a fine tall lord who welcomed him graciously and invited him to spend the night.

"I thank you, most noble sir," said Gawaine, "but I can not linger here. For I must needs meet an obligation within the next four days, and I do not know how much farther I must travel." And, because this handsome lord looked an honest man, he told him of his appointment with his verdant adversary.

"Sir knight," said the lord, "I tell you that I know this green man, whose Green Chapel is just near by, and it is there that you will find him, four days hence and in good time! Meanwhile you must accept my hospitality." And he led Sir Gawaine within the castle, which was the most sumptuously furnished place that Gawaine had ever seen, and the chamber where he was led was

hung with silks and carpeted in fur soft as foam, and nightingales sang in golden cages, and hanging lamps burned Arabic oils with a delicious fragrance and in their glow, on a couch of wine-purple velvet, lay an exquisite woman whose robes were of pale-violet gauze and transparent, so that her voluptuous body was revealed in every particular.

Now Sir Gawaine was taken aback, for he believed that he had been conducted into a bordel and that this seemingly fine lord was rather a loathsome pander. But before he could draw his sword and smite him with the flat of it for this insult to a knight of the Round Table, the lord said, "Most noble Sir Gawaine, may I present my wife."

And therefore Gawaine was constrained by the laws of courtesy to greet this lady as he would any other, and he endeavored to ignore the indecency of her costume as she smiled at him and welcomed him to the castle, for her ivory body, scarcely screened, was far more beautiful than any he had ever seen in many years of intimate congress with maids.

"Now, Sir Gawaine," said the lord, "whilst you are under my roof, all that I possess is yours, and the only offense that you can commit against me is to refrain from using that which you desire. For this is Liberty Castle, and the freedom of my guest is absolute."

"My lord," said he, "do I understand that you are so addicted to the giving of freedom that you would impose it upon him who doth not seek it?"

"Ah," said the lord, "there is no such mortal upon the earth, for all are born free and become captives through denial."

Now Gawaine believed this an impious theory, but having a generous heart, he determined to ponder on it further. Therefore he now said only, "My sole desire currently is but for a basin of water and a towel, for my journey hath been dusty and I would wash."

"Then come with me, my dear sir," said the lord, and he conducted Gawaine to another chamber, which was even more sumptuously appointed than the one in which his wife lolled, and it gave onto a walled garden in which every sort of flower did bloom under a warm sun (though elsewhere the day had been damp and dreary), and in this garden was a pool in the center of which was the alabaster statue of a nude woman, and from each of her paps flowed a fountain of silvery water. And lovely soft music was heard there, though no musicians could be seen.

And saying, "Here you may bathe," the lord did clap his hands and a peacock spread its resplendent fan and strutted to him,

1. Year.

carrying in its beak a little silver bell, the which he took, and he rang it, and three naked small boys, all with golden hair and very white skin, came to Sir Gawaine, bearing towels as fluffy as clouds.

"Now," said the lord, "these tiny retainers will dry you, and kiss you as well, and when you have taken your pleasure with them, please ring the bell."

But Sir Gawaine did start back in dismay. "My lord," said he, "kindly remove these juvenile persons."

"Very well," said the lord, smiling. "I shall summon my wife to wash you."

"Nay, my lord, with all respect," said Sir Gawaine. But before he could say he would wash alone, the lord rang the bell again and a robust young man appeared, unclad except for an iron helmet and brass greaves,² and carrying a bundle of birches, he smote his other hand with them whilst smirking in genial cruelty.

"This fellow," said the lord, "is late masseur to the court of Rome, and can soon obliterate the loins' memory of an arduous day in the saddle."

"Sir," said Gawaine, "I would wash me alone, and in a simple tin basin filled with cold water."

"I can deny you nothing," said the lord, and he summoned these things, and they were brought by a withered hag, and Sir Gawaine dismissed her and was left by himself.

Now when he had finished his bathe, he realized he had nought to wear but his smallclothes³ and steel armor, and therefore he reluctantly rang for his host, for to request the loan of a house coat. But in answer to his summons came instead a lovely young maid, her flaxen hair flowing over her white shoulders to part at her high round breasts so that the orchidaceous tips were revealed, for she was naked, and Sir Gawaine, who was an authority on such matters, judged she was in years sixteen, and in former times she would have been to him as a goblet of cool water to a parched throat, but now he hastily concealed his secrets with the coarse homespun cloth brought him by the hag to dry himself on, and he commanded her to fetch her master to him.

And when, as required by the laws of Liberty Castle, she complied instantly with his wishes, Sir Gawaine knew the first faint

2. Leg armor worn below the knees.

3. Underwear.

pangs of regret, for though he was no longer the unrestrained lecher of old, neither had he become as enervate as an eunuch.

Now the lord brought him a robe of fine silken stuff and trimmed with soft fur, and then he led him to a magnificent dining hall, where the table was laden with delicacies from all over the earth and the dishes were of pure gold, while the goblets were each cut from a solid diamond, and when they sat down they were served by a corps of unfledged maidens, delicate as primroses and with smooth bodies clad only in sheer lawn.⁴

And hearing some slight stirring near his knees beneath the table, Sir Gawaine lifted the cloth and saw a beautiful child with a face of old ivory and dark eyes shaped like almonds.

"At the very edge of the world," said the lord his host, "on the brink of nothingness, live in great luxury a golden-skinned people called the Chinees. Now it is their practice to use infantile entertainers beneath the table top at banquets, to stir one appetite by provoking another. This can be especially amusing as prelude to an Oriental dish we shall presently be offered: live monkey. I shall strike off its crown, and we shall eat his smoking brains." And here the lord brandished a little silver ax. "I promise you that nothing is more aphrodisiac, and that soon you will be delirious with lust."

But Sir Gawaine declined to partake of the pleasure beneath the cloth, and he begged to have the dish withheld, but though he believed this lord monstrously unnatural he would not denounce him under his own roof, for after all no vileness had yet been imposed upon him, but rather merely offered.

And Gawaine also spurned the lark's eyes in jelly, the coddled serpent-eggs, the pickled testicles of tiger, the lot, and he asked instead for cold mutton and small beer, which he instantly was brought.

Now after this feast the lord led Sir Gawaine to a chamber where a lovely maid, dressed in many veils, played sweetly upon a flute while dancing gracefully, and one by one she dropped her veils until with the last one she was revealed to be a willowy young man, and when the dance was done, he bowed to the floor before Sir Gawaine but facing away.

But Gawaine said to his host, "My lord, I am no bugger."⁵

4. "Lawn" is a sheer linen or cotton fabric.

5. Sodomite.

Therefore the lord dismissed the young man, and then he said to Sir Gawaine, "Well, I would know what I might do for you."

And Gawaine said, "Nothing, my lord."

"So be it," said the lord. "And now I must leave you, for to go hunting, and I shall be away until nightfall. Pray remember that even in my absence you can be denied nothing at Liberty Castle." And he gave Gawaine the silver bell that had been fetched by the peacock. "Ring this for whatever you desire. But now I propose to you a bargain: that when I return we each exchange with the other that which we have got during the course of the day when we were apart."

Now Sir Gawaine could see no reason to do this, but he was aware by now that the ways of this castle were strange, so strange indeed as to suggest magic, but whether white or black he could not yet say: for though the beastly amusements offered him were evil, they may well have been temptations in the service of a higher good. And surely courtesy required that he respond amiably to this lord, until such time as he could determine his purpose.

Therefore he agreed to this bargain, for anyway he had no intention to do ought all day but prepare himself spiritually for the ordeal to come, when he must face the Green Knight.

"Good," said the lord. "Perhaps I shall bring you a brace of partridges."

"And if I have nothing to return?" asked Sir Gawaine.

"Then nothing shall be my reward," said the lord in a merry voice. "But do not forget that our agreement is to be considered literally, and that to conceal *anything* you have received would be to violate your pledge."

"My lord," said Gawaine reproachfully, "I am a knight of the Round Table."

"Indeed," the lord said, "and I should strike a bargain with no other!"

Then he left to go a-hunting, and scarcely was he gone when Sir Gawaine regretted not having asked where the chapel was situated within the castle, for he wished to pray there. But remembering the little silver bell, he rang it, and in answer to his summons the lord's wife appeared and she was no more abundantly dressed than she had been when he had seen her first.

"Lady," said he, "please direct me to your chapel, for I would fain pray."

But the lady came to press against him, and she put her arms about his neck, and she said, "Sweet Sir Gawaine, be kind to me, I beg of you."

And though Gawaine was far from being immune to the sensations caused by the pressure of her luxuriant body (and graciousness would not allow him to thrust her away), he had the strength of soul to remain modest, and he said, "Lady, this is not proper."

"I speak of kindness and not propriety," cried the lady, and she held him tightly and her warm breath was against the hollow of his neck.

"Lady," said Gawaine, "methinks I now understand the test to which I am being put at Liberty Castle, where all temptations of the flesh have been offered me, but in fact not even when I was a notable lecher did I frequent children, persons of mine own gender, nor other men's wives."

Now this beautiful lady did fall against him weeping. "You are the defender of women," said she, "and I am in distress."

"Then let me get mine armor and weapons," said Sir Gawaine, "and tell me who would abuse you."

"'Tis no person," said the lady. "I am rather tormented by a sense that my kisses are obnoxious, for my lord hath avoided me lately." And she lifted her mouth to him, the which was moist and red.

"Your breath, lady," said Gawaine, "is fragrant as the zephyrs of spring. I cannot believe that your kisses are repulsive."

"Well," said the lady, "then there must be something offensive in the touch of my lips." And she pursed these for his inspection.

"Nay," said Sir Gawaine. "They are flawless as the rose."

"Yet," said she, "you can not be certain unless you press them to your own."

"Perhaps that is true," said Sir Gawaine. "But should I be the one to make this test?"

"But who other?" asked the lady. "I can not subject my husband to it, for it is precisely he who I fear finds me obnoxious. And any man who is not a knight of the Round Table could never be trusted."

"Trusted, lady?" asked Gawaine, endeavoring to loosen her clasp, which had now been lowered to his waist, to the end that their bellies were joined.

"A knight of lesser virtue, enflamed by my kiss, alone with me, my lord being in the remote forest, I attired lightly as I am, he in a

robe of fine thin stuff that betrays the least stirring of his loins—” And so said the lady, and she heaved with the horror of it.

And Sir Gawaine said hastily, “Certes,⁶ I am trustworthy in this regard. Now, lady, your argument hath moved me. I shall accept one kiss from you, for the purpose of examining it.”

And the lady forthwith crushed her hot mouth against his lips and had he not clenched his jaws and so erected a barrier of teeth, she would have thrust her tongue into his throat so far as it would go, for it battered against his gums with great force.

And when he at last broke free, he said, “Your kiss is sweet, I assure you. But perhaps it is given too strenuously.” (And truly, his lips were full sore.) And then he said, “As guest in Liberty Castle I have this wish, which must be honored, and it is that this test be taken as concluded.” Therefore, as she was constrained to do by the laws of the place, the lady went away.

Now when the lord returned from his hunt he came to Sir Gawaine, saying, “Well, here you are, sir knight, a brace of fine fat partridges, the which are my gain, and all of it, from a day in the forest. Now, what have you got here that, according to our agreement, you shall give to me?”

“As I predicted,” said Sir Gawaine, “I have nothing to give you, having received nothing.”

“I beg you to re-examine your memory,” said the lord. “Surely you received something during my absence that you had not previously possessed?”

And Sir Gawaine was ashamed, first for his failure of recall, and then for what he must needs confess.

“I received a kiss, my lord,” said he, coloring. But then he realized that he was not obliged to say who had kissed him (and the situation at Liberty Castle was such that there were many possible candidates).

“Very well, then,” said the lord smiling. “Pray give it me.”

Now Gawaine’s shame was increased, for he understood that the terms of the agreement were absolute, but manfully he did purse his lips and press them to the cheek of the lord.

“Now,” said the lord, “is this precisely how you received this kiss, and did the giver thereof make a similar grimace?”

Sir Gawaine hung his head and said, “Nay, my lord.” And then gathering his strength he lifted his mouth to the lord’s and,

6. Surely.

doing his best to simulate the tender expression of the lady, he kissed him full upon the lips.

“Splendid!” said the lord. “You are a truthful knight of much worship.”

Now the following day the lord came to Sir Gawaine once again, and he announced to him that he would make the same exchange with him as he had done the day before. But Gawaine did protest against this.

“Sir,” said the lord, “I took you for a courteous knight. Are Arthur’s men given to such rudeness?”

“With all respect, my lord,” said Gawaine, “I am fasting for my appointment with the Green Knight, and therefore I can not eat game.”

“Then I shall bring to you some other goods of the forest,” said the lord, and then he looked narrowly at Sir Gawaine. “Sir,” said he, “methinks you worry that you will have to give me another kiss.”

Now though this was quite true, Sir Gawaine could hardly confess to it without being discourteous in the extreme, and therefore he bowed and said, “My lord, I make this pact with you once again.”

But so soon as the lord left the castle this time, Gawaine, eschewing the use of the silver bell and hoping thereby to elude the lady, went alone in search of the chapel, but though he looked everywhere he could not find it. Therefore he returned to the chamber where he had spent the night and he knelt by his bed clasping his hands in the attitude of prayer, but before he could begin his orisons the lady appeared from nowhere and embraced him.

Then he rose with difficulty and freeing himself gently from her, he said, “Lady, it would be indecent for me to talk with you at this time. Pray let us wait until your husband returns from the hunt.”

But the lady said, “Sir, remember your sworn duty to all women! Once again I require your aid, and the vows you have taken will never allow you to deny me.” And she drew aside the transparent stuff that swathed her bosom, and she bared her breasts absolutely.

“Ah,” she cried, “you start back, just as does my husband when I undress before him! Then it is as I fear: my bosom is hideous.”

“No, that is not true, lady,” said Sir Gawaine. “Between waist and shoulders you are very beautiful.”

"Do you say my mammets are round?" asked the lady.

"Very round," said sir Gawaine.

"And full?"

"Very full."

"Yet high."

"Oh, indeed high," said Sir Gawaine as he walked backwards, for she continued to approach him.

"But think you that the paps are discolored?" And now she held herself in two hands, so that the pink nipples did peek through the white fingers.

"Never discolored," said Gawaine, who was now against the arras⁷ and could retreat no farther.

"Not brown then?"

"Certes," said Sir Gawaine, "they are rather of the hue of the Afric orchid."

"Oh," said the lady, taking her hands away, "but they are cold! Methinks breasts should be warm, or if not, then warmed." And before Sir Gawaine knew what he did, she had taken his fingers and put them onto her bosoms. "Now tell me if they are cold."

"Lady," said Gawaine, "they are quite near burning." And for a dreadful moment he could not control his fingers, and finally it was she who drew back, saying haughtily, "Sir, I did not seek kneading. I wished only to know my temperature."

And Sir Gawaine was chagrined. "Forgive me, lady." He sighed with great feeling. "Now, by my privilege as guest, I wish to be alone." Therefore she vanished, and he fell to praying ardently.

Now when the lord returned from the forests he presented to Sir Gawaine the flayed hide of a bear, and he said, "There you have my day's spoil, and all of it. What shall you give me in return?"

And this time Sir Gawaine was ready for him, and he was relieved that it was not so distasteful a thing as a kiss. "I have for you a touch of the chest," said he. "Therefore if you will remove your hauberk⁸ and breastplate and raise your doublet,⁹ I shall give it you."

Now the lord did these things, and Sir Gawaine groped at his chest, which was covered with a thick mat of hair very like that of the bearskin.

7. Tapestry.

8. A tunic of chain mail.

9. A man's close-fitting jacket.

Then the lord began to laugh, for he was ticklish, and when Sir Gawaine was done the lord said, "And is that all? Did I not know you as a truthful knight, I should wonder at this. Nor is it evident as to whose chest was so tickled in the original episode: your own, or that of another?"

"Mine obligation, methinks," said Sir Gawaine, "is but to give you what I had got, and so have I done. I am not required to explain it."

"Aha," said the lord, "methinks not even a sodomite doth toy with a hairy chest, and certes you are anyway not a sod. May I then assume it was rather a woman's full bosom which you fondled?"

"My lord," said Gawaine, "our agreement is to be kept to the letter, no more and no less."

And the lord did laugh merrily, saying, "Well put, my dear sir."

"And now," said Sir Gawaine, "may I ask you to show me to the chapel, for 'tis there I intend to stay at prayers until my appointment with the Green Knight, which is now but two mornings away."

But the lord said, "I'm afraid there is no chapel at Liberty Castle, good Sir Gawaine. We are pagans here, and furthermore we make no apology for so being."

Sir Gawaine crossed himself. "I should have understood that," said he. "Absolute liberty is the freedom to be deprived."

"But only if you choose to make it so," said the lord. "One can also see it as the only situation in which principles may be put to the proof. No strength of character is needed to stay virtuous under restraint."

"But only God, sir, hath perfect strength," said Gawaine. And he was now vexed, and he said, "And how dare you, as a paynim,¹⁰ to test the virtue of a Christian?"

"Because I have no shame!" merrily replied the lord. "Which is a Christian invention."

Now Sir Gawaine began to suspect that this lord was the Devil, for never had he heard so much wickedness from any man. "Methinks," said he, "that you would weaken me for my encounter with the Green Knight."

"Well," said the lord, "if you are honest you will admit that it is a ridiculous thing. A charlatan dyes his skin and hair and dressed in

10. Pagan.

green clothes bursts into Arthur's court to make a preposterous challenge. Would that be taken seriously anywhere but at Camelot? Now you are likely to die of this buffoonery, and *cui bono?*"¹¹

"For the Green Knight I care not a bean," said Sir Gawaine. "But to keep my oath I should go to Hell. And methinks I have done so in coming here."

But the lord did make much mirth. "It is so only if you choose to make it such, I say again," said he, "the which can be said of any other place on earth but especially of your Britain. But enough of this colloquy! And pray never believe that I do not admire you withal."

"Despite such flattery," said Sir Gawaine, "I shall leave you now."

"Ah," the lord said, "you well may leave me, but the one freedom not available at Liberty Castle is to leave it before the proper time hath come."

And Gawaine found that what he had said was true, for when he sought to go out of the gate he was arrested by a strange unseen force and could move only in the direction of the castle behind him. Therefore willy-nilly he stayed the final night, and the next morning the lord came to him again with the familiar proposal.

"Do I have a choice?" asked Gawaine.

And the lord answered, "Well, it is the last time." And promising to exchange with his guest what they each had come into possession of during the day, he went a-hunting in the forest.

Now Gawaine determined no longer to wait passively for the lady to seek him out, for he knew that she would do so, according to the pattern of the previous days: and all things in Heaven and on earth come in threes, and only the tripod is ever stable even though its legs be of unequal lengths. Therefore taking the virile initiative he did go in search of her, and you may be sure he was not long in finding her, for her sole purpose was to try his virtue (to which end all women, even the chaste, are dedicated) and thus all corridors at Liberty Castle soon led to the most private of her chambers, the walls of which were lined with quilted velvet of pink, the which color deepened and darkened as he penetrated the room, and the couch on which she lay was of magenta. But her body for once was fully covered, in a robe of the richest dark red and of many folds and trimmed with the sleek fur of the otter.

11. For what good [purpose]?

"Good day to you, sir knight," said she. "And for what have you come to me?"

"To offer my services," said Sir Gawaine, "the which you have previously required each day at just this time."

"Of that I have no memory," said the lady sternly. "And can your purpose be decent, so to seek me out when mine husband is away?" And crying, "Villainy!" she did clap her hands, and soon a brace of huge knights, armed cap-à-pie, burst into the chamber through a secret door and made at Sir Gawaine.

Now Gawaine understood that he had been tricked and mostly by himself, for he had come here voluntarily and unarmored and unweaponed. But being the truest of knights, what he feared was not the death that he might well be dealt here (for he expected to be killed on the morrow by the Green Knight, and we each of us owe God but one life), but rather that if he were not alive to meet his appointment with the verdant giant he would cause great shame to be brought upon the Round Table, for death were never a good excuse for breaking a pledge.

Therefore he seized a tall candlestick of heavy bronze, and he swung its weighted base with such force that the flange not only split the helm of the first knight to reach him, but also cracked his skull to the very brainpan, and his wits spewed out through his ears. Now taking the halberd¹² that this man dropped, Sir Gawaine brought it up from the floor just as the other knight came at him, and he cut him from the crotch to the wishbone, and his guts hung out like ropes.

"Well," said the lady when this short fight was done, "do not suppose you have me at your mercy." And she found a dagger within her clothes and leaping at Sir Gawaine she sought to do him grievous injury.

But though he was the protector of women Gawaine saw no obligation to suffer being assailed by a female to whom he had offered no harm. Therefore he seized the dagger from her, and then, because she next tried to claw him with the sharp nails of her fingers, he restrained her hands behind her waist.

But hooking her toe behind his ankle the lady tripped him up, so that he fell onto the couch, and she was underneath him.

"Lady," he said, "I would not hurt you for all the world."

12. A weapon with an axelike blade and a steel spike mounted on the end of a long shaft.

"Then release mine hands so that I might feel whether I have broken anything," said she. And he did so, but when her fingers were free she used them rather to bare her thighs, the which she then spread on either side of him. And whilst he was stunned with amazement at her strange behavior, she lifted his own robe to the waist, saying, "I fear I may have smote your belly with my knee, and I would soothe your bruises." And then she went to that part and farther with her white fingers.

"Lady," said Gawaine, "I assure you that I am not sore."

"Yet you have a swelling," said she, and she did forthwith apply a poultice to him.

And to his horror Sir Gawaine discovered that his strength of will was as nothing in this circumstance, and therefore he must needs submit to this lady altogether. But this was a defeat which it was the more easy to accept with every passing instant, and before many had gone by he had quite forgot why he had resisted so long, in the service of a mere idea, for such is the eloquence with which the flesh first speaketh to him who ceases to withstand temptation, God save him.

But when the lady was done with him, and they lay resting, he knew great shame, and this grew even worse when he remembered he had agreed to exchange the spoils of the day with the lord of the castle.

Therefore when the lord returned from his hunting and presented to Sir Gawaine a splendid rack of antlers from a stag, and asked in exchange whatever Gawaine had got, his guest did prevaricate and say he had spent all day in prayer and therefore could give the lord only the peace he had thereby obtained.

"I am prevented by the laws of hospitality," said his host, "from impugning the veracity of a knight to whom I am giving shelter. Yet it seems remarkable to me that you have got no more tangible rewards during a day at Liberty Castle."

"Well," said Gawaine, "I cannot call it a reward when I am attacked by two of your armed men. Should you like me to assail you with a halberd and a mace?"

"Hardly," said the lord, but he smiled. "Yet you appear whole, whereas I passed their bodies being hauled away in a cart."

"My lord," said Sir Gawaine, "on the morrow I meet the Green Knight, and though I thank you for your hospitality, I shall be relieved to have it come to an end, for between us there is no common language."

And so he retired for the night. But while he slept he had bad dreams.

Therefore when Sir Gawaine awoke, he went to find the lord for to tell him everything that had happened on the previous day. But nowhere could he find him throughout the castle, nor indeed did he see the lady or anyone else, nor the scented pleasure-chambers. In fact, the entire castle was but a ruin and covered in years of moss and vines, and it was apparent that no one had inhabited it since the days of the giants who lived in Britain before the first men came there after the fall of Troy.¹³

Thus it was in sadness that Sir Gawaine rode to seek the Green Knight, for he realized that the last three days of his life had been spent in some magical test at which he had proved himself untrustworthy, mendacious, and adulterous.

Now he was not long in reaching a valley where a green chapel stood, and before it was tethered a green-colored stallion. And when he dismounted and went within he saw the same huge green knight who had come to Camelot one year before.

"Sir Gawaine," said the Green Knight, brandishing his great green battle-ax, "are you prepared to keep our bargain?"

"I have come here only for that reason," said Gawaine, removing his helm and baring his neck. "And I would fain have you get it over with quickly."

"Why for?" cried the green man. "Who rushes to his death?"

"Our bargain, sir," said Gawaine, "will be completed when you strike off my head. There is no provision in it for argument."

"I am no quotidian¹⁴ headsman," said the Green Knight, "and I do not crop necks for profit nor pleasure. Tell me why you are in haste to lose your self, the which is truly the only thing a man possesseth, if but temporarily."

"I am not pleased with mine," said Gawaine. "I have not done well. I have lately broken a vow and lied."

"Which is no more than to say, you have been a man," said the Green Knight and in a jovial voice. "And with only these failings, are better than most."

"And worse," said Gawaine, "I have adulterated with the wife of mine host." And with a groan he threw himself into the stones of

13. According to medieval legend Britain was founded by and named for Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas, who together with others of the Trojan race founded Troynovant (New Troy), later named London.

14. Commonplace.

the floor of the chapel so that the Green Knight could chop off his head.

"Sir Gawaine," said the Green Knight, raising his ax high over his head, "you are the most humane of all the company of the Round Table, and therefore, unlike the others, you are never immodest. To be greater than you is to be tragic; to be less, farcical."

And with a great rush of air he brought the ax down onto Gawaine's bare neck and the blade struck the stones with a great clangor, and red sparks sputtered in the air.

But Gawaine was still sensible, and he flexed his shoulders and stretched his neck, and then he felt with his hands that his head was yet in place.

Therefore he sprang to his feet and drew his sword. "Well, sir," he said, "you have had your one blow. I am not to be held at fault if you missed me! Then have at you!"

But the Green Knight threw down his ax and laughed most merrily. "Feel your neck," said he, "and you will find that you have been wounded slightly."

And Gawaine did as directed, and there was a slight cut in the skin, the which bled onto his fingers.

"That is your punishment," said the Green Knight. "You are no adulterer, dear sir, for that was no one's wife but rather the Lady of the Lake. You did however break your pledge to the lord of Liberty Castle, and you did prevaricate. But had you told the full and literal truth and fulfilled to the letter the terms of your agreement, you would have been obliged to use the lord as you did the lady."

"Yes," said Sir Gawaine, and having escaped the death for which he had been prepared, he felt an unique joy though his demeanor remained sober. "But I had done better to explain that at the time."

"Indeed," said the Green Knight. "And therefore, your slight wound. But in the large you performed well: a knight does better to break his word than, keeping it, to behave unnaturally. And a liar, sir, is preferable to a monster."

"Then can it be said, think you," asked Sir Gawaine, "that sometimes justice is better served by a lie than by the absolute and literal truth?"

"That may indeed be so," said the Green Knight, "when trafficking with humanity, but I should not think that God could be ever deluded."

Then Sir Gawaine knelt to pray, and when he rose he saw that the Green Knight had lost his greenness and had dwindled in size, and in fact was no longer a man, but a woman, and she was the Lady of the Lake.

"My dear Gawaine," said she, "do not hide thy face. Thou hast done nothing for which to be ashamed."

"Lady," said Sir Gawaine, "'tis not all of it shame. I confess that I am vexed that once again you have chosen to gull me. Remember that on the first occasion I did seemingly kill a woman and now I apparently made love to another. Yet each of them was you, and both events were delusions."

"And from neither have you come away without some reward," said the Lady of the Lake, who in her true appearance was even more beautiful than in any of her guises. "And would you rather that each time the woman had been real?"

"No, my lady!" cried Gawaine. "But I might ask why my natural addiction to women must invariably be the cause of my difficulties. Methinks I was happier as the lecher of old. I have since been only miserable. And for that matter, what service did I render to Elaine of Astolat, whom I did love without carnality? Better I had made to her lewd advances, the rejection of which would not have altered her fate, but would have freed me!"

"Why," asked the Lady of the Lake, "didst thou assume thine overtures would have been rejected? Gawaine, thou wert never commanded to be a prude."

And so having made her favorite knight the more puzzled, the Lady of the Lake did void that place in the form of a golden gossamer,¹⁵ the which floated from the door of the chapel and rose high into the soft air without.

15. A fine film of cobwebs often seen floating in the air.