Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

A retelling of a King Arthur legend

BY PAT CUSICK

Winter held Britain in an icy grip. Snow covered the forest and field, and a lone wolf howled at the cold moon. Mists rose and fell over the marshland, and under the earth, the great trolls moaned in their sleep. But high on the hill, lights and music filled the shimmering castle. King Arthur was observing the New Year at Camelot. His knights and their ladies were celebrating with him.
Arthur was the noblest knight of all, a man of great wisdom and courage. He had carefully selected the Knights of the Round Table. They were the finest warriors in all of Britain and they fought nobly at his side. Each had sworn to abide by the Code of Chivalry. The Code required that they fight for king and country, support and defend the rights of the weak.

Tonight Arthur sat with the beautiful Queen Guenevere on a high dais. Beside the royal couple sat his young nephew, Sir Gawain. Arthur’s heart was filled with joy as he greeted one person and then another. When everyone was seated, the trumpets sounded, and the first course arrived. Servants carried in huge platters of venison and great bowls of soup and placed them before the guests. Arthur laughed and talked as his guests ate and drank.

Everyone was enjoying the food and the fellowship, when a loud crash sounded at the gate. The huge doors swung open, and a gigantic knight on an immense horse rode into the hall. He was dressed in bright green from top to toe. His heavy green coat was lined with green leather. His stockings were green and the toes on his shoes were tipped with green and gold. Around his waist he wore a wide green belt set with sparkling emeralds. Smaller emeralds decorated the saddle of his handsome horse, which was the same bright green color as his coat. The knight’s hair was rich and full and gleamed green in the candlelight. Those in the hall were speechless as they gazed at the sight.

The Green Knight wore no armor and carried no sword. In his right hand he held a branch of holly, and in his left he carried a huge ax. It was large and heavy to hold, and its blade had been sharpened to cut as close as a razor. The Green Knight rode boldly into the room, looking neither to the left or right, until he reached the front of the hall. He reined in his horse and stared at the knights before him.

"Which one is your leader?" he thundered. "I would speak to him courteously, as the Code of Chivalry requires."

Arthur broke the silence.

"Fair knight, welcome to this place. I am Arthur, the chief of this company. We would be happy to have you partake of our feast."

Then the Green Knight looked straight at Arthur and replied, "You and your knights are known far and wide as the best and bravest knights in the world. I come to you in peace, for I carry a branch of holly in my hand. But I would challenge your knights to a game in honor of the New Year, the time of gift-giving."
The Green Knight stood high in his stirrups and waited. No one moved. He shook his fist at the knights and then began to laugh, saying, "Is this the glorious Round Table? Will no one pick up my challenge? Are you, the bravest knights in the world, afraid to answer me?"

Arthur stood up and shouted, "No man in this great hall fears you. I will take your challenge and meet your terms. With this very ax I will break every bone in your body!" And Arthur grasped the ax from the knight's hands, waving it to the right and the left, testing its strength.

The Knights of the Round Table watched, as still as stones. Then young Gawain leaped to his feet and ran to the king.

"Oh, noble king!" he pleaded, "Let me take this challenge. It is not right that you, our leader, should respond to this knight's words. This is a foolish contest, but it is suitable for me, the least brave and least worthy of all your knights. If I fail, then let the blame be mine and in no way let it be placed with you or this noble company."

Arthur listened, a smile coming over his face. He moved from table to table, consulting with his knights. All agreed that Gawain should take this challenge.

So the king offered the green ax to Sir Gawain with these words, "Be strong, nephew, and strike carefully. If you do, I believe you will be able to survive his stroke when it is your turn, a year and a day from today."

Then Arthur stepped back. Everyone watched as Gawain, ax in hand, approached the Green Knight.

"I am Gawain," he said to the Green Knight. "Let it be known that Gawain gives you this blow. A year and a day from now, you may deliver the same kind of blow to me. No matter what weapon you choose, I will be ready."

The Green Knight's laughter filled the hall and he leaned toward the young knight saying, "Hail to you, Gawain. I am pleased to receive this blow from your hand. And I accept your pledge to return the favor. But you must seek me out and find me, wherever I may be, and you must come alone."

"I do not know your home, so how shall I find you?" asked Gawain. "Tell me your kingdom and your name and I will most certainly appear as I promised."

"Not yet," said the Green Knight. "First, deliver the blow. If you strike squarely, then I will tell you how to find me so you can fulfill the bargain. Take up your weapon, Sir, and let us see whether or not you
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can deliver a proper blow.”

With that, the Green Knight knelt down on the floor. He bent his head and pushed his long, thick hair to one side so that his neck was clearly in view. Gawain stood above him, ax in hand. He placed one foot in front of the other. Then he grasped the ax tightly and lifted it high in the air, bringing it down in one swift stroke. It pierced the Green Knight’s bare neck and sliced through his flesh and bones.

The Green Knight’s head flew into the air and came crashing to the ground. As it rolled across the floor, some of the knights kicked it to one another, beginning a grisly game of sport. Although blood poured from the Green Knight’s body, covering his green clothing with brilliant red, he wasted not a second. Headless, he leaped to his feet and jumped into the crowd of playful knights, snatching his head up by the hair. Then he ran to his horse and hoisted himself into the saddle. He held his head high in the air for all to see.

The knights were filled with horror as the headless body turned this way and that, the blood still streaming to the ground. Then the Green Knight turned his bleeding head toward the crowd, and the eyelids opened. The face looked directly upon Gawain, the
mouth moved, and the lips began to speak.

“Do not forget, Gawain, the promise you made in this hall tonight. Let a year and a day go by, and then seek me faithfully. I am known as the Knight of the Green Chapel. You must come to me and offer your neck as I did to receive a blow. You will find me if you try. If you do not, you will be called a coward by the world for the rest of your days!”

Without another word, the knight pulled his horse around and galloped away. King Arthur turned to Guenevere and said, “It is a season of magic, my dear queen, and we have all just seen a marvel unlike anything we have ever seen before. Rest your heart, and do not fear. Magic and wondrous events often take place during the New Year. So enjoy the music of the minstrels and the laughter and conversation of our knights and ladies!”

Then Arthur smiled at Gawain and said, “Hang your ax on the wall above our table. Let us all admire it and wonder at this strange adventure that took place tonight.”

The feast ended and the New Year began. Spring came, followed by summer, followed by autumn. Gawain had many adventures, but when winter arrived, he set out to seek the Knight of the Green Chapel and keep his pledge.

One day Gawain found himself before a strange castle. He approached the guard and was brought inside. He explained to the lord of the castle that he was searching for the Knight of the Green Chapel. The lord invited him to stay and rest a few days before continuing his search.

Then the lord suggested that they play a game.

“Each day I will go out to hunt, and each day you will stay here and rest. At the end of the day, I will offer you whatever I have won in the forest. You will offer me whatever you have won in my home,” he said.

Gawain agreed, and the next day the lord went off to the hunt. During the day, the lady of the house spoke soft words to Gawain and walked with him about the castle grounds. At the end of the day, the lady offered Gawain a kiss. Gawain thought the lady was very beautiful. He wished to kiss her in return, but he pulled away, for she was the wife of his host.

That evening the lord of the castle offered Gawain a deer, and Gawain offered him a kiss.

The next day the game continued. This time the lord offered Gawain a boar, and the knight offered him two kisses.

On the third day, the lady kissed Gawain three
times. Then she offered him a green silk scarf to wear beneath his armor.

“Green is a magic color,” she said, “and this scarf is magical. Wear it when you bow your head before the Green Knight. The scarf will protect you.”

That evening the lord offered Gawain a fox, and Gawain gave him three kisses. But he said nothing about the green scarf. The next morning, after thanking the lord for his hospitality, he rode out of the castle to seek the Green Knight.

He passed a bubbling brook and heard someone sharpening an ax. Gawain followed the sound. The man who was sharpening the ax was the Green Knight. Although his heart was filled with fear, Gawain spoke boldly to him.

“I am Gawain, here to fulfill my pledge,” he said. “Never let it be said that Gawain did not keep a promise.”

“And I am here to fulfill the terms of the agreement,” said the Green Knight as he picked up his ax. His heart pounding, Gawain knelt and offered his neck to the Green Knight. The knight lifted his ax high to deliver the fatal blow. As the blade descended, Gawain could hear the sharp blade slicing through the air—and he flinched!

The Green Knight stopped and set his ax aside, scolding the young knight for his cowardice. But Gawain leaped to his feet and begged for another chance. The Green Knight agreed to try again. This time, as the blade descended and sliced through the air, Gawain did not flinch, but the Knight stopped the blade. He asked the young knight to face him and bare his throat. With the edge of his blade, the Green Knight nicked Gawain’s throat.

Gawain leaped to his feet saying, “Now the pledge is fulfilled, Knight of the Green Chapel. I challenge you to a battle of sword against ax!”

The Green Knight threw back his head and began to laugh, his voice ringing through the forest. “Why, Gawain, are you so angry?” he said. “Why should you challenge me? Did I treat you discourteously? Behold! You promised to allow me a blow. I attempted two blows, and I finally took a blow the third time. I could have injured you much more seriously, but I did not. I recalled how honestly you dealt me a blow on the evening I appeared in King Arthur’s court.”

The Green Knight continued. “The first blow simply frightened you. It was in honor of the first day that you spent in my castle. You gave me honestly what you had received, a single kiss from my wife. The
second blow was for the second day when you offered me two kisses from my wife. For it is true, an honorable man need not fear danger."

Now the Green Knight looked at Gawain with a steady eye. Gawain was as still as stone. The Green Knight spoke again.

“But on the third day you did not behave as a true and honest knight, and that is why there is a nick on your throat. For on the third day, you took a sash that belongs to me. You are wearing it now, a green silken sash given to you by my wife. Ah yes, I know all about my wife’s kisses and how you restrained yourself. I set it all up as a test for you. Truly, I believe you are one of the most faultless knights that ever graced our island. But you failed, however slightly. And you did not do so out of an evil heart. You failed out of fear for your own life. You loved your life more than honor, and I cannot blame you for that.”

Once again there was silence. Anguish filled the heart of Gawain. He looked at the ground, then at the heavens, and finally at the Green Knight.

“I have been untruthful and broken the Code of Chivalry,” he cried out. “I have brought shame upon my name, Gawain of the Round Table. Because I loved my life and feared your blow, I was false to you. I regret it and wish to regain your good will.”

The Green Knight laughed and said, “Gawain, be at peace. You have admitted wrongdoing and have taken the punishment from my ax. I hold you in good faith. I grant you the green scarf, as green as my robes, as a parting gift to begin the New Year.”

As Gawain slipped on his helmet, he looked sadly at the Green Knight and said, “I leave you in great sorrow, and I thank you for your forgiveness. I accept your scarf, not for its beauty or for its magical properties, but as a sign of my failure. I will wear it on my arm always. When I accomplish great things and wish to lift my head above my fellow knights, this scarf will remind me of this day.”

Then Gawain looked up at the Green Knight and asked, “Before I go, may I ask you your name?”

“I am happy to tell you,” the Green Knight replied, “I am called Bercilak de Hautdesert. The beautiful goddess Morgan le Fay, mistress of Merlin, lives in my house. It is she who sent me to King Arthur’s court to test the pride of his knights. Morgan le Fay is an excellent wizard. She intended to frighten you out of your wits by enabling me to speak even though my head had been cut from my body.”

Gawain sighed. It was time for him to leave. He
embraced the Green Knight and pledged eternal friendship. As he began his journey to King Arthur's court, he thought about what had happened. He had been given his life back, a fine gift indeed. And he had learned how weak he could be.

Gawain had many adventures as he traveled the highways and byways of the kingdom. The wound in his neck healed. He wore the green sash under his left arm, its knotted ends flying in the breeze. And so one day, he entered Camelot again.

King Arthur was amazed, for he had feared Gawain would lose his life fulfilling his pledge. He embraced his nephew over and over. The knights insisted on celebrating with a great feast. Everyone wanted to hear his story.

Gawain told them all that had happened, sharing with them his untruthfulness and the goodwill of the Green Knight. He showed everyone the scar on his neck. Then he held up the green scarf and said to Arthur, "Behold the sign of my disgrace, which I wear like the scar on my neck. I will wear it all of my life to remind me that I once broke the Code of Chivalry and was untruthful to another knight. To my endless disgrace, I did it out of fear of losing my life."

Arthur embraced Gawain and tried to comfort him.

The rest of the knights told him how happy they were to see him again. They urged him to be at peace, for he had been honorable in all ways, except one. They promised, one and all, to wear a ribbon of bright green on their left arms in fellowship with him. From thenceforward, the Knights of the Round Table all wore a green ribbon to honor their beloved Gawain and his contest with the Green Knight.