



SIR GAWAIN
AND THE
GREEN KNIGHT

WEL GAY WATZ THIS GOME GERED IN GRENE
& THE HERE OF HIS HED OF HIS HORS SWETE

— MIDDLE ENGLISH —

GARBED ALL IN GREEN
WAS THE GALLANT RIDER
AND THE HAIR OF HIS HEAD
WAS THE SAME GREEN AS HIS HORSE.

— ENGLISH TRANSLATION —

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

EVERY WINTER, during the Yuletide festival, King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table gathered in a great hall to feast, sing, and tell the most wondrous tales. One year, scarcely had their feast begun, when the oddest-looking man anyone had ever seen entered the hall on horseback.

The horseman was the tallest knight in the land. He was very handsome with gigantic limbs, a thick, broad chest, and a beard as big as a bush. He might have been the most handsome horseman on Earth, but for one thing: He was green. From head to foot, his skin, hair, beard, and clothing were as green as emerald stones. His bridle was green, his saddle was green, and his horse was green. He wore no armor and carried no spear or shield. In one hand, he held a green holly bough and in the other, a great green axe.

“Who is the leader of this feast?” he bellowed.

The banquet guests could not even speak. Only King Arthur had the courage to answer the Green Knight. “Dismount from your horse, sir!” he commanded, “and join our celebration.”

“I came not to feast,” said the Green Knight, “but to prove the courage of your famous warriors.”

“Oh, if you seek a battle, there are many here who will take you up on your offer,” said the king.

The Green Knight laughed loudly. “I’ve not come to fight with beardless children,” he shouted. “I came to play a sport. I challenge any of you to strike me with my own axe — on the condition that should I survive, next year at this time, I shall strike you back.”

FAVORITE MEDIEVAL TALES

"Give me your axe," said King Arthur, "and I shall grant your wish."

The Green Knight dismounted from his horse. As he put his axe in the king's hands, the Knights of the Round Table shouted their protests.

"This is not a task for our king!" said Sir Gawain, the youngest of all. "Let this fight be mine."

"So be it," said King Arthur. As he gave the axe to Sir Gawain, he whispered, "Put such heart and hand in your stroke that he will never be able to pay you back."

The Green Knight grinned at the young warrior. "First, on your honor, you must swear to seek me out in twelve months and let me give back what I receive from you," the giant said.

"I swear it, on my honor," said Sir Gawain.

The Green Knight then bared his neck and waited to receive his due.

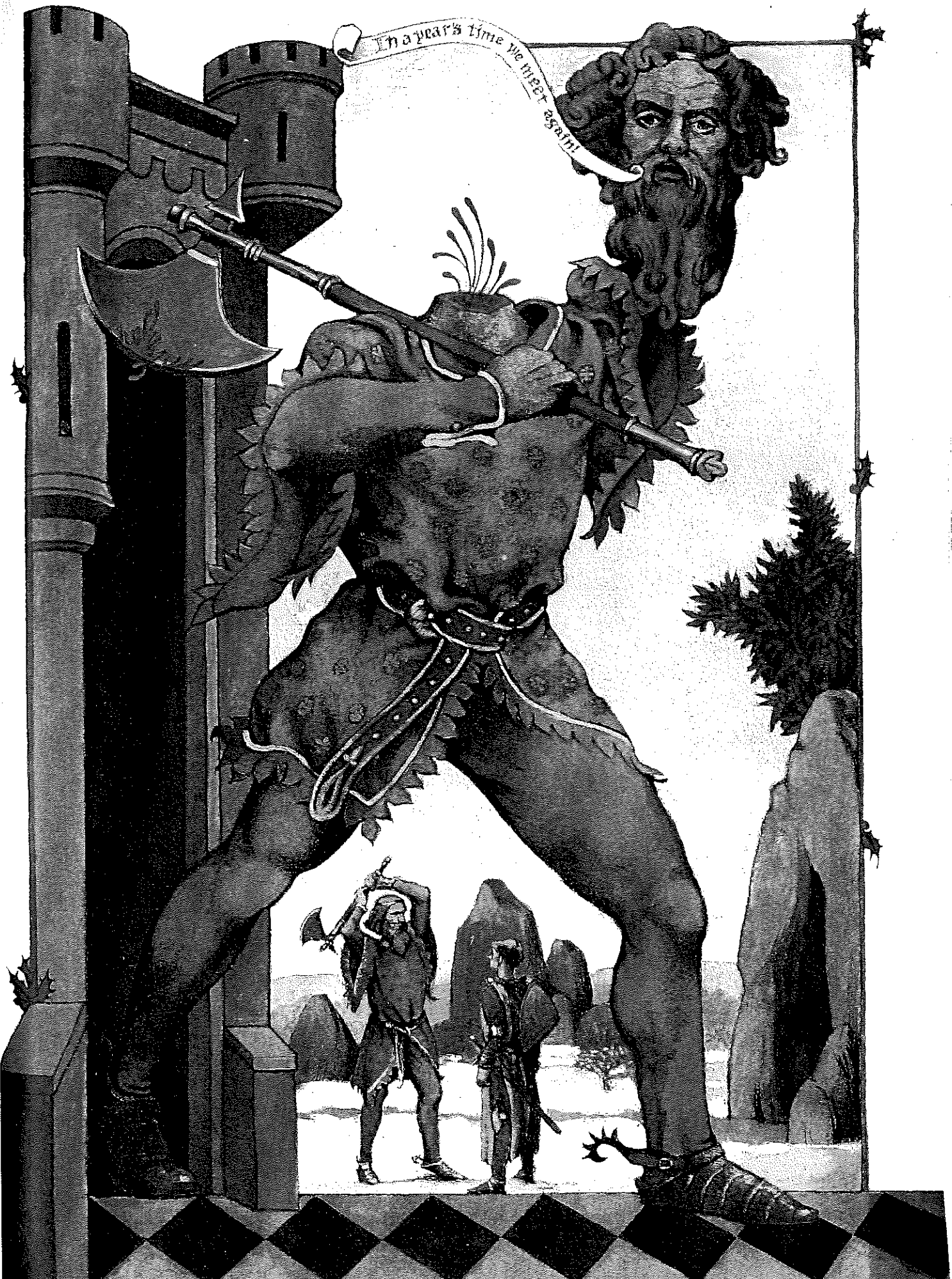
Sir Gawain swung the heavy axe with all his strength, and with one mighty blow, the sharp blade cut off the knight's head.

But the green giant did not die. He did not even flinch. Calmly and slowly, he stood up, picked up his own head, and held it aloft like a lantern. Then he mounted his horse and rode out of the hall.

The guests were stunned. Before the Green Knight had passed from sight, the severed head called out to Sir Gawain, "Remember — in a year's time, we meet again! You will find me on the day of New Year at the Green Chapel. Do not fail to keep your promise, or you will be dishonored!"

Even the bravest warrior shuddered. Preserving a knight's

In a year's time we meet again!



FAVORITE MEDIEVAL TALES

honor was more important than preserving his own life. All knew that in a year's time, the Green Knight would cut off Sir Gawain's head.

Over the next months, the young knight dreaded the passing of each day. He watched winter turn to spring and spring to fall. On the Eve of All Hallows, he knew it was time to begin his long journey.

Sir Gawain bid farewell to his friends and kinsmen. Then, wearing full armor, he left Camelot and began to wander far and wide in search of the Green Knight.

Sir Gawain climbed many hills and crossed many rivers; he valiantly escaped dangerous wild beasts and savage men. In the winter cold, he slept on naked rocks and endured sleet and snow.

On Christmas Eve, Sir Gawain found himself lost in a great forest. No paths could be seen; no voices heard. He prayed for help. Then, as he raised his eyes, he saw for the first time an opening between the trees. Through the opening, he spied a castle on a distant hilltop, shining in the glow of the waning winter light.

Sir Gawain reached the castle before nightfall.

The drawbridge was lowered, and the guards of the castle announced to their lord that a wayfarer had arrived.

A tall, sturdy knight and his fair lady came out to greet Sir Gawain. They convinced the youth that he could not spend Christmas alone with the bears and the wolves, but must join them for their holiday celebration.

For three days, Sir Gawain stayed in the wonderful castle. As

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

the day of the New Year drew nigh, he told his hosts that he must leave soon, for he was bound by his honor to find the Green Knight.

“Oh, please stay just three more days,” his host urged him, “for the Green Chapel of the Green Knight is not far from here.”

Surprised to discover that his journey was nearly over, Sir Gawain agreed to stay for three more days.

“Wonderful!” said his host. “Now, you must rest here at the castle while I go out to hunt. And let us have an agreement — whatever you get each day shall be mine in exchange for what I win in the woods.”

Sir Gawain did not fully understand this agreement, but with good faith, he went along with it.

The next day, the lord of the castle left before daybreak with his huntsmen and hounds, while Sir Gawain rested in his chambers.

Soon the fair lady of the castle entered Sir Gawain’s room. She confessed that she had fallen in love with him, and she begged him to take her away.

Sir Gawain was tempted to do as she asked, for indeed, she was very beautiful, and her words of flattery touched his heart. But the knight’s sense of honor forbade him to betray his host. So he told the fair lady he could not do as she asked.

The lady only laughed merrily, and on her way out of his room, she gave him a quick kiss.

That night, the lord of the castle returned with a deer and gave it to Sir Gawain. According to their agreement, the young knight was supposed to turn over whatever he himself had got-

FAVORITE MEDIEVAL TALES

ten that day, so he gave the lord the quick kiss given him by the fair lady.

The next morning, the lord set out to hunt again. And, again, in his absence, his wife visited Sir Gawain and begged him to take her away with him. Again the young knight fought hard against the temptation to do as she asked; and again, his honor prevailed. The fair lady only laughed merrily, then gave him two quick kisses as she left.

That night, the lord returned with a boar. And he gave it to Sir Gawain in exchange for the two quick kisses the knight had received that day.

The third day was cold and clear. Once more, the lord went hunting. And once more, his wife tried to tempt their guest, but failed. This time before leaving his chambers, she gave Sir Gawain a green silk belt fringed with gold.

“Know that whoever wears this belt has the power to make any weapon harmless,” she said.

Sir Gawain did not want to take her gift as he did not think it honorable. But he was overwhelmed by the fear of losing his head to the Green Knight. So he accepted the magic belt in hopes that it would save his life.

Later that day, the castle lord brought home the skin of an old fox and gave it to the young knight. But this time Sir Gawain did not keep his part of their agreement. He kept his green belt concealed and did not offer it to the lord of the castle.

That night, Sir Gawain slept poorly, for the next day was the day he had been dreading. Before the cock crowed, bringing in a stormy New Year's Day, he rose and carefully wrapped the green

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

belt around his waist. Then he mounted his horse and set out to find the Green Knight through the wind and snow.

A servant led Sir Gawain toward the Green Chapel of the Green Knight. In the early, gray twilight, the two climbed rugged cliffs and crossed dark moors. As the sun rose, the servant prepared to leave Sir Gawain at the mouth of a valley winding between snowcapped hills.

"If you are ready to be done with life," the servant said, "then ride down to the bottom of the valley, for there is the man you seek. For all the gold on Earth, I would not go with you."

The servant turned back, leaving Sir Gawain to ride on alone.

The valley was bordered by steep stone cliffs. Look as he might, Sir Gawain did not see a chapel. He saw only the opening of a distant, dark cave.

He tied his horse to a tree and climbed the snowy rocks until he reached the mouth of the cave. "Who dwells here?" he shouted.

"Stand still!" replied a deep voice above him. "Receive now what you have come for!"

A giant figure emerged from behind the rocks, bearing a mighty axe. It was the Green Knight, his head attached again to his shoulders.

"Put down your spear!" the Green Knight said. "Take off your helmet. Stand the blow I have owed you for these twelve months."

Sir Gawain sighed. "I am ready," he said. Then he unlaced his helmet and leaned forward without fear, offering his bare neck to the steel blade.

FAVORITE MEDIEVAL TALES

The Green Knight raised his green axe high, then swung it through the air.

Sir Gawain did not move as the sharp edge of the axe touched his neck. It gently pierced his skin, causing only a few drops of blood to sprinkle on the snow. And that was all.

Stunned, Sir Gawain felt for his head — *it was still there*. He drew his sword and faced the knight. “One stroke have I taken,” he said, “and that is all I will take — according to our agreement!”

The Green Knight turned toward him. His face was no longer green; in fact, it was the face of the lord of the castle Sir Gawain had visited.

“Brave knight, be not angry,” said the lord. “I had instructed my wife to tempt you, but you passed the test of faith and honor that every true knight must pass.”

Sir Gawain was confused by the generosity of the castle lord. “Cursed be my cowardice, for indeed I *was* false to my word,” he said. “I kept this green belt from you.” He unclasped the belt and held it out to his host.

“Nay, you must keep it,” said the castle lord. “I know already of this deceit and have punished you for it, by slightly piercing your neck. You must keep it forever to remind yourself of your adventure with the Green Knight.”

Sir Gawain hung his head sadly. “Ah, but this belt shall always remind me that I failed through cowardice,” he said.

“Nay, not cowardice,” the lord said gently. “Let it remind you instead that you love life very much. It was this very love

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

that caused you to conceal the green belt from me, so that you might live.”

The lord then invited Sir Gawain back to his castle. But the young knight was eager to return home. He said good-bye, and homeward he rode.

Many days later, all of Camelot welcomed Sir Gawain with great joy, as if he had just returned from the dead.

