

nce, in the days after Arthur had brought peace to the Isle of the Mighty, that noble warrior (who was never King—though he was often so called) happened into a curious misadventure, which I shall herein relay.

As all strife had been banished and the kingdoms of the Isle were safe, Arthur sought new things to occupy his time. And just so he was out one fine summer day earnestly striving to grasp the art of hunting. Unfortunately, his great enthusiasm, coupled with his thoroughgoing inexperience, led him to wander far from his hunting party and become quite lost in the primeval forest.

And, in such a state, dressed only for hunting, Arthur was accosted by a denizen of the wood, armed *cap-a-pie* (which is to say, "head to toe") in the most glimmering silver chain mail (which, the late but not forgotten J.R.R. Tolkien would, in his day, call Mithral). And this armored man with him also carried a long slim sword, which was very pointy, and which he had aimed directly at Arthur's unprotected heart.

"We are well met, Arthur. I am Gromer Somer Joure and you have done me wrong for many years, but now I shall repay you, unhappily for you. I believe the days of your life are nearly over. You gave my lands wrongfully to Sir Gawain. What do you say about that, Lord Arthur, here alone?"

"If you are thinking of slaying me here, Sir Gromer Somer, you will get no honor from that. It seems to me you are a knight, but if you kill me unarmed, all knights will refuse you everywhere, and you will never be able to escape shame."

"You shall not escape, indeed, for now I know I have the advantage over you. If I should let you go with only a few mocking words, another time you would defy me. I am not going to let that happen."

The very idea of pressing so great an advantage was quite alien to Arthur, but his peril could not be denied, so he accepted the conditions that Sir Gromer set for his release—that he return one year hence, unarmed and unescorted, with the answer to this riddle: "What do all women most want?" And if he could not bring the answer, he was sure to lose his head.

No sooner had the arrangement been settled than Arthur blew his hunting horn. Within moments the hunting party had found him, but Sir Gromer Somer Joure had already disappeared back into the wild forest.

In the days and weeks that followed, Arthur asked every woman of the court what it was that all women wanted most, but he receive no authoritative answer. At last, he turned to his nephew, Sir Gawain, who had by far know the most women of any of the knights of the Round Table. After hearing the entire story, Gawain confessed no greater progress on that riddle than Arthur himself, though he had spent his lifetime seeking the answer.

But Gawain's enthusiasm for the subject renewed Arthur's resolve. Gawain suggested they ride in different directions to question every woman and man they could find. Arthur replied that they could each compile their answers into a book and compare them at the end of the year. Surely they would have the correct answer from someone.

The year passed more quickly for Gawain, who found the company of women most rewarding, and more slowly for Arthur, who found himself one day closer to losing his head as each day passed. Both had pages filled with answers and a book full of pages, and yet at the end of the yearlong quest, when Arthur pored through the pages, his heart was yet heavy. He was not confident that any of the many answers that they had collected would serve.

Not long before his dread anniversary, Arthur retraced his wayward hunt. But along the way he encountered another denizen of the wild wood. And she was in her own way all the more frightening than the armored villain, for she was, without qualification, the ugliest, most repulsive woman ever to live.

Her face was red, her nose snotted, her mouth wide, her teeth yellow, her eyes rheumy, her teeth hung over her lips, and her cheeks were as fat as a woman's hips. Her neck was long and thick, her hair clotted and snarled. Her shoulders were a yard broad, and her breasts were a load for a strong horse. She was formed like a barrel. No tongue can adequately describe how foul she was, but she was ugly enough, and Arthur was dumbfounded.

"Sir, I would be happy now to talk with you and give you some good news. For all the answers that you can boast about collecting, not any of them will help you, as you shall discover. If I do not help you, you are dead. So allow me one thing, Lord Arthur, and I will guarantee your life. Otherwise you will lose your head."

"What do you want, fair lady? Let me know what you are talking about and why my life is in your hands. If you tell me truly, I will fulfill your request to the best of my ability."

"If because of my answer your life is saved, you must grant me a knight as my husband. His name is Sir Gawain. If my answer is not needed, you may ignore my wish. Let me advise you, good Sir, it has to be this way or soon you will lose your head."

"I cannot promise you Sir Gawain as husband. That depends only on him. But if what you say is true, then I will do my utmost to make the wedding come about."

"Well," she said, "now go home again and speak convincingly to Sir Gawain, for I can save your life. Even though I am ugly, I am full of life, and through me, he can save your life as well."

With a heavy heart, Arthur returned to court and sought out his handsome nephew.

"Gawain, today I met the ugliest woman that I ever saw. She said she would save my life, but first she would have you as her husband. This is the reason I am woe begone."

"Is that all?" Gawain asked. "I shall wed her and wed her again be she even a fiend so foul as Beelzebub. I will wed her or no longer count me as a friend, for you have honored me in many a battle. Therefore I shall not refuse. It is my obligation to save your life, my lord, or else I were false to you and a great coward."

"Many thanks Gawain," Arthur said. "Of all the knights that I have ever known, you bear the flower. My honor and my life you save forever, and therefore you will never lose my love."

When the time came, Arthur rode out once more to meet Dame Ragnell.

"Ah, Lord Arthur, you are welcome here. I know you bring Gawain's promise with you."

"Gawain shall wed you. He has promised me this to save my life, and you shall have your desire both at home and in bed. Therefore tell me the answer to my question without delay."

And so she did. And with such authority did she speak that Arthur could find no doubt she had answered rightly.

"There, Lord Arthur, go your way and tell that knight as I have told you, that this is what we desire most. He will be wrathful and cranky and curse the woman who taught you, for all his effort is lost. Go now and keep your promise, for your life is now safe, I dare say."

Arthur rode out a great way as fast as he could, through mire, moor, and fen to the place where he met Sir Gromer, and there he presented his two books.

"Sir, here is my answer, I say. For at least some of these answers must help me." Sir Gromer looked at each one of them.

"No, no, Lord Arthur. You are a dead man. Now you shall bleed."

"Wait a minute, Sir Gromer," said Arthur, "I shall have one more answer that shall make everything sure."

"Let us see, or else you shall have your death as your pay, I tell you surely."

And so, despite his reluctance, Arthur presented the answer paid for by Gawain's noble sacrifice.

"And she who told you now, Lord Arthur, I curse her to burn in fire, for that was my sister, Dame Ragnell, that old Scot. Otherwise I would have tamed you."

"You shall never find me in such a plight as this again, and if you do, I deserve to be bound and beaten," said Arthur. "Farewell, and I am glad I was successful, and may I continue to prosper."

Arthur turned his horse into the plain and soon met up again with Dame Ragnell.

"Lord Arthur, I am glad you have been successful," she said. "I told you that you would be in every way. Now you must hold your own promise. Since I alone have saved your life, Gawain, the noble knight, must marry me."

"Lady, I promise you I shall not fail in my promise. If you will be governed by my council, you will get what you wish."

"Now do not try any tricks—I won't have it. I shall be married and in public, before I leave you. Or you shall be shamed. Ride ahead and I will come after into your court, Lord Arthur. I do not want to shame anyone. Remember how I saved your life; so do not quarrel with me now. If you do, the blame will be on you."

As they rode along, Arthur was ashamed of her, but she, ignoring his embarrassment, just rode along until they came to Carlisle. When they went into the castle, she rode right beside him, and for no one would she change her position. Arthur was not pleased about this, and wondered where such a foul, horrible creature came from. The people of the court had never seen so ugly a person.

"Arthur, fetch me Sir Gawain," she said when they entered the great hall, "in the presence of these knights and quickly, that I may now be certain of your promise. In sickness and in health we will pledge our troth together before all your chivalry. This is your promise; let's see it done. Bring on Sir Gawain, my love, right now. Do not keep me waiting." Then Gawain came out.

"Sir, I am ready to fulfill my pledges as I promised you," he said.

"God have mercy," said Dame Ragnell, "for your sake I wish I were a beautiful woman, for you have such good will." Then Sir Gawain plighted his troth to her in sickness and in health as he was a true knight, and Dame Ragnell was happy.

"Alas, poor Sir Gawain," said Dame Guinivere, and the ladies in her chamber repeated what she said and wept for the knight.

"Alas," repeated both Arthur and his knights, sad that Gawain should have to marry such a person, so foul and horrible. She had only two teeth like boar tusks the length of a hand on two sides of her mouth. One tusk went up and the other down. Her mouth was enormously wide and was surrounded with many gray hairs. Her lips hung over her chin.

In spite of her appearance she would not be married in any way but with a public announcement in all the shires, both in the towns and in the boroughs. All the ladies in the country cried when they learned the marriage would take place. On the day the foul lady was to marry Sir Gawain, all the ladies pitied him, and Guinivere asked Dame Ragnell earnestly that she be married early in the morning.

"As secretly as possible," she requested.

"Not at all," Dame Ragnell answered. "By Heaven's King, I will not do that for all the world. In spite of anything you may say, I want to be married quite openly. I made that agreement with Arthur. Let me relieve you of any doubt. I will not go to church until the time of high mass, and afterward I will dine in the great hall in the midst of all the court."

"I am agreed," said Dame Guinivere, "but it seems to me more honorable for you to be married quietly."

"As for that, my lady, God save you, this day I will still have my honor, and I say it without boasting."

She made ready to go to the church, and all the people agreed she was dressed so richly that her clothes would have taken any prize. She was arrayed more attractively than Dame Guinivere without exaggeration. Her clothes were worth three thousand marks of sound gold nobles. But of the woman herself, such foulness I never heard tell. To make a long story short, so foul a sow no man ever saw.

And as soon as she was married, the people all hurried to the castle and to the banquet, but you can see that at this banquet there was more than enough, both of domestic food and wild meat. In Arthur's court there was never any lack of what could be acquired by the hand of man either in the forest or in the pasture. And minstrels arrived from a far-away land.

That horrible woman was mistress of the high dais, but she was crude and ill mannered in every way. When the service came before her, she ate as much as any six who were there. Here nails were three inches long and she tore her food apart with them, eating all by herself. She finished three capons, three curlews, and several huge baked dishes, by God. All the guests remarked that nothing was put in front of her but she gobbled every scrap of it, that horrible damsel. She continued eating right to the finish of the meal until the servants took the tablecloth away and all the guests had washed, as is customary. Every knight and squire cursed that the devil might gnaw her bones.

When the banquet was over, Gawain and Dame Ragnell left the hall and went to their chamber.

"Ah, Sir Gawain," Dame Ragnell said, "since I have married you, now show me your courtesy in bed. This right cannot be denied. Truly, if I were beautiful, you would have acted differently. Give me not have bothered to worry if we were married or not. So, for Arthur's sake, at least give me a kiss. I asked you to do this, anyway. Let us see how well you kiss."

"I will do more than kiss you," Gawain said, "and before God." He turned toward her and saw beside him the most beautiful woman he had ever imagined with no exceptions.

"Now, what is your will?" she asked quietly.

"Oh, Jesus," he said, "What are you?"

"I am your wife, surely. Why are you being so unnatural?"

"Oh, my lady, I am to blame. I ask for mercy, fair Madame—I did not imagine. Now you are certainly a beautiful woman, and even today you were the ugliest person I ever saw. I am certainly fortunate to have you change this way." He took her in his arms and kissed her with great passion.

"Sir," she said, "you may have me beautiful. But you must choose, may God save you, for my beauty is not constant. You may have me beautiful at night for yourself alone and ugly during the day for all other men, or at night ugly for yourself, and in the day beautiful for others. You have to choose one or the other. Choose one, sir knight, whichever you prefer."

"Alas," said Sir Gawain, "the choice is hard. To choose what is best is difficult. To have you fair at night and no more would grieve me deeply, for I would lose my honor and respect. To have you fair during the day but ugly at night, then I would lose my pleasure. Although I would be glad to choose best, still I do not know what in the world I can say. So do as you wish, my lady dear. The choice I put in your hands. Do with me as you wish. Both my body and my goods, my heart and all parts of me are all yours, to buy and sell—that I swear to God."

"Many thanks, courteous knight," said the lady. "Of all the knights in the world you must be the most blessed, for now you honor me. You shall have me beautiful both day and night, and I will be fair and attractive as long as I live. Therefore, do not worry; for my stepmother transformed me by an enchantment, may God have mercy on her. I would have been transformed until the best man of this mighty isle married me and gave me sovereignty over his body and his goods. I was deformed until that happened. And you, sir knight, courteous Gawain, have given me sovereignty, that very thing which all women most want. You will never be sorry about that. Now kiss me, sir knight, right here, I pray you. Be happy and enjoy yourself, for it has turned out well for both of us."

There they joy unimaginable as was right and natural, both of them alone. Both she and Sir Gawain dressed God and Mary mild that she recovered from her enchantment. They had all kinds of pleasure in their chamber and thanked our Savior for it. I can tell you truthfully, they stayed awake until dawn with their joy and play, and then the beautiful girl wanted to arise.

"You shall not," said Sir Gawain. "We will lie and sleep late this morning, and then let Arthur call us to dine."

"I'd like that," said the girl, and so the time passed until midday.

"Sirs," said Arthur to his nobles, "let us go and see if Sir Gawain is still alive. I am much afraid that the devil might have killed him. I have to find out. Let us go and see what has happened." All of them came to the chamber door. "Get up!" called Arthur to Sir Gawain, "why do you sleep so long in bed?"

"Mary," said Sir Gawain, "Lord Arthur, surely, I would be glad if you would let me be, for I am contented. Wait a minute, I will open the door. I believe you will say that I have been fortunate, and you will know why I am reluctant to get up." Sir Gawain arose, and took his lovely bride by the hand over to the door and opened it. She was standing in her smock by the fire. Her hair down to her knees was a red-gold filigree.

"She is my pleasure," Gawain said to Arthur. "Sir this is my wife, Dame Ragnell, who saved your life." And he told Arthur and Guinivere how suddenly her transformation was accomplished and why she had once been ugly.

"I thank God," said Guinivere. "I thought, Sir Gawain, she wanted to do you harm, in my heart I was afraid. But obviously, I can see the contrary here."

There was pleasure, revel, and enjoyment, and every one said she was a beautiful woman. Arthur told them all how Dame Ragnell had saved his life.

"Or my death had been assured," he said. "She saved me from death for the love of Sir Gawain." And Dame Ragnell told Arthur what choice and what power Gawain had given her.

"May God thank him for his courtesy," she said. "He saved me from death from ill fortune and a degradation that was foul and grim. Therefore, courteous knight and noble Gawain, I shall certainly never anger you. I make that promise here. And I will be obedient all the days of my life, and to God above, I guarantee never to argue with you."

"Thank you very much," Gawain then said, "I am well contented with you, and I know I always will be. She shall have my love," Gawain told them all, "and she will not need for anything, for she has been so kind to me."

"She is the most beautiful woman now in the castle," Guinivere said. "I swear by St. John. You shall always have my love, because you saved my lord, Arthur, on my word as a gentlewoman."

Dame Ragnell and Gawain were the parents of Guinglain, who was a strong knight and a member of the Round Table. At every feast day Dame Ragnell was always the most beautiful wherever she was, and Gawain loved her very much. In all his life he never loved anyone as well, and I can tell you truthfully that willingly he lay beside her both day and night.