



The Marriage of Sir Gawain

Overview



Sir Gawain, called “the Courteous,” was King Arthur’s nephew and was one of the favorites among the knights of the Round Table. His many adventures have been told and retold, most notably in the amazing story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The story of his marriage, however, is not so well known, though it much resembles *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*.

As this tale is shorter and simpler than the others, it was possible to retell it in the same verse form in which it was originally written. All the old stories were in some verse form, for the bards (poets) of olden times sang, or rather chanted, them to the accompaniment of their harps.

The Tale of The Marriage of Sir Gawain

Part I

King Arthur dwelt in merry Carlisle,
And lived in mirth and glee,
And with him was Queen Guinevere,
His bride so fair to see.

The King a royal Christmas kept
Of mirth and princely cheer,
And feasted many gallant knights,
Who came from far and near.

And while they were at table still,

And cups went freely round,
Before them came a damsel fair
Who knelt upon the ground.

“A boon,¹ a boon, oh noble King,
A boon I beg of thee!
Avenge me of a churlish² knight
Who has taken my love from me.

“At Tearne-Wadling his castle stands,
Near to that lake so fair,
And proudly rise the battlements,
And streamers deck the air.

“No gentle knight nor lady gay
May pass that castle wall,
But from that foul and churlish knight
Mishap will them befall.

“He’s twice the size of common men,
With thews³ and sinews strong,
And on his back he bears a club
That is both thick and long.

This grim and grisly baron came
Upon the yester morn,
And bore my love away with him
And left me all forlorn.

“And when I said that thou, O King,
His life would never spare,
‘Go tell,’ he said, ‘thy coward King
To fight me if he dare.’”

Then up arose the noble King
And swore by hill and dale
That he’d ne’er leave this baron grim
Till he had made him quail.

“Go fetch my sword Excalibur;
Go saddle me my steed.
Now by my faith, that churlish knight

Shall rue his evil deed!”

And when he came to Tearne-Wadling
Beneath the castle wall,
“Come forth,” he cried, “thou baron bold
And yield thyself my thrall.”⁴

That castle stood on magic ground
Fenced in with many a spell.
No valiant knight could tread thereon
But what his courage fell.

Then forward rushed that churlish knight,
King Arthur felt the charm,
His sturdy sinews lost their strength,
Down sank his feeble arm.

“Now yield, King Arthur, quickly yield,
And give thyself to me,
Or fight and lose thy life and lands;
No better terms may be.

“Unless thou’lt give thy promise true,
And by thine honor swear
To come back here to Tearne-Wadling
Upon the next New Year.

“And tell me true what thing it is
All women most desire.
That is thy ransom, craven⁵ King,
I’ll have no other hire.”

King Arthur swore upon his faith,
In sign held up his hand,
Then left that grim and evil knight
And rode forth from the land.

And he rode east and he rode west,
And did of all inquire
What thing it is all women crave
And what they most desire.

Some told him riches, pomp, or state;
Some, raiment fair and bright;
Some told him mirth; some flattery;
And some, a jolly knight.

The answers all in notes he put,
With wax he sealed them tight,
But since each told a different thing,
He feared that none was right.

Then Arthur dressed him for to ride,
In all his rich array,
Back o’er the land to Tearne-Wadling
That he might keep his day.

Onward he rode over the moor
To where a lady lay,
Beneath an oak and holly bright,
All clad in scarlet gay.

Her nose was crook’d and turned aside,
Her chin stood all awry,
And where there should have been her mouth
Lo! There was set her eye.

Her hair like serpents clung about
Her cheeks of deathly hue.
An uglier lady than she was
No man might ever view.

She hailed the King in friendly way,
No answer gave he back.
She cried, “Though I be foul to see,
I’ll help thee find thy lack.”

“If thou canst find me what I seek,
And help me in my task,
I’ll give thee truly, ugly hag,
Whatever thou mayst ask.”

She told her secret, then she said,
“This my reward must be--
That some young, fair, and courtly knight
Thou bring to marry me.”

Then fast rode on the noble king
Through hill and dale and wood.
Soon he had found the baron’s hall,
And there the baron stood.

He bore his club upon his back,
And wore his armor gray,
And when the letters he had read,
He flung them all away.

“Now yield thee, Arthur, and they lands,
All forfeit unto me.
These letter do not hold the truth
I sent thee for,” said he.

“Now wait a bit, thou baron proud,
I pray thee hold thy hand,
And give me leave to speak once more
In rescue of my land.

“This morn I came upon a moor
To where a lady lay,
Beneath an oak and holly bright,
All clad in scarlet gay.

“Of all things women wish the most
To have their will, said she.
Now grant me as thou’rt a baron true
This may my ransom be.”

“May dire mishap take her who told
Thee this,” the baron said,
“For only my sister knew the truth,
That foul, misshapen maid.”

Part II

Homeward again King Arthur went,
A weary man was he,
And soon he met Queen Guinevere.
“How hast thou fared?” said she.

“That churlish knight through magic charm
Did win me to his hand,
And but for an ugly lady there,
I should have lost my land.

This is what fills my heart with woe
And sorrows all my life,
I swore a young and courtly knight
Would make that hag his wife.”

The up spoke gallant Sir Gawain,
Ever a gentle knight,
“That ugly lady will I wed;
So let your heart be light.”

“Nay, nay, kind sir,” the King replied,
“My sister’s son ye be;
This loathly lady’s all too grim
And all too foul for ye.

“Her nose is crook’d and turned aside,
Her chin stands all awry,
A worse-formed lady than she is
Was never seen with eye.”

“What though her chin stand all awry
And she be ill to see,
I’ll wed her uncle, for thy sake,
And I’ll thy ransom be.”

“Now thanks, good nephew,” said the King,
“At morrow morning tide,
With knights and squires and hawks and hounds
We’ll go fetch thy bride.”

Sir Lancelot, Sir Stephen bold
With them that day did ride,
And Gareth keen and Tristram, too,
And many more beside.

And when they to the greenwood came
Beneath a holly tree,
There sat the dame in scarlet gay
Who was so foul to see.

And when they saw that lady’s face,
They took their hawks and hounds,
And said they would not marry her
For cities or for towns.

“Some one of us,” Sir Gawain said,
“Must make this maid his wife,
But I’ll wed her, ye churlish knights;
So cease ye from your strife.”

“Now thanks, good sir,” the lady said,
“And a blessing be thine always,
For as I am thy promised bride,
Thou’lt ne’er regret this day.”

Then up they took that ugly dame
And brought her home at last,
And there she and the courteous knight
Were married hard and fast.

And when at last they were alon,
And all had gone away,
“Come, turn to me, my lord,” she said,
“And look at me, I pray.”

Sir Gawain scarce could lift his head
For sorrow and for care,
When lo! He saw no ugly hag,
But a maiden wondrous fair.

Sweet blushes stained her rose-red cheek,
Her eyes were as black as sloe,⁶
The ripening cherry swelled her lips,
And all her neck was snow.

Sir Gawain kissed that lady bright
Who sat there by his side.
“The fairest flower is not so fair--
Thou’rt surely not my bride.”

“I am thy bride, my own dear lord,
The same that thou didst know,
Who was so ugly and was wont
Upon the moor to go.

“But I can only be this fair
Either at night or day;
So choose when thou wouldst have me thus,
And choose with care, I pray.”

“I could not bear to have thee foul
When we’re alone at night;
I’d rather far, my lady, have
Thee ugly by daylight.”

“When ladies go with their lords
At day in raiment fine,
Then I must hide myself,” she said,
“And can not go with mine.”

“Indeed, my lady,” Gawain said,
“For thee that would be ill;
So, since thou art my own dear bride
I’ll let thee have thy will.”

“Now blessed be thou, my gentle lord,
And the day I first saw thee,
For as thou seest me at this time,
So shall I ever be.

“My father was an aged knight,
My mother dead long ago,
He wedded then a wicked witch
Who brought me to my woe.

“She turned me from a fair young maid
To a shape most foul to see,
And sent me to the wilderness
In the wild greenwood to be.

“Mid moors and mosses, woods and wilds,
To lead a lonely life
Until a young and courtly knight
Should take me for his wife.

And ne’er to gain my own true shape--
Such was her fiendish skill--
Until that knight should yield to me
And let me have my will.

“My brother she turned into a churlish knight
And made him stiff and strong
And built him a tower on a magic ground,
There to live by might and wrong.

“But now the spell is broken through,
And wrong is turned to right,
Henceforth I’ll be a lady fair,
And he a gentle knight.”

Then was the good king Arthur glad,
And Guinevere, his queen,
And all his loyal band of knights,
Most gallant to be seen.

And so the knights, both great and less,

Rejoiced all that long day,
Because the magic spell had gone
From Gawain’s lady gay.

¹ A boon is a favor.

² Churlish means surly, selfish, or rough.

³ Thews are muscles.

⁴ A thrall was a slave or bondsman.

⁵ Craven means cowardly.

⁶ Sloe is a small black plum.