



Guy of Warwick

Overview



Guy of Warwick is one of the oldest and most popular of the stories told of Anglo-Saxon heroes. Of course, this statement does not mean that it is as old as the stories of Beowulf, Havelok, and Horn, who were heroes of Denmark and the older countries. It means

that Guy was one of the first really English heroes, born and bred in the new land. This tale was such a favorite that it was told by many generations of bards both in England and in France.

However, it was best loved in England, where the victory of King Athelstan over the Danes was a very important event in the history of the country. Later, after the invention of the printing press, this tale had the honor of being one of the very first stories to be put into a printed book.

The Tale of Guy of Warwick

In the court of the Earl of Warwick, there was a faithful old steward named Segard. Segard had an only son, Guy, a lad who was brave and handsome and clever. When Guy was very young he became a page in the court. There he was taught to hunt with hawk and hound, to carve and serve at table, to play chess, to take part in tournaments,¹ and to do everything a young noble of those days should do. Soon he was so skilful that he was made chief cupbearer. Now every year at Pentecost,² the Earl of

Warwick held a great feast, with hunting and tournaments for a whole fortnight afterward. At this feast, Guy was chosen to go to the chamber of the Earl's daughter, Felice, and serve her and her maidens. Guy had often heard of the marvelous beauty of Felice, but he had never seen her.

No sooner did he set eyes upon her with her long dark hair, star-like eyes, and proud red lips, than he could think of nothing but his love for her. When the feast was over, he went to his room to be alone with his thoughts of the lovely Felice.

He was unhappy, for he knew that a mere cupbearer could never hope to win the daughter of an earl. At last he became so ill from his sad thoughts that he made up his mind to tell Felice of his love, even if it should cost him his life. He crawled to the garden under her balcony.

When she stepped out to enjoy the starry night, he pleaded for her love. She only laughed at him and went in, slamming the door behind her. Then Guy became so ill that for a long time he lay at the point of death, and even the best leeches in the court could do nothing for him. At last Felice had a strange dream. She dreamed that she would have a great misfortune if Guy should die on account of love for her. So she went to Guy and told him that if he became a knight and won much glory, perhaps some day she would marry him. Guy was so young and inexperienced that she thought he would be killed in his first battle. Then she would be well rid of him without having him die of love for her.

When Guy heard her words, he was so happy that he began to get well at once. As soon as he had gained his strength again, he went to the Earl of Warwick and asked to be made a knight. The

Earl was fond of Guy and was glad to knight him.

As soon as Guy was made a knight, he set sail for Normandy with three of his best friends. There he took part in the grand tournaments that were held every year. He overthrew all the knights who rode against him, even Sir Otho, the Black Duke of Pavia, the most wicked and terrible knight in all Europe. When Sir Otho struck the ground, he swore that he would not rest until he had revenge upon the young knight who had overcome him.

After Sir Guy received the prize of that tournament, he set off through Spain, Lombardy, and Germany in search of more glory. He fought in tournaments in every country in Europe, and in every tournament he won a prize. His name was known wherever minstrels sang of brave men. At last he turned homeward to lay all his prizes at the feet of the fair Felice.

As he went toward the coast to take a ship back to England, Sir Otho of Pavia heard of his coming. The Black Duke sent for his friend, Earl Lombard, and fifteen of the boldest knights in the land. He stationed them in a thicket by the woodland path over which Sir Guy and his three friends had to travel. The Italian knights thought that they could jump upon Sir Guy and his comrades and kill them without any trouble at all.

Sir Guy, unarmed, was riding along through the greenwood with no thought at all of danger. Suddenly he saw the glint of steel helmets among the leaves and heard the neighing and stamping of horses.

“Make haste,” he called to his comrades. “I fear that there will be a treacherous attack upon us.”

He sprang from his horse and put on his armor so quickly that he was all ready by the time the first of his enemies jumped from the bushes. He and his three friends struck out boldly. They killed four Italian knights at the first encounter, but the bravest were still left. Soon the Italians had slain Guy’s three friends, one after another.

When Guy saw his comrades killed, he was beside himself with rage and sorrow. Although he was wounded, he struck out with might and main until there was only one Italian knight left. Now since he was fresh and Guy was wounded,

this knight thought that he would have little trouble in conquering Guy. He rode on at top speed. Sir Guy gave him such a terrible wound that he fled as fast as his horse could carry him. He arrived half dead in Pavia and told Sir Otho of Guy’s escape.

Sir Guy went sadly on his way alone. At last, when he was so weak from his wounds that he could go no farther, he came to the hut of a hermit.³ Here he stopped. The good hermit cared for him until his wounds were healed. Then he went back to Warwick. His fame had come even there and he was welcomed by all, from lord to page. But his return brought the greatest joy to his aged father and mother. The proud Felice was the only one who was not glad to see him. She had hoped that he would never come back. When he went to tell her of his glory and ask her for her love, she said that even if he were a famous knight, she would have nothing to do with him until he was known as the bravest, boldest knight in the world.

So Sir Guy asked the Earl of Warwick’s consent to set forth once more for strange and unknown lands in search of adventure. The Earl was rather surprised that Sir Guy should wish to leave again so soon, but he gave his consent. But old Segard and his wife were by no means ready to lose their son again. They begged and begged him to stay with them.

“You have won enough glory to satisfy any man,” they said. “Pray stay with us at least one year. We are old and feeble. If you go now, you may not find us alive when you return.”

Now Sir Guy was very fond of his parents and did not want to leave them, but his love for Felice was so strong that it sent him forth again. So he went away again and traveled through countries far and wide. He helped to conquer kingdoms and rescued damsels in distress and was the hero of so many strange and wonderful adventures that he became known as the bravest knight in all the world.

As he was returning homeward through a forest in Italy, he heard loud groans coming from the underbrush. There he found a knight sorely wounded. Sir Guy asked him his trouble. “I am Sir Thierry,” said the knight. “Long I served in the army of Loyer, Duke of Lorraine, for the sake of his lovely daughter, Osile. I loved her and she loved me. But the Black Duke of Pavia

loved her too, and her father wished her to marry him, because he is richer and more powerful than I. She would not forsake me. She and I were on our way to be married secretly but now. In some way Otho found out our plans. He sent a band of assassins to kill me and carry her away to him. I am badly wounded and fear that I am about to die, but I should gladly die if I could feel that Osile would be saved from the Black Duke.”

Sir Guy promised to help Sir Thierry, for he was only too glad to have a chance to fight against his old enemy, Sir Otho. He snatched up Sir Thierry’s sword and shield and rode fast in the direction in which the assassins had carried away poor Osile. Soon he came upon them, a ruffian band. One of them carried Osile before him on his horse. She was crying and screaming for help. Sir Guy rode upon the men and struck out savagely. Soon he had killed them all.

Then he carried Osile back to the thicket where he had left Sir Thierry. When he reached the spot, there was no Sir Thierry to be found. The bushes around there were trodden and torn as though a large company of knights had been there. Sir Guy knew that more of the Black Duke’s men must have come and taken away Sir Thierry. He left Osile and went to seek Thierry. Though he searched far and wide, he could not find him. Weary and discouraged, he returned to the thicket to tell Osile the bad news. She too had disappeared, and, search as he might, he could not find her.

At length, as night was drawing near, he went to a castle to seek shelter. He did not know whether the castle belonged to an enemy or a friend. Much to his joy, he found that the lord of the castle was Sir Amys of the Mountain, a brave and generous knight who had often fought on his side in battles and tournaments. He welcomed Sir Guy and led his horse to the best stall in the stable. Then he unarmed Sir Guy and cast a silken cloak over his shoulders. At dinner in the great hall, Sir Guy told his host of his adventures.

Sir Amys said that he had seen two parties of the Black Duke’s knights pass that day; one carrying the wounded knight, Thierry, and the other bearing the fair maiden, Osile. He advised Sir Guy to wait at the castle until he found out surely what had happened to Thierry and Osile and then to form some plan to rescue them.

Before Sir Guy had been at the castle a day, he learned from a travelling minstrel that Otho of Pavia held both Thierry and Osile. Sir Otho had thrown the knight into a deep, dark dungeon. He was going to marry the maiden in forty days.

Then Sir Guy formed a plan. First of all, he stained his hair and eyebrows black and wore strange clothing so that no one could recognize him. Taking with him a splendid warhorse and a suit of armor, he started out for Sir Otho’s court. He hid the armor in the woods just outside the town. He presented the horse to Sir Otho and knelt down before him.

“Sir,” he said, “I bring you this steed, the swiftest, strongest-hearted animal that ever bore a knight. In return, I ask only one small favor. You hold in your dungeon my worst enemy, Sir Thierry. Pray make me his jailer so that I may have revenge upon him.”

The Black Duke did not recognize his old enemy, Guy. He did not suspect any treachery and made Guy jailer at once. Guy was taken to the mouth of a pit forty fathoms deep where Sir Thierry was slowly starving to death. As soon as he thought that all Sir Otho’s servants were out of the way, he leaned over the edge of the pit and said to Sir Thierry, “Friend, be of good cheer. Your jailer is Guy of Warwick, who will do his best to help you.”

But an Italian knave,⁴ hiding around the corner of the passage, heard his words and ran off to tell Duke Otho. Sir Guy heard the clatter of his steps on the stone floor and followed him. The knight caught up with the knave just at the foot of Otho’s throne. Before the Italian could open his mouth, Sir Guy ran him through with his sword.

“What right have you to slay a servant of mine?” cried Otho in a rage. “I’ll have you killed at once for this.”

“Alas! Sir,” answered Sir Guy, happy now that his secret could not be discovered, “I caught the knave carrying a basket of food to my prisoner. Such was my anger that I struck him dead.”

Then Duke Otho thought that he had never seen so faithful a jailer. So instead of punishing Guy, he praised him and let him go. As soon as Sir Guy had left Otho, he went out into the town and bought some food for his friend. After he had lowered bread and wine down into the pit for Sir

Thierry, he went around the castle to try to find a way of sending a message to Osile. As he passed under the south tower of the castle, he heard a maiden weeping. He looked up and found Osile on the balcony.

“Lady,” he whispered, “this is a friend, Guy of Warwick. I have a plan to help you, but first you must agree to do whatever I ask you, no matter how mad it seems to you. Do you agree?” “I agree,” replied the lady softly.

“Then send for the Duke and ask him to have the wedding at once, instead of waiting forty days,” said Guy, and could say no more because some Italian knights appeared.

But the lady obeyed him. She sent for Duke Otho and told him that she would marry him the very next day. Duke Otho was overjoyed and at once hurried about making preparations for the ceremony and feast.

Meanwhile, Sir Guy was no less busy. As soon as it became dark, he lowered a rope into the pit and pulled out Sir Thierry. Together they stole out of the castle and through the narrow streets of the town until they came to the walls.

The walls were about twice as tall as a man and were of rough stone. As the gates were locked each night at sunset, no one could pass out of or into the town. Sir Thierry climbed upon Sir Guy’s shoulders. Then he jumped and caught the top of the wall and, after a few minutes’ struggle, sat safely astride it. Already Sir Guy had whispered his directions. He had told Sir Thierry where the armor was hidden in the woods and how to find the way to the castle of Sir Amys.

Sir Thierry dropped over the wall and disappeared. Soon he returned and tossed the armor, piece by piece, over the wall to Sir Guy. Sir Guy armed himself and took his place around the corner of a crooked street through which the wedding procession had to pass on its way to the chapel. There he waited all through the long night until he became stiff and sore.

Early in the morning he heard footsteps clattering in the stone street. He stepped back into a shadow. The porter passed with his giant key as he went to unlock the gates of the town. After that, it was only a short time before he heard the rush of feet, the murmur of voices, and

the music of pipe and fiddle, telling of the approach of the wedding procession.

Soon the procession turned the corner. Duke Otho and Osile were at the head; the Black Duke riding on the coal-black steed that Sir Guy had given him and pale Osile beside him on a milk-white palfrey.⁵ Sir Guy jumped forward and killed Otho with one stroke of the sword. He sprang to the back of the black steed, snatched Osile from her palfrey, and set her before him. Then he was out of the town gate and away through the forest before the startled Italian knights could really tell what was happening.

He rode to the castle of Sir Amys and gave Osile to her lover, Thierry, who was waiting for her there. Then Sir Guy was satisfied. He had rescued the two lovers and had overcome his worst enemy. He was known as the boldest knight in all the world. All he had to do was to return to England and claim the promised love of Felice.

So he hurried back to Felice as fast as he could. Now, all the time that Felice had been waiting at home, she had been hearing of the courage and chivalry of Sir Guy. As she was very ready to become the wife of such a famous man, they were married just as soon as Guy returned. A marriage feast was prepared in haste, and the guests were called in at once. As the guests came in, Guy looked for his mother and father, for he wished to seat them near him at the head of the table. He could not find them anywhere. When all the guests had arrived and the tables were filled, Guy again looked for his parents. Although at the great feasts of that time there was usually a place at the foot of the table for the poor people, there was no one at that feast who was not a rich lord. The proud and selfish Felice did not wish to see anyone who was not clothed in satin or velvet. Guy looked at every face in all that vast company, and although he found many of his old friends, he saw no sign of his parents.

“How is it that my father and mother are not at my wedding feast?” he asked a knight by his side.

“Alas!” replied the knight, “the good Segard and his wife have been dead and buried six months or more.”

Then all Guy’s happiness was gone. He remembered how his mother and father had

begged him to stay with them and had warned him that he might never see them alive again. The rich food choked him, and he could no longer stand the merriment of the guests. He stole away unnoticed to a lonely tower. He wished to think and mourn. For the first time he saw Felice as she really was.

“Alas!” he cried, “I left my parents and forgot my duties, all for the sake of a proud and selfish woman who loves not me, but my fame.”

Then he thought of how his three best friends had been killed by the Italian knights and how he himself had killed many men, all on account of Felice.

“I have been very wicked,” he thought, “and now I must repent. I will never fight another battle or kill another man as long as I live. I will leave Felice and all my riches and make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.”

He laid aside his rich garments of velvet and silk and put on the clothing of a pilgrim, the coarse haircloth robes, the broad flat hat with its little bells, the sandals, and the rough staff. Then he set out for the Holy Land without a word of farewell to anyone.

He journeyed on foot many weary miles. His only riches were the pennies he begged by the wayside. When he stopped at castles along the way for food and shelter, he who had once sat at the highest place was placed at the foot of the table with the servants, and received the crusts and bones. After he had been to Jerusalem and had visited all the sacred spots of the Holy Land, his thoughts turned back to his native England and especially to Warwick, his home. So he started homeward and, after a long journey, at last reached England.

Now King Athelstan of England was in great trouble. King Anlaf of Denmark had come with a great army and had sent him a challenge. Anlaf had in his army a giant champion named Colbrand whom no knight had ever conquered; King Anlaf said that unless King Athelstan could find a champion to conquer the terrible Colbrand, he would have to surrender all England to the Danes.

King Athelstan had no hope. There was not a knight in all England bold or skilful enough to fight with Colbrand. At last, when he was about

to surrender to the Danes, he had a strange dream. An angel came to him in his sleep and said, “Fear not, Athelstan, because you can find no champion. If the first pilgrim who comes to your castle gate will fight against the giant, all will be well.”

Guy had just entered the king’s town of Winchester and was coming to the castle to beg for something to eat. As soon as King Athelstan awoke, he called his nobles and told them of his strange dream. They all went to the gate to seek a pilgrim and found Guy already there. Before Guy could open his mouth to ask for breakfast, they took him by the hand, led him to the head of the table, and fed him the best food in the castle. Then, as he ate, they told him of the challenge of the Danish King and the strange dream of Athelstan.

“I know that you are a holy man not accustomed to fighting and that the Danish champion is very terrible,” said Athelstan, “but since God has sent the dream, He will help you in the battle.”

“Sir, I can not help you,” replied Guy, “for I have resolved never again to fight a battle or kill a man.

Then the King and all the lords knelt at Guy’s feet. “You are our only help,” said the King. “If you do not fight for us, all this broad land of England is lost.”

With these words, they all began sighing and groaning. Guy pitied them with all his heart and could not bear to think of his native land under the savage rule of the Danes. So at last he said that he would fight the battle for them. Then the King was joyful and sent word to the Danes that he had found a man to fight for England. The Danes armed themselves and hastened to the field of battle.

The English King gave Guy the best armor in the town--a strong coat of mail, a keen-edged sword, and a helmet plated bright with gold and decorated with a flower all made of jewels. One of the precious stones was a carbuncle that shone as brightly among the others as the sun shines through the leaves of the forest trees. Lastly, he gave him a wondrous shield on which were painted the three wise men who brought gifts to the Christ Child. Then they placed Guy upon a brave steed and he rode forth to the battlefield.

When they arrived, Guy alighted from his horse, knelt down, and prayed that he might save England. Then the two kings came together and exchanged promises of good faith.

“If my giant is slain,” said Anlaf of Denmark, “I promise upon my honor to take all my soldiers back to Denmark and never to set foot in England again.”

“If my man is killed,” said Athelstan of England, “I promise to yield myself and all my people, my gold and silver and riches, and all my broad land unto you.

Then Guy mounted and rode out into the field and soon the giant, Colbrand, came forth also. He was a frightful champion. He was so tall and heavy that there was no horse living strong enough to bear him. A cart could scarcely have carried all the armor that he wore. This armor was as black as pitch and all of strong steel splints closely joined. He wore two thick helmets, one over the other. He bore a bow and several darts and had his battle-ax strapped to his side. Behind him was placed a whole heap of new axes and spears, which he could use if he should break the weapons he was carrying.

King Athelstan and the English were filled with great fear when they saw Colbrand. Even Guy was afraid for the first time in his life, but he rode forward at once to strike the giant with his spear. As Guy came on, the giant shot his darts.

The first two missed. The third struck Guy’s shield and shot through it, but passed between his arm and body and ploughed an acre’s length into the ground. Guy smote the giant with his spear and the spear broke into five pieces. Colbrand rushed forward to strike Guy’s helmet with his ax. The blow missed its mark, but the ax fell forward, cut Guy’s horse in two, and sank a foot into the ground.

Then Guy had to fight on foot. He seemed like a child beside the huge giant. He tried to strike Colbrand’s head. He could not reach high enough, but he wounded the giant’s shoulder. Colbrand was furious. He struck Guy’s jeweled helmet in two and he struck the wondrous shield in two. The pieces fell to the field on all sides.

Guy had only his sword left. He smote the giant’s shield so that lightning burst forth. The

blade sank deep into Colbrand’s armor, but when Guy pulled it out, it broke.

Then Guy was struck with terror, and it was little wonder. His helmet was broken; his shield was broken; his spear was broken; his sword was broken; and his steed was slain. The Danes began to nudge one another and smile and boast that all England was now theirs.

“Sir Knight,” cried Colbrand, “now that you have lost your arms and your steed, you would do well to yield to me. You have fought so bravely that I will spare your life and take you to my King. He can use such knights as you. “I should rather be hanged than yield to you,” said Guy. “You have many weapons in your pile. You must give me one.

“No, indeed,” said Colbrand, “you’ll have none of my weapons.

Even while the giant was speaking, Guy ran to the pile and snatched up an ax. He came back and cut off the giant’s right arm with the hand that held his sword. Colbrand leaned over to pick up his sword with his left hand and as he stooped, Guy cut off his head. A hoarse cheer arose from the Englishmen. They took Guy upon their shoulders and carried him back to the town in triumph, while the Danes sadly turned toward their ships.

There were to be great feasts in Winchester. The unknown pilgrim was the hero of the land. Nothing in the country was too good for him.

Everyone wished to know his name, but in vain. “I shall never tell my name,” said Guy. “If you are grateful to me for my help, pray grant me just one small favor.”

“Anything in the land that you wish is yours,” said the King. “I shall be glad to do everything that I can for you.”

“Then pray give me back my pilgrim’s robes and let me go in peace,” said Guy.

The King was surprised and a little angry. Here he had ordered a splendid feast for Guy, and Guy wished to leave before it should take place. Besides, all the people were impatient to see the hero who had saved their land. But he had given his promise to Guy and could not break it.

So Guy laid aside his rich robes and again put on the coarse garments of a pilgrim. Then he slipped quietly out of the town before the feasting had even begun.

He went back to Warwick, his birthplace. He wished to see again all the people and places that he had once known and loved. But most of all, he wished to see whether the proud Felice were still alive and as selfish as ever. As soon as he reached Warwick, he learned that the Earl was dead and that Felice was ruling in his place. He wondered whether she would recognize him in the robes of a pilgrim.

When he went to the castle gates to seek shelter and food, he found many hungry, ragged people already waiting there. Soon a gong sounded within the castle and the gates were thrown open. The steward came and bade them all enter.

They were led to the hall and seated at the long table laden with the best of food. Lady Felice herself sat at the head of the table and saw that they were all well served. Was this the same Felice who had once disliked poor people because they were ragged and unclean? Guy looked at her curiously. She scarcely seemed the same woman. Her beautiful face, once so proud and cold, was older and sadder, but kind and full of pity.

Guy sat very near her. She looked at him closely and even asked him some questions of the Holy Land, but still she did not recognize him. In the midst of the meal, the steward spoke a few words in her ear and she slipped quietly away. Soon the whisper ran around the table that she had gone to dress the wounds of a poor woodsman who had been gored by a wild boar.

“Is your lady always so kind and merciful?” Guy asked the man beside him.

“Oh, yes, she is the best lady in all the world,” he replied. “Once, it is true, she was selfish and cruel, but sorrow has made her gentle. She was wedded to Sir Guy of Warwick, the bravest knight in the world, but on the very day of the wedding feast he went away, no one knows where. At first, she was wild with grief and wounded pride. Then she became sweet and gracious and merciful to all. There is no man in the land who would not gladly die for her. Even the little children come in crowds whenever she

steps out of the castle and follow her through the streets wherever she goes.

Guy’s heart was glad when he heard how Felice had changed. He did not dare to make himself known to her for fear all her old selfishness would come back. So he went away without seeing her again. In the woods just outside of the town he built himself a little hut and lived as a hermit. Thus Guy in his hut and Felice in her castle both spent the rest of their lives in doing good deeds, and all the people in the land loved and blessed them.

¹ A tournament was a mock battle or warlike game in which a large number of knights jostled, usually for a prize.

² Pentecost was a Jewish festival in which an offering of the first fruits of the harvest was made. Later it was also adopted by Christian churches as a feast day.

³ A hermit was a religious man who lived all alone.

⁴ Knave is used here to mean a rascally servant.

⁵ A palfrey was a small saddle-horse usually used by ladies. It was much slower, and also much gentler and easier to manage, than the knights’ spirited warhorses.