

Sir Gawaine and Lady Ragnell

as told by Peter Amidon

Arthur was lost.

Every winter, at mid-winter, King Arthur and all of his Lords and Ladies and servants and cooks and knights and huntsmen, took a break from the difficult work of defend the borders of Britain from the invading hordes, leaving the Castle Camelot for eating, drinking, singing, dancing and, Arthur's favorite, hunting, at Castle Carlisle.

So Arthur and his men were hunting. Arthur saw what he'd not seen since he was a child; a white hart, and albino deer.

"Take chase," he bellowed, and they took chase. Arthur was the fastest of all the horsemen, and he soon left them all behind. He would get just within bowshot distance of the deer, and draw his bow and arrow, when the deer would bound off down a hill and out of sight, and thus she led him deeper and deeper into the forest.

And then he saw her no more. No deer, no men, strange forest. It was cloudy, and Arthur had no idea of north, south, east, west. He started riding in the direction which he thought would take him back to the Castle Carlisle, but the forest, instead of becoming more familiar, became more strange.

Arthur knew he was lost when he found himself looking over a dark and swampy pond. There were dead trees and tree stumps on the shore and in the shallow water all around the outside of the pond. Some of the stumps were in the strangest shapes; there was one (were his eyes fooling him?) on the far side of the pond that looked just like a knight on a horse. And then it was moving; it was a knight, dressed all in black armor, on a black horse, riding around the outside of the pond towards Arthur. As the dark knight approached Arthur, he raised his sword saying, "Prepare to meet your death Arthur. You've stolen all my lands and property; and now I will get them all back."

"Who are you?" asked Arthur.

"I am Sir Gromer."

"Oh, Sir Gromer," said Arthur, "You, a knight, about to kill an unarmed man." For Arthur had left Excaliber back at the Castle Carlisle.

Sir Gromer lowered his sword. "So, Arthur, you are going to play that game. All right, I am a knight, and I will give you a chance to spare your life. I will put a riddle to you. If you agree, on your word as a knight and a king, to meet me here in a year and a day, and if you can tell me on that day the one true answer to the riddle, then your life will be yours. If you cannot give me the one true answer, your head will be mine."

"Agreed," said Arthur, "What is the riddle?"

"The riddle is this: What is it that woman wants more than anything else?"

"What kind of a riddle is that?" asked Arthur.

"A year and a day!" shouted Sir Gromer, as he rode off around the pond and back into the forest.

Somehow Arthur found his way back to his men. When they returned to the Castle Carlisle, Arthur went up to his wife, Queen Guenevere, and, not wanting to worry her, did not tell her about the threat on his life. He said only, "My wife, I met this fellow, a traveling knight, who put the strangest riddle to me: 'What is it that woman wants more than anything else?'"

"Well, what I want more than anything else," answered Queen Guenevere, "is peace and prosperity for all of Britain."

"That's it then," said Arthur. But he thought he would ask one or two more women in the castle just to make sure. The first woman he met in the castle halls was an unmarried maiden, sister to one of the ladies.

"What is it, my dear, that you want more than anything else?" asked Arthur.

"I really can't tell you, my Lord," she answered.

"Oh yes you can, you will tell your King what you want more than anything else."

"Oh, do I really have to tell?"

"Yes, I am ordering you to tell me," he answered.

"What I have always wanted is . . . is . . . to be your queen," and she ran away down the hall.

“Maybe that wasn’t it,” mused Arthur.

And so Arthur wandered the halls of Castle Carlisle asking all of the women the question, even the servants and the scullery maids in the kitchen. And each woman he asked gave a different answer.

Queen Guenevere noticed Arthur going around asking all of the women the question, and so she said to him, “Arthur, if you really want to get the one true answer to this riddle, why don’t you give great blank books to all of your knights. Then, as they go on their quests, adventures and battles all the next year, they can ask any women they come across the riddle, and write all the answers down in the blank books. You are bound to get the answer that way.

So Arthur gave great blank books to all of his knights, and as they went quests, adventures and battles all the next year, they would ask every woman they saw the riddle, and wrote all of the answers into the books.

One knight was crossing a field when he saw a peasant woman hoeing in a field. The knight dismounted and walked up to her: “Woman, what do you want more than anything else?”

The woman threw down her hoe. “What I want,” she started, “is for your King to stop taxing us to death. Just last spring the rain drowned our crops out, and even with a second planting we’ll have barely enough to feed my starving family, let alone pay a percentage of our crops and taxes to you.”

“Thank you very much,” said the knight as he wrote the answer in the book and rode off.

Another knight was riding in another part of the kingdom when he saw three little girls next to a stream. He got off his horse and said, “Little girls, what do you want more than anything in the world?”

“Oh “ said one of the girls, “I want to be a beautiful princess with my dress all woven through with threads of silver and gold.”

“Not me,” said the second, “I want to be a knight with a sword! Whoo! Whoo!” and she swung her imaginary sword about.”

“I’m hot! I want to go swimming,” whined the third.

And so a year and a day passed as if it was just a moment. Arthur went through all the answers in all of the book; not one of them had the ring of truth, but still, it was time for Arthur to meet Sir Gromer.

Arthur packed all the books onto his horse and rode off. When he got to the strange part of the forest where he had first gotten lost, he heard a sound, a high screeching voice: “Aaarrrrthurrrrr.” Arthur could not quite tell from whence came the voice. He tied up his horse and walked about. “Aaaarrrrrthurrr.” Ah, he could see a shape, something red. As he got closer he could see a figure in red sitting on a rock. “Aaaarthurrrrr.”

And then he saw. It was some kind of awful looking creature in a red cloak. It was human, a woman, but so awful and ugly. She had patches of hair here and there on her scabbed head. She had long twisted brown teeth, horse’s teeth; her fingers twisted like the roots of a tree.

“Arthur.”

“How do you know my name?”

“Never mind. I also know that you are going to meet Sir Gromer with so many answers to the riddle he put to you.”

“How do you know that?”

“Never mind. I also know that if you don’t give Sir Gromer the one true answer, that he will take your head.”

“How do you know that?”

“Never mind. I also know that not one of the answers you have in all of those books is the one true answer.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“Never mind. I also know the one true answer.”

“Oh my lady, the one true answer, what is it?”

“*Oh my lady, oh my lady*, and I am going to give you this answer for nothing?”

“Oh no, my lady, I will give you whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want?”

“On my word as a knight and a king, whatever you want.”

“Well then, approach; I will tell you the answer.”

And so King Arthur went up to the loathly lady and she whispered the answer into his ear. Arthur’s heart leaped; he knew at once that this was the answer. Arthur ran for his horse, “Oh my lady thank you so much, you have spared my. . .”

“*Oh my Lady thank you,*” she mocked him, “I give you the answer and now there is nothing for me.”

Arthur stopped, turned, “Oh my lady forgive me, I forgot my part of the bargain. Of course, you may have whatever you want. I will give you gold, riches. . .”

“I want none of your gold and riches. What I want is to be married to your most brave and handsome knight.”

“Oh no, my lady, I could never do that.”

“So much for the word of a knight and a king.”

“Oh, yes, my word, of course, that is what you want, and that is what you will have...wait. . . an answer other than the one you gave me. . .”

“If you find an answer other than the one I gave you that satisfies Sir Gromer, you owe me nothing. But if my answer is the one, you know what you must do.”

So Arthur rode off. When he got to the dark pond, there was Sir Gromer, sitting on his horse, waiting for Arthur.

“So Arthur, do you have an answer?”

“How much time do you have?” asked Arthur.

“Arthur, I have all day.”

So Arthur took out the first of his books and read the first answer. Sir Gromer shook his head no. Arthur kept reading through all of the answers, going from book to book; Gromer just kept shaking his head no. Arthur got to the last

book, he turned to the last page, he read the last answer. Gromer shook his head no, and as Arthur closed the last book, Sir Gromer raised his sword, when Arthur said, "Wait, I have one more answer." Gromer lowered his sword. Arthur said:

"What woman wants most, is to make her own choice."

". . . my sister . . . my sister . . . MY SISTER LADY RAGNELL TOLD YOU THAT! BLAST HER, BLAST HER, A THOUSAND TIMES BLAST HER!" and Sir Gromer rode off in a rage.

Arthur sighed in relief, and then groaned with the thought of what he now must do.

Back at the Castle Carlisle, all the Lords and Ladies were eating and drinking and gossiping when King Arthur returned. As usual, when he was announced, they all turned to see their King as he came in the door. When they saw King Arthur's face, when they saw the way he was walking, they all fell silent. Arthur was silent as well, as he walked through the great hall and into his own chambers. Queen Guenevere followed him in; "My Lord, my husband, my King, what is the matter?"

"I cannot tell you."

"My Lord, if you cannot tell me, your wife and Queen, who can you tell?"

And so he told her: about how the riddle was actually Sir Gromer's threat on his life, about the loathly Lady Ragnell, and about what he now had to do. As he was telling the story, the Lords and Ladies of the castle, who were curious and concerned too, were gathering around the door of his chamber to listen in on the story. When Arthur finished, the married Lords were so grateful to be married, and many of the unmarried Lords were sneaking off, wanting nothing to do with this Lady Ragnell. All but one, Arthur's youngest, kindest, and most brave knight, Sir Gawaine, who went right into Arthur's chamber, bent on one knee and said, "My Lord and King, I will marry the lady."

"Oh no Gawaine, you can't, you don't realize, she is hardly a woman at all, she is. . ."

"My King this is not for me or even for you, this is for Britain. We have no choice."

And so Gawaine and Arthur went off to collect Lady Ragnell, while all the others started preparing for the wedding. They got the cooks cooking, they started laying the tables, gathering the musicians and priest, all the while running to the window, anxious to get a glimpse of this loathly lady.

A cry rang through the castle: "They're coming, they're coming," and they all ran to the windows and the door. Lady Ragnell rode out of the woods and they all groaned as one when they first looked on her ravaged figure. All but Queen Guenevere, who walked out, and escorted Lady Ragnell into the castle, and up to the priest.

And so the priest married Sir Gawaine to Lady Ragnell. After the ceremony the musicians played and the food was laid out. But the Lord's and Ladies had little heart to dance, nor stomach to eat. After some half-hearted nibbles and waltzing, one by one the Lords and Ladies made excuses of fatigue and lateness and left the hall, leaving only King Arthur, Queen Guenevere, Sir Gawaine and Lady Ragnell.

And now it was time for Sir Gawaine and Lady Ragnell to go to their wedding chamber. Queen Guenevere escorted Lady Ragnell to the door, and kissed her goodnight; once on each cheek. King Arthur walked with Sir Gawain to the door of the wedding room and wordlessly hugged him, full of the horror of what Gawaine now had to live, and sleep with.

When Gawaine went into the room there was one candle burning, and Lady Ragnell was already in bed. Gawaine blew out the candle, got into the bed, turned his back to his bride, and prepared to go to sleep, when, out of the darkness, he heard Lady Ragnell's voice: "Gawaine, what about my wedding kiss?"

And so Sir Gawaine turned, and kissed Lady Ragnell.

Suddenly there was some kind of movement in the bed. Gawaine jumped out of the bed and lit a candle. There, sitting on the edge of his bed, was the most beautiful woman.

"Who are you, and where is my wife?" said Gawaine.

"I am your wife, Gawaine. For by agreeing to marry me, by giving me the wedding kiss, you have broken the spell that my brother, Sir Gromer, laid on me years ago, turning me into the beast you brought back from the forest."

"Oh, wonderful." sighed Gawaine.

“But wait, the spell is broken only halfway. For now I will be beautiful by night as you see me now, when we share our wedding bed, and ugly by day when we go out amongst the people; or I will be beautiful by day when we go out amongst the people, and ugly by night when we share our wedding bed. The choice, Gawaine, is yours.”

“Oh no my Lady, the choice is yours.”

“Oh Gawaine . . . Oh Gawaine. By giving that one true answer you have broken the spell forever. For now I will be beautiful by day and by night.”

And so she was. And so Gawaine and Lady Ragnell lived together peacefully, and happily, ever after.

* THE END *

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