

Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady

It was a cold crisp morning in early winter and King Arthur and his knights were out hunting. During the hunt Arthur got separated from his companions and while he was searching for them he came upon a white stag, which looked him squarely in the eye for a moment and then ran off into the forest.

White stags are extremely rare and Arthur knew that they always represented mystery, a doorway into other realms, and so he set off in pursuit of the mysterious creature, determined to follow it into whatever adventure it led. Deeper and deeper into the forest they went, until at last the stag turned to face Arthur and, as it turned, it changed into an enormous, fully armoured knight. With one blow of his steel clad arm he knocked Arthur off his horse, then he put his foot on Arthur's chest, drew his sword and roared, "Arthur, prepare to die!"

"I am not afraid to die," said Arthur, "but you dishonour yourself by striking me in this way, for you are fully armoured and I am only in my hunting clothes. I will fight with you if that is what you want, but let me return to my castle and get my armour and then we will have a fair fight."

"I will spare you on one condition," growled the knight, "and it is this: That you promise to return here in a year and a day with the answer to the question, 'What is it that women desire most of all?' If you fail to bring me the right answer, I will strike off your head. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Arthur.

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Without another word, the knight grunted and disappeared into the forest. Arthur rode back to his castle where he told of his adventure and of his intention to spend the next year riding through the kingdom, searching for the answer to the question. There was a moment of silence as people took in the news, but then Sir Gawain, one of his knights, stepped forward and said, "My lord, let me ride with you."

Without delay Arthur and Gawain set out on their quest and everywhere they went they asked the people what women desire most of all. "Good sex!" said some with a wink. "Money," said the cynics. "Fine clothes," said others. "And more fine clothes," groaned some of the husbands. "A new husband," sighed some of the women. It seemed that everyone they asked had something different to say and they wrote all the answers they received down on a long list, hoping that amongst them would be the right one.

As the year drew to a close, they rode to meet the knight but their hearts were heavy, for deep inside themselves they knew they did not have the right answer. As they were riding through the forest they came to a little cross-roads and beside it sat the most hideous old woman that ever lived. Her hair was matted into great lumps; her scaly skin was covered in weeping sores; her eyes were little red dots sunk deep into her face; her mouth was like a gash across her face and out of it stuck not teeth but yellow tusks; her hands were like claws and she smelled so bad that the horses shied away from her.

"Where are you off to, my pretty boys?" she wheezed in a voice like fingernails on a blackboard.

Arthur reined in his horse. "Well, er, madam, we are on a quest."

"Oooo, quest eh?" chortled the hag. "From what I hear, you haven't been very successful!"

"What do you mean? We have collected many, many answers to the question."

"I don't care how many answers you've got," spat the hag, "they won't do you much good if you haven't got the right one!"


Arthur's heart beat faster. "Madam, if you know that, do you then also

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know the right answer?"

"Oooo, yes, I know."

"Then for the love of God tell us and I will reward you with as much gold as you want."


"It's not gold I want. I will only tell you the answer if one of your knights.....," she paused teasingly, piggy eyes icking from one to the other, "promises to marry me!"


"Madam," said Arthur uncomfortably, "I don't wish to be rude, but I couldn't possibly ask one of my knights to marry you."

"Off you go then! Lose your head! See if I care!"

Arthur was about to ride on but Gawain said, "My lord, wait! If this lady will give us the answer to the question, then I myself will marry her."

"For God's sake, Gawain," said Arthur turning towards him, "think what you're saying!"

"If she will give us the answer," repeated Gawain firmly, "I will marry her."

"Ooooooo, good," gurgled the hag. "I like you Gawain, you're a pretty boy!" And then she told them the answer to the question, but they did not write it down on the list, in the hope that the knight would be satisfied  with one of the answers they already had, and therefore that Gawain would not have to marry the hag.

When they reached the meeting place they found the knight sharpening a great axe as he waited for them. Arthur gave him the list and he read through it. When he had read the last answer he roared, "Arthur, prepare to die! The answer is not here!"

Gawain stepped forward and said, "Wait! We have one more answer and it is this: What women desire most of all is power over their own lives."

A look of fury clouded the knight's face. "That's the right answer!" he snarled and stormed off into the forest.

"Told you," crowed the hag. "Come on Gawain, let's go and be married!"

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Arthur, Gawain and the hag returned to the court. Everyone was overjoyed to see the two knights after their long absence, but they were also rather surprised at the strange creature they had with them. When the people learned that Gawain was to marry the hag, a silence fell over the court, and everyone went into mourning for the poor man's wretched fate. But a promise is a promise, and Gawain and the hag were married.

That night, after a cheerless wedding feast, the newlyweds went to their room. Snuffing and grunting like an asthmatic boar, the hag slipped into bed. Unable to bring himself to go near her, Gawain paced back and forth on the far side of the room. At last she peeped up from under the covers, "Gawainy," she wheezed, saliva dripping from her lipless mouth, "this must be a true marriage. Come over here and kiss me!"

Gawain took a deep breath, walked over to the bed, closed his eyes, bent over and kissed the hag.

"There," said a gentle voice, "that wasn't so bad was it?" Gawain opened his eyes and lying in the bed was the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen! "With that kiss you have broken the spell that bound me," she said. "Or at least half of it, for I can only keep this shape for half of every day. So now you must choose. Do you want me to be beautiful during the day and do you honour about the court in front of your friends, but ugly at night when there's just you and me? Or do you want me to be ugly during the day, but beautiful at night when we are alone together?"

Gawain thought for a moment and then he said, "Lady, I leave the choice up to you."

At that she smiled and said, "That is the right answer. With it you have broken the second part of the spell, and now I shall be my beautiful self, all of the time."