

Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle

anon

a Middle English verse narrative in the Arthurian tradition

Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by
Richard Scott-Robinson

This tale has been translated and retold from: Thomas Hahn (Ed), 1995. *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. The story is taken from a unique copy in Porkington MS 10 in the National Library of Wales.

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richardsr@hotmail.co.uk



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late fourteenth century

Lystonnyth, lordyngus, a lyttyll stonde · of on that was sekor and sounde · and doughgy in his dede · He was Las meke as mayde in bour · and therto styfe in every stour · was non so doughtty in dede – Listen my lords and noblemen, for a moment, and hear of a knight who was trustworthy, reliable and accomplished in battle, magnificent at arms, invincible in warfare and as gentle as a maiden! There was none more able to achieve his aims through strength and courage than he, and he had tested himself in the thick of battle in many far flung lands. This knight sat with King Arthur at the Round Table, as we read in romance, and his name was Sir Gawain.

Sir Gawain was renowned in Britain for his strength and valour; for Scotland and England were given this name then, the Isle of Britain, if our stories are told correctly. Wales was an angle of that isle and here King Arthur stayed at Cardiff once, with many gentle knights, all looking forward to some fine hunting. Sensing the mood of his knights and seizing the moment, King Arthur said to his noblemen: ‘Let’s hear a Mass. Bishop Baldwin shall take it. Then we shall go out into the forest to hunt the deer, for the stags have been feeding on the grass all summer and it is time for us to go and disturb their peace!’

Sir Marrock was overjoyed to hear this and so was Sir Kay Caradoc and many others as well. Sir Lancelot was delighted at the news and so were Sir Percival, Sir Launfal, Sir Yvain and the sturdy King Lot. Sir Gadiffer was very pleased, and Sir Galleron, Sir Constantine and Sir Reinbrun, and also the Green Knight. Everybody was pleased to hear it.

Sir Gawain was King Arthur’s steward and he exercised his authority at once by urging them all to get ready, since he outranked them. Then Sir Engles, that gentle knight, brought out hounds that were skilled and accomplished, and the King’s uncle Sir Mordred led out a noble contingent, as we read in romance. The Fair Unknown was there, intent upon bringing down the brown deer, along with many respected noblemen, including Sir Pettypace of Winchelsea, who was a fine knight upon a steed.



Sir Grandon and Sir Fair Unknown rode behind the hounds, crying out instructions to the animals. Sir Brandles and Sir Ironside rode alongside them, with many a strong warrior and many a swift horse.

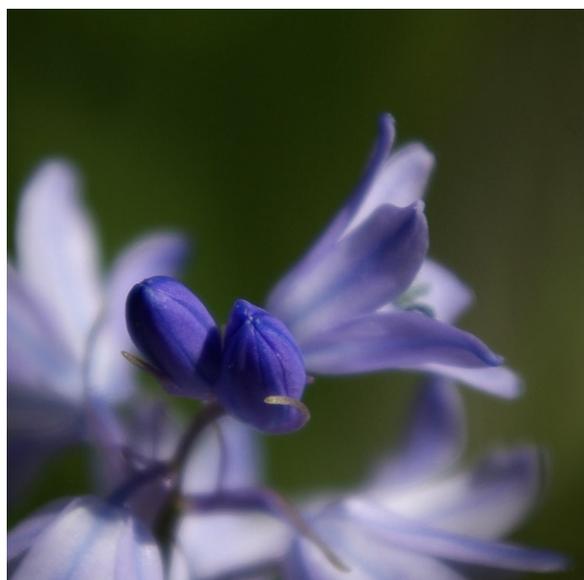
Speaking of Sir Ironside, I believe that he fathered the Green Knight upon a beautiful lady from the White Land, in a room as I understand it, and it is said that he wore full armour even when the summer sun was at its hottest, and in the depths of winter as well, for he and giants were always at war. His horse and his armour were both of the finest quality and he bore a shield of azure against a golden griffin and fleurs-de-lys. He knew more about hunting and about war than any king that was there and he often put these skills to the test. He had killed burning dragons and many wild bulls – animals with savage reputations! – and conquered some fine noblemen in battle. No hardier knight could be

found anywhere, nor more bold. And for these reasons he was called the King's Companion and was mentioned alongside all the worthy knights. The crest upon his helmet was of a golden lion and when he spoke, his words were worth listening to. Wherever he went, he declined no opportunity to fight, be it with man or with beast.

King Arthur's knights rode keenly onwards and the king followed behind, with many others – five hundred or more I believe. Archers were in attendance with their feathered arrows to bring down the fallow deer. Noblemen blew their hunting horns as the game began to gallop in a broad line across the forest, both hinds and stags. By the middle of the morning, five hundred carcasses lay in a forest clearing, spread out beneath some lime trees. Sir Gawain, Sir Kay and Bishop Baldwin chased after a reindeer. They rode after it from the middle of the morning until late in the afternoon and the animal did not stop once but led them at last onto an open moor where, as the air began to cool, a mist started to develop. Back in the Welsh forest the noblemen blew loudly upon their horns to signal the end of the day's sport. But Sir Kay was in a bad temper. The reindeer they were chasing had not rested for a moment, and listen to what happened next! In thick woodland again, they found themselves in great need of somewhere warm and dry to spend the night.

'All our labour has been in vain,' complained Sir Gawain. 'Believe me, I know it! The deer has vanished. We will see no more of him tonight! Noblemen, listen to me. I suggest that we dismount here and spend the hours of darkness in the forest, under this large tree.'

'We shall ride on,' replied Sir Kay arrogantly, 'and find somewhere to lodge for the night. Let no man dare suggest that we can't.'



'I know of a place not far from here,' suggested the bishop. 'A carle lives in a castle – the Carle of Carlisle is his name. He will put us up for the night. And by Saint James, there has never been so bold a knight that he did not think it an evil refuge! His guests receive a severe beating, I have heard, and if they escape with their lives it is only through God's blessing. Let's all three of us go there!'

'I agree,' announced Sir Kay enthusiastically. 'Let's do as you suggest. However powerful this carle thinks he is, I count him to be not worth a hair. We can beat the shit out of him! He will get nothing from us but a strong compulsion to flee from his own castle. As he brews, so shall he drink!'

'By my hope of heaven!' replied Sir Gawain in exasperation. 'I shall not forcefully impose myself upon anybody, however much it may be to my advantage to do so, if fair words will persuade the lord of this castle to accommodate me willingly instead. Sir Kay, stop this arrogant talk! Your aim is always to make mischief. I will ask the Carle courteously for some food and a roof over our heads until morning.'

So they rode quickly towards this castle until they arrived at the outer gate. Looking for a means to call the porter, they saw a hammer hanging from a chain. Sir Kay seized this hammer and began knocking with such force that the chain nearly broke. A porter silently appeared, saw them mounted there and

A late-Medieval cycle of Middle English stories concerning Sir Gawain includes the famous Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and a small number of lesser-known works, one of which is found in Porkington MS 10 in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, dating to c. 1400. Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle bears many similarities to its more famous cousin, and, in a later version of this story, one found in the seventeenth century Percy Manuscript, it includes a beheading scene. But although the story in Porkington MS 10 omits this episode, given the differing approach to a similar theme in its story of Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle, it is perhaps understandable that this scene is considered superfluous and is not copied just for the sake of it.

asked what they wanted.

‘We beseech the lord of this fine castle to give us shelter for the night,’ replied Sir Gawain, courteously.

‘I shall convey your message willingly,’ said the porter. ‘But if this request brings down harm upon you, don’t blame me. You are all fine-looking gentlemen but my master doesn’t do courtesy. You will leave this place the victims of an assault, be sure of that!’

‘Shed no tears for us, you scoundrel!’ shouted back Sir Kay. ‘Isn’t it obvious that we can travel no further in this mist and rain tonight? Cease your joking and take this message at once, or we will tear down these gates by force!’

‘There are no three knights alive who could do that!’ countered the porter. ‘If my master could hear you now, some of you would soon be dead, or fleeing for your lives! I’m sorry you’ve come here, and you will be too, before you leave.’

The porter disappeared into the castle and found his powerful and mighty lord in the hall. ‘Carle of Carlisle!’ he cried. ‘May God protect you! There are three men at the gate, magnificently dressed and armed. Two are Knights of the Round Table, they say, and one is a bishop. Only these three, no more.’

‘By Saint Michael!’ cried the Carle. ‘This is good news. Let them in.’

Bishop Baldwin and the two knights were brought into the hall where they were shocked and surprised to see four wild animals lying on the floor around the fire. One was a great bull, another a boar, there was a lion with some ferocious teeth and a huge bear, unchained. These four lay around the fire in front of the seated Carle, but when Sir Gawain, Sir Kay and Bishop Baldwin entered, they sprang to their feet and approached the men menacingly. But the Carle cried out: ‘Lie down! Lie down my four whelps!’ The lion stared angrily at the visitors with eyes like coals, the bear growled, the bull snorted and the boar whetted his tusks ferociously against the stone flags of the floor.

‘Lie still I say! Stay back!’ repeated the Carle.

The four beasts fell down at once onto their haunches and crept beneath a table, terrified of the Carle’s stern command. Sir Kay was quick to notice this.

The Carle stared at his visitors with a fierce and unwavering gaze. He had broad cheeks, an enormous face and a nose to match. His beard was grey and his hair hung loose about his chest. This Carle was two yards across at the shoulders – much to Sir Kay’s concern! – and nine tailor’s yards in height! When he stood up, there was no pillar supporting the roof of the hall that was thicker than his thighs! His hands were huge, with fingers as large as a man’s legs. I can safely swear that anyone who could withstand a blow from this man would not be deemed a weakling!

Sir Gawain knelt down before the Carle but the giant asked him to stand up again. ‘Stop this kneeling, gentle knight,’ he said. ‘You lodge with no nobleman tonight, I swear by Saint John. You shall receive no courtesy except ruffians courtesy here, so save me God. I have no other sort to offer.’ Then he gave instructions for wine to be brought. It appeared in golden goblets that shone like the sun and each goblet held four gallons of wine! But he sent his own goblet back again, asking for a larger vessel. ‘What use is this little cup to me?’ he complained. ‘It is too small even when I sit by myself beside the fire. Bring me a greater bowl of wine. Then let us drink together and have a game before we go to supper.’

The butler brought another goblet that held nine gallons and gave it to the Carle. Nine gallons it held!



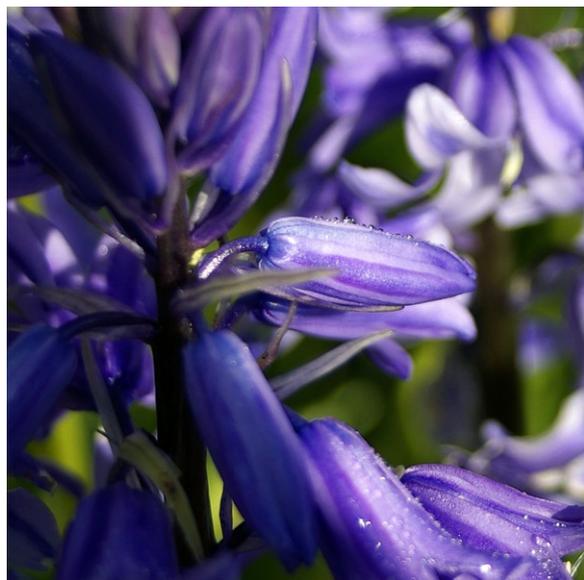
The Carle was not weak, holding it in only one hand as he sat there. The knights drank some wine and then went out to see to their horses. Bishop Baldwin went first. The steeds had already been given hay and corn to eat and the bishop found his eating hay beside an enormous foal at a hayrack. The bishop drove this young colt away with a slap on its behind.

‘You shall not share your meal with my palfrey, while I am a bishop in these parts!’ he declared.

The Carle rushed out and saw his young horse driven from its fodder. ‘Who has done this?’ he asked.

‘I,’ replied the bishop.

‘Then you, too, shall have a slap, from me, so save me God!



‘But I am a clergyman!’

‘And yet you show little courtesy, I swear!’ rebuked the giant and gave the bishop such a slap with his great hand that the bishop fell heavily to the ground and lay there unconscious, not moving a muscle.

Sir Kay came in next to see to his horse and found it munching away beside the Carle’s enormous colt. Sir Kay drove the animal out through the stable door with a sharp clout on its backside. The Carle saw this and gave Sir Kay such a heavy blow with his fist that it laid him out cold, next to the bishop.

‘Ignorant knights!’ muttered the Carle. ‘I shall teach you some of my courtesy before you go.’

Sir Kay and Bishop Baldwin, those worthy gentlemen, soon recovered their senses, picked themselves up from the floor and went back into the hall. Sir Gawain asked them where they had been.

‘Seeing to our horses, much to our misfortune,’ they replied.

Sir Gawain addressed the Carle. ‘Sir, by your leave, I would like to do the same.’

The Carle guessed what Sir Gawain might do.

It was turning into a wild night outside and any creature could count itself lucky if it had found warmth and shelter from the driving rain and the wind that was now howling. The Carle’s young horse was still standing outside the stable in the pouring rain. Sir Gawain led it back into the dry, but it was soaking wet, so he placed his green hunting cloak over the colt’s back as a horse blanket.

‘Stand here, foal, and eat your hay,’ said Sir Gawain. ‘This is all your master’s property that we consume, while we are here.’

The Carle was standing nearby and thanked Sir Gawain for his courtesy, many times I believe.

By now, supper was ready and boards were quickly laid upon trestles and covered with cloths. There was no pause for any formality. Bishop Baldwin fell upon his food without a second thought. Sir Kay sat on the opposite side of the table, beside the Carle’s wife, who was surprisingly pale and beautiful. Her arms were small, her waist slender, her eyes grey and her eyebrows pleasingly arched. And for courtesy she scored ten out of ten as well. She had round cheeks, a healthy complexion and indeed, no fairer woman might be found on Earth, and none prettier, if the truth be told. She was very attractive, and her clothes were of the finest quality.

‘Alas!’ thought Sir Kay. ‘That such a lovely lady as this should be shackled to such a fiend!’

‘Sit still and eat your meal,’ said the Carle, perceptively. ‘You are thinking more than you dare reveal, I would say.’

Nobody had invited Sir Gawain to sit at the table yet, so he remained standing there on the floor of the hall. ‘Fellow!’ the Carle called over to him. ‘I want you to do something for me. Take a spear in your hands, go and stand over there by the door that leads into the buttery and cast the weapon at my face. Do as I command! Even if the force of the blow knocks me against the wall it will not hurt me, while I am a giant in this land!’

Sir Gawain was quite pleased with this invitation, went over to the door to the buttery and lifted a great spear in his hand. The Carle turned his head down to face the knight and Sir Gawain threw the weapon accurately with all his might, with all the ferocity that he could muster. The spear shattered into pieces against the wall behind the Carle, spitting out sparks from the stone as though from a flint.

‘Gentle knight, you have done well,’ said the Carle at once, and he took Sir Gawain by the hand and led him to a chair that had been set for him at the table. This worthy British knight was placed opposite the Carle’s wife and Sir Gawain at once became so enraptured by her beauty that for the entire meal he ate and drank nothing.

‘Take comfort, Gawain,’ said the Carle at last. ‘Sin is sweet, I can see. But she is mine. Your desire is pointless, I can assure you. Leave such thoughts alone and drink your wine. You will not get her.’



Sir Gawain’s face went bright red and he was overcome with shame.

The Carle’s daughter was fetched. She was a fair and pretty girl, her hair shone like gold thread and the clothes she wore must have cost a thousand pounds or more. The material of her dress was decorated with emeralds and sapphires sewn into a rich fabric, a beautiful fretwork of precious stones and pearls. She made a beautiful sight! The entire hall was lit up as though from a sunbeam by her presence and by the flashes of light from the gems.

‘Where is your harp?’ the Carle asked his daughter, censoriously. ‘Why have you not brought it with you?’

The harp was called for and brought into the hall, along with a lovely chair, which was placed in front of the girl’s father. The instrument was made of the finest maple wood and the tuning pins were of gold, without any word of a lie. First the Carle’s daughter harped a melody and then she sang a lai about love and the exploits of King Arthur. How beautifully the words and the music complemented one another! When they had finished the meal, they were all very happy and relaxed. Bishop Baldwin and Sir Kay were led to their bedchamber and Sir Gawain, without any word of a lie, was taken to the Carle’s large, and splendid, private room. The Carle urged him to get ready for bed and had a couch prepared that was draped with cloth-of-gold. And when all was ready, the Carle told his beautiful wife to get into it. A squire appeared and helped Sir Gawain to remove all of his armour and to undress.

‘Sir Gawain. Take my wife into your arms and kiss her, now, while I watch,’ insisted the Carle.

‘Sir, your bidding shall be done, have no fear!’ replied Sir Gawain.

Come what may, Sir Gawain quickly pulled back the sheets and, as he felt the softness of the lady in his arms he gave full rein to his desires, as the Carle had invited him to do. But when their lovemaking looked like getting very intimate indeed, the Carle shouted: ‘Whoa there! That game is not allowed!’

But since you have done as I asked, I must give you something in return, something that lies within my power to give. You shall have a woman who is just as beautiful as the one you hold now, and who can play with you all night long, until morning breaks.'

The Carle went to his daughter's chamber and urged her to get up and go to the knight, and to let him do with her as he liked. She dared not go against her father's wishes but went straight away to Sir Gawain and lay down beside him.

'Now Gawain,' said the Carle. 'Do you think yourself well-rewarded?'

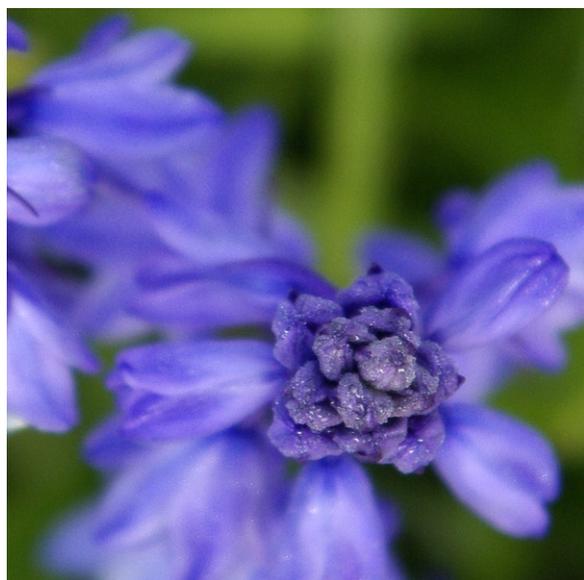
'Yes, I certainly do!' replied Sir Gawain. 'I could ask for nothing better.'

'Now,' said the Carle. 'I will go to my chamber. My blessing upon you both. You can make love together all night if you wish.'

Sir Gawain was very happy with this maiden. He liked the way things had worked out, I have to tell you, and so did the Carle's daughter, I'm sure. 'Mercy, sweet Mary!' thought this beautiful damsel. 'There has never been such a knight as this in our castle!'

Sir Kay arose the following morning and went to fetch his horse, looking to make an early start, but Bishop Baldwin said: 'No, Sir Kay, we cannot begin our journey back until we have seen Sir Gawain.'

The Carle arose, found everything as he wanted it and a meal being readied on the table. They rang a bell for Mass. Sir Gawain heard it, got dressed and kissed the beautiful damsel he had shared a bed with all night. 'Mercy, sweet Mary!' she said. 'When shall I see you again?'



When the Mass was completed Sir Gawain asked permission to set off, and thanked the Carle for his hospitality.

'First you shall eat,' insisted the Carle. 'And afterwards, you may depart with my blessing, you and your companions. Twenty winters have passed now, since I made a vow before God, one that has brought me much discredit. I made a pledge that no man should spend the night in my castle unless he did everything I asked him to do, or else he should be slain. Knight, page, earl or squire, I have never found a single man able to survive this pledge, except for you. May God reward you! I am delighted! Through the grace of Mary, Queen of Heaven, my sorrow is turned to joy!'

The Carle led Sir Gawain into a deserted building and inside lay a great pile of dead men's bones. The ground was stained with their blood. Hanging from beams were a large number of blood-stained tunics emblazoned with heraldic devices of every kind. It was a grisly sight.

'I did all this,' confessed the Carle. 'I and my four animals. But now I will abandon these wicked customs. No more men shall be killed in my castle, Sir Gawain. For your sake, all men from now on will be welcome here, if they come in peace. And for all these men who lie here slain I shall build a church and provide for ten priests to sing prayers for their souls until Doomsday.'

By now breakfast was ready. Tables tops were lifted onto trestles and covered with clean cloths. Sir Gawain and his fair damsel were served together, wrapped in each other's conversation and with eyes

only for one another, much to the Carle's approval. He urged Sir Kay and Bishop Baldwin to be merry as well. And the Carle gave to the bishop a cross, a mitre, a ring and a cloth-of-gold, I believe. And to the belligerent knight Sir Kay, he gave a swift and powerful warhorse that was blood-red in colour, the like of which Sir Kay had never seen before. And to Sir Gawain, in all truth, he gave his own daughter, a white riding horse and a packhorse laden with gold! The Carle's daughter was so beautiful and so well-dressed that I cannot begin to describe how she looked. This damsel was the most beautiful young lady ever to have stood upon the Earth.

'Ride on your way, Sir Gawain, with my blessing,' said the Carle. 'Greet your lord, King Arthur, for me and ask, for the love of Christ who was born in Bethlehem, that he come to dine with me tomorrow morning.'

'Certainly, I shall do this' said Sir Gawain.

Then they rode away, singing merrily together – Bishop Baldwin, Sir Kay, Sir Gawain and the Carle's beautiful daughter, seated upon her palfrey. When they caught up with King Arthur they described everything that had happened to them and all the wonders that they had seen with their own eyes.

'Thank God, Gawain, that you have escaped with your life!' exclaimed King Arthur when he heard all about it.

'And me!' exclaimed Sir Kay. 'Thank God that I'm alright as well! And the Carle asks if you will dine with him tomorrow, for the sake of Christ who was born in Bethlehem.'

King Arthur said that indeed he would, and a message was conveyed accordingly. So the next day, at dawn, he rode out with a magnificent entourage of knights and noblemen. At the gate of the Carle's castle they were met with the sound of trumpets and silver clarions crying out a royal fanfare; harps, fiddles and all sorts of stringed instruments were playing, and knights came out to lead King Arthur into the Carle's hall. The Carle knelt upon his knee and welcomed the king with complements and fitting words. Nothing was lacking, I can tell you. The walls of the Carle's hall shone like glass – the wallys glemyd as any glasse · wyth dyapir colour wrought his was · of golde, asure and byse – and sparkled in many colours; in azure blue, grey and gold, like the crystal spheres, or like the shining sun in a clear blue sky! Secluded areas were all around the hall, canopied over, and there were pinnacles and embellishments of gold that are impossible to describe. Another fanfare of trumpets announced that the meal was ready to serve. King Arthur called for grace to be said and then sat at the table and was served immediately. Swans, pheasants, cranes, partridge, plover, duck: all were set before King Arthur.

'Enjoy yourself!' said the Carle to the king. 'This is all the courtesy you are likely to get from me!'

Gold bowls were immediately brought to the table and they were so heavy that no knight sitting at his meal was able to lift a single one of them. 'By Saint Michael!' swore the king. 'This is the best banquet that I have ever sat down to!'

The following morning King Arthur dubbed the Carle of Carlisle a knight and gave him all the countryside around Carlisle to be lord over. 'Here on this morning I make you a Knight of the Round Table,' he declared. 'Carlisle shall be your name.'

And on that very same morning, as soon as it was light, Sir Gawain married the Carle's beautiful daughter. The Carle was very happy at the way things had turned out, I can assure you! He thanked the king many times. The feasting lasted for a fortnight, with laughter and entertainment. The minstrels



were given many fine gifts for their services. They were rewarded well for the quality of their lais and when the feasting was brought to an end, the lords and noblemen all took their leave of Sir Carlisle and set off homewards.

Sir Carlisle caused a great abbey to be built, to sing chants and services in praise of God and to the honour of the Virgin Mary. In the town of merry Carlisle he ordered this to be constructed, out of the finest stone. And he arranged for grey monks to do observances until Doomsday, as I have been told, for all the men whom he had killed. It is now a cathedral and a bishop's see. Jesus Christ, bring us to the Joy of Heaven, that is Your see.

Amen.