

THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

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TELL ME A STORY: SIR GAWAIN AND THE LOATHLY LADY (AN ENGLISH TALE)

Tell Me a Story is a series of tales, adapted by Amy Friedman and illustrated by Jillian Gilliland, that are suitable for children to read with their parents, friends or alone.

One evening, King Arthur's court gathered in the great hall at Carlisle. The knights and ladies waited in silence. No one dared taste a bit of the feast before them, for King Arthur had decreed that he would not break his fast until he had completed a great task.

Suddenly the court heard the clattering of hooves outside. A moment later, the doors of the great hall burst open and a lady dressed in glowing crimson, riding a stately mare, galloped into the hall. "I seek King Arthur," she said. "I am in dire need of his help."

"I am Arthur," answered the king. "And if I have the power, I shall grant any request you make of me."

The lady bowed her head and said: "I am Lady Modren. My husband is held captive by the Black Knight. Only King Arthur can save my husband. Will you come with me?"

Arthur rose from his chair. "I will come, lady," he said.

"My lord, no!" Sir Gawain cried. Gawain was Arthur's nephew, the most loyal and beloved of all the knights. "Please let me come with you. If you need help, I will be there."

Arthur granted his nephew's request; then he and Gawain rode out with the crimson lady into the forest.

After traveling for three days, they came to a gray castle nearly surrounded by black, swirling water. The castle's drawbridge rose. Arthur and Gawain saw a tall knight dressed in black armor standing in the entryway.

At the sight of Arthur and Gawain, the Black Knight began to laugh. The sound echoed on the dark lake. "Well done, wife," he said. "You have brought me the king. Prepare to die, Arthur! My sorcery will end your life."

Arthur and Gawain turned to look at Lady Modren. The crimson lady laughed too. "The Black Knight is my husband, Gromer Somer Joure," she said. "He is master of this place, and now he is master of you!"

Gawain felt a chill run down his spine. "Sir," he said, "sorcery is no weapon for a noble knight. Meet me with your sword."

"I do not need sorcery," Gromer cried. "My wits are enough. Listen, I shall give you a riddle to solve. Return here in a year and a day with the correct answer and I will spare your life. But if you fail, I will take your head in payment, Arthur. Now listen closely; this is the riddle: "What is it that women most desire?"

Arthur and Gawain turned and rode away into the forest. They looked back and saw a thick mist rising from the lake, hiding the castle from view.

For all of that year, Arthur and Gawain rode through England asking everyone they met, rich and poor, old and young, what it was women most desired. Some said women wanted man; some said women wanted children; some said women wanted idleness; some said women wanted work. But none of the answers seemed right.

At last the year ended. Arthur and Gawain turned sadly to ride back to their meeting with the Black Knight. They had stopped to let their horses graze in a clearing just beyond the dark, deep lake when suddenly, from behind the trees, they heard a voice calling out to them. "I know the answer Gromer seeks," it said.

They looked up as a lady covered in a thick veil stepped from behind the trees. "Arthur," she said, "if you promise me your knight's hand in marriage, I will give you the answer you seek." She lifted her veil, and Arthur gasped.

The woman had a balding head plastered with bits of wispy gray hair. Her skin was covered with purple warts, and her eyes seemed but empty sockets. She smelled of mold and cackled monstrosly. Then she whispered to Arthur the answer to the riddle "Now, Arthur, take me up behind you and let us ride to Gromer Somer Joure," she said.

"No," Arthur cried. "I cannot ask my knight to marry you."

But Gawain leaned forward and pulled her up onto his own horse. "Let us be off," he cried.

As they approached the castle, they saw the Black Knight standing, just as the year before, at his gate. The crimson lady leaned out of the tower, a mocking smile on her face.

King Arthur sat straight upon his horse. With a heavy heart he looked up at the Black Knight. "Sir," he said sadly, "the greatest desire of women is to rule over men."

Lady Modren screamed. The Black Knight's face grew as dark as his armor and, without another word, he turned and rode into his castle. Arthur and Gawain watched as once again a thick mist rose and the castle vanished.

Now the lady behind Gawain laughed. "Our bargain is accomplished, Arthur. Let us return for the wedding."

"Anything but that!" Arthur cried "I shall give you land and gold, but not my nephew. He is the joy of my heart."

"My lord," Gawain said softly, "this damsel has saved your life. I must be honorable. Let our marriage be proclaimed." And with that he turned his horse and rode back to Carlisle.

Word spread quickly through the court that the gracious Gawain was to take a wife. Everyone came running to offer garlands to the bride. But when they saw the woman, they dropped their flowers at their feet.

"Come, there is to be a wedding," Gawain cried, and at last Arthur arranged for the wedding to be held.

The wedding was silent and sorrowful. Only the bride was full of cheer. As evening fell, she turned to Gawain and said, "Husband, let us go to our chambers."

Gawain rose and gave her his arm. When they reached their room, she said, "Now that we are married, will you kiss your wife?"

Gawain looked down at her. In her eyes he saw pain and sadness, and feeling deep tenderness for her, he kissed her.

The lady shuddered, and her warty skin dropped away. A moment later, a lovely woman with skin as pale as the dawn and clear, dark eyes that shone with love stood before the stunned Gawain.

"My husband," she cried. "I am Lady Ragnell. My sister, Lady Modren, and her evil husband, Lord Gromer, cast a spell on me and told me I would never find a true knight to love me. But you have broken the spell. Now I am my true self."

She took Gawain's hand. "And now I have one more request to make of you. I cannot always keep this form in which you see me. Do you wish me to be my true self when we are alone in our chambers or when we are among people?"

Gawain's heart swelled with love. "My dearest," he said, "whatever you wish, I will accept. You are the one who suffers."

At that, Gawain's bride glowed with joy. "Oh, Gawain, my sister said if I found a man who pitied me I could regain part of my former self. But she said I would never find a knight who would give me the power to make my own choice. Now you have broken the spell completely!"

From that day on, Sir Gawain and Lady Ragnell lived together in great happiness. ILLUSTRATION: Drawing

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