

## **Part 1**

The poem opens with a mythological account of Britain's founding. After the fall of Troy, we are told, various heroes left to build cities. Romulus founded Rome, Ticius founded Tuscany, and Brutus founded Britain. The author introduces Britain's greatest leader, the legendary King Arthur. This brief introduction ends with the poet telling us he will relate a story he heard told in a hall about a great Arthurian adventure.

The story begins at Christmastime at King Arthur's court in Camelot. The knights of the Round Table join Arthur in the holiday celebrations, and Queen Guinevere presides in their midst. The lords and ladies of Camelot have been feasting for fifteen days, and now it is New Year's Day. Everyone participates in New Year's games, exchanging gifts and kisses. When the evening's feast is about to be served, Arthur introduces a new game: he refuses to eat his dinner until he has heard a marvelous story.

While the lords and ladies feast, with Arthur's nephew Gawain and Guinevere sitting together in the place of privilege at the high table, Arthur continues to wait for his marvel. As if in answer to Arthur's request, an unknown knight suddenly enters the hall on horseback. The gigantic knight has a beautiful face and figure. Every piece of his elaborate costume is green, with flourishes of gold embossing. His huge horse is green, and his green hair and beard are woven together with gold thread. He holds a holly bob in one hand and a huge green and gold axe in the other.

Without introducing himself, the knight demands to see the person in charge. His question meets dead silence—the stunned lords and ladies stare at him silently, waiting for Arthur to respond. Arthur steps forward, inviting the knight to join the feast and tell his tale after he has dismounted from his horse. The knight refuses the invitation, remaining mounted and explaining that he has come to inspect Arthur's court because he has heard so much about its superior knights. He claims to come in peace, but he demands to be indulged in a game. Arthur assumes the knight refers to some kind of combat and promises him a fight. However, the knight explains that he has no interest in fighting with such young and puny knights. Instead, he wants to play a game in which someone will strike him with his own axe, on the understanding that he gets to return the blow in exactly a year and a day.

The strange conditions of the game shock the court into silence once again. The Green Knight begins to question the reputation of Arthur's followers, claiming that their failure to respond proves them cowards. Arthur blushes and steps forth defend his court, but just as he begins to swing the giant axe at the unfazed Green Knight, Gawain stands up and requests that he be allowed to take the challenge himself. The king agrees, and Gawain recites the terms of the game to show the Green Knight that he understands the pact he has undertaken. The Green Knight dismounts and bends down toward the ground, exposing his neck. Gawain lifts the axe, and in one stroke he severs the Green Knight's head. Blood spurts from the wound, and the head rolls around the room, passing by the feet of many of the guests. However, the Green Knight does not fall from his horse. He reaches down, picks up the head, and holds it before him, pointing it toward the high table. The head speaks, reiterating the terms of Gawain's promise. The Green Knight rides out of the hall, sparks flying from his horse's hooves. Arthur and Gawain decide to hang the axe above the main dais. They then return to their feast and the continuing festivities.

## **Part 2**

Part 2 begins with a brief summary of the New Year's feast in Part 1. The poet calls the Green Knight's game with Gawain King Arthur's New Year's gift, since it provided him with the marvelous story he had waited to hear. The poet describes in elaborate language the change of

seasons, from Christmas to the cold season of Lent with its ritual fasting, to a green young spring and summer, then into harvest time, and finally back to winter. In late autumn, on the Day of All Saints, the knights of Camelot prepare to send a mournful Gawain off on his quest for the Green Chapel.

Worried but resigned, Gawain calls for his armor, which the poet describes in great detail. He devotes space to each and every piece, down to the shimmering skirts on Gawain's horse, Gringolet. The description lingers on Gawain's shield, which depicts on its outside a gold five-pointed star, or pentangle, on a red background. On the inside of the shield is the face of Mary, Christ's mother. Each of the five points of the pentangle, which is described as an "endless knot" (630), represents a set of Gawain's virtues: his five senses; his five fingers; his fidelity, founded on the five wounds of Christ; his force, founded on the five joys of Mary; and the five knightly virtues.

After dressing, Gawain says goodbye to his friends and leaves the court. Sparks fly from Gringolet's hooves as they ride off. He heads out into the wilderness, traveling through North Wales and the west coast of England in his search for the mysterious Green Chapel. He encounters various foes—wolves and dragons, bulls and bears, boars and giants—but always prevails over his enemies. He sleeps in his armor and has frequent nightmares. As the winter grows colder, he nearly freezes to death.

Finally, on Christmas Eve, the desperate Gawain prays to the Virgin Mary that he might find a place to attend Christmas Mass. He repents his sins, crosses himself three times, and, when he looks up, he sees a beautiful castle. Surrounded by a green park and a moat, the castle shimmers in the distance through the trees, and Gawain, full of thanks to God for saving him, approaches the drawbridge. The castle is so white and its crowns and turrets so tall and intricately carved that the whole building looks as if it were cut out of paper. Gawain salutes, and a guardian allows him to enter.

The porter welcomes Gawain warmly, inviting him in to meet the courtiers and the lord of the castle. The host's lords and ladies repeatedly express their joy that Gawain (a minor celebrity because he is Arthur's nephew and a knight of the Round Table) can show them the latest in knightly behavior and help them to become more courtly themselves. Like Arthur's followers, the courtiers seem inexperienced and carefree. But Gawain's host presents a much more imposing figure than Arthur. The lord appears to be middle-aged, with a thick, gray-black beard and solid, sturdy legs. Though the host's fiery face and stocky figure make him appear fierce, his speech reveals him to be gracious and gentle.

The lord takes Gawain to a rich chamber, where he feeds Gawain sumptuous food and wine, and introduces Gawain to two women. The host's wife is young, beautiful, and elegantly dressed, her firm neck and bosom exposed. The other, an old woman, is wrinkled, stocky, hairy, black-browed, and covered entirely in clothing. Only her nose, eyes, and blistered lips are exposed by the fabric. After the introductions, the lords and ladies play games and celebrate late into the night, when Gawain retires for bed.

Christmas morning and the two days following it pass in a similar manner, but Gawain begins to feel the weight of his quest pressing on him. With only three days remaining before his engagement with the Green Knight, Gawain refuses his host's offer of a longer stay, explaining that he must search for the Green Chapel or else be judged a failure. The host responds gleefully, telling Gawain he can send him to the Green Chapel easily—it is only two miles away. Gladdened, Gawain thanks the host and accepts the invitation to stay the three days until New Year's. The host proposes a game of sorts: during the day, he wants Gawain to stay at court and linger in bed and around the castle, spending time with the two ladies. Meanwhile, the host will

go out hunting with his men. At the end of each of the three days, the two men will exchange whatever they have won. Happy to play along, Gawain accepts. The men kiss each other, repeating their vows, and then go off to bed.

### **Part 3**

Early in the morning, the host and his guests get out of bed and prepare to ride forth from the castle. They attend Mass, eat a small breakfast, and leave with their hunting dogs as dawn breaks. They ride through the woods, chasing after the deer and herding the does away from the bucks and harts. In the fields, they slay the deer dozens at a time with their deadly arrows. The hounds hunt down the wounded animals, and the hunters follow to kill them off with their knives.

Back at the castle, Gawain lingers in bed until daybreak. While still half asleep, he hears the door open quietly. Peeking out of his bed's canopy, he sees the host's wife creeping toward his bed. Gawain lies back down, pretending to be asleep. Stealthily, the lady climbs inside the bed curtains and sits beside Gawain. Confused but curious, Gawain stretches and pretends to wake up. Upon seeing the lady in his bed, he feigns surprise and makes the sign of the cross. The host's wife smiles and greets him, teasing him for sleeping so deeply that he didn't notice her entering his chamber. She jokes that she has captured him, and she threatens to tie him to the bed, laughing at her own game. Gawain laughs and "surrenders" to her, then asks her leave to get up and put on his clothes. She refuses, saying that instead she will hold him captive. She tells Gawain that she has heard many stories about him and wants to spend time alone with him. She offers to be his servant and tells him to use her body any way he sees fit.

The two continue bantering, and the lady tells Gawain that she would have chosen him for her husband if she could have. Gawain responds that her own husband is the better man. Until mid-morning, the lady continues to lavish Gawain with admiration, and Gawain continues to guard himself while still being gracious.

When the lady gets up to leave, she laughs and then sternly accuses her captive knight of not being the real Gawain. Alarmed and worried that he has failed in his courtesy, Gawain asks her to explain what she means. She responds that the real Gawain would never let a lady leave his chamber without taking a kiss. Gawain allows one kiss, and then the lady leaves. He dresses immediately and goes to hear Mass, then spends the afternoon with the host's wife and the old woman.

Meanwhile, the lord has been hunting deer with his men all day. As evening comes on, the hunters begin to flay the animals, separating the meat and skin from the carcasses. The poet describes the dismembering of the deer in gory detail, from the removal of their bowels to the severing of their heads. After they finish their bloody task, the hunters return home with their meat.

The host greets Gawain and gives him the venison he won during the hunt that day. Gawain thanks him and in return gives him the kiss he won from the lady. The host jokingly asks where Gawain won such a prize, and Gawain points out that they agreed to exchange winnings, not to tell where or how they were acquired. Happy, the men feast and retire to bed, agreeing before they part to play the game again the next day.

The next two days follow a similar pattern. On the second day, the lord hunts a wild boar, risking his life as he wrestles it to the ground and stabs it with his sword. At the castle, the lady continues to teasingly challenge Gawain's reputation, pressuring him into allowing her two kisses

and continuing to make convincing arguments for how his acceptance of her love would be chivalrous. That night, the host brings home the boar's head on a stick and exchanges it with Gawain for the two kisses.

On the third day the host hunts a fox, and Gawain, awakened by the lady from horrible nightmares about the Green Knight, receives three kisses from the lady during the course of their conversation. However, while they banter, the lady asks Gawain for a love token. Gawain refuses to fulfill her request, claiming he has nothing to give, so the lady offers him a ring, which he also refuses. She then offers him her green girdle, which she claims has magical properties: it possesses the ability to keep the man who wears it safe from death. Tempted by the possibility of protecting his life, Gawain accepts the girdle.

That afternoon, Gawain goes to confession. At the end of the day, he gives the three kisses to his host but fails to mention the lady's gift. After the exchange, the host and his courtiers hold a farewell party for Gawain, who later retires to his chamber, prepared to leave the next day to seek out the Green Chapel. Whether he sleeps or not, the poet cannot say.