

Sir Gawain

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Play One: The Table Round

Act One, Scene 1

- KAY.** I never can believe it, Sir Gawain. *Sir Tristan* found unfaithful?
- GAWAIN.** Upon mine honour, Sir Kay, the brave Sir Lancelot discovered them together: Tristan and the Irish lass, Iseult, en route to her wedding.
- KAY.** Shocking the virginal Lancelot, no doubt!
- GAWAIN.** I understand he said his prayers and washed his eyes with penances.
- KAY.** Except for your uncle, my foster-brother, King Arthur, I've never known a man more eager for a hermit's robes. But you have met this Princess Iseult. The lady *was* unmarried?
- GAWAIN.** As I understand it: yet Iseult was promised to another.
- KAY.** Then I cannot see a fault! Where Wart and I grew up, why anyone unmarried might make merry on a bright May morning! No fault found—unless it were some nine month later, you understand.
- GAWAIN.** Indeed, I do conceive you.
- KAY.** Quite good!
- GAWAIN.** And how did you find Cornwall? You often envoy there. Is King Mark still willing to receive this Irish...bride?
- KAY.** I've made my overtures to the Cornish king. I like him well. He hath more head for sport than sanctity. Yet, for all of that, I think he'll sue for peace.
- GAWAIN.** 'Tis well. And better than another war. King Arthur, swayed by Lancelot, hath made his solemn oath to Christianize this Kingdom by deed and by law—no man excepted.
- KAY.** Not even on a May morning, Sir Gawain?
- GAWAIN.** Indeed, not then the most of all.

...

ARTHUR. And thou, Gawain?

GAWAIN. I'll venture forth at once.
I have a love for Ireland, which reminds me much of Wales.
'Twill be good to look upon a Green World once again.
And, if I overheard the Merlin's word aright,
There is a Welsh maid coming that I'd avoid tonight.

ARTHUR. What's this?

GAWAIN. The maiden Guinevere. Was that not her name?

MERLIN. By the standing stones, your ears are sharp, Gawain.
It's true. The maiden Guinevere is hither bound.
And I'll not hear another word against it!

ARTHUR. "...The maiden Guinevere?" Who's she?

GAWAIN. Is she so soon forgot? I told you of her, Majesty,
When first you sent myself to Wales,
To parlay with my neighbours and bring them
Beneath one single cross. 'Twas she—or rather:
'Twas her warriors, whom we by name call: "Woods"
Would not let us speak. And for their silence,
Did you send Lancelot to murder all her land.
And now: she's come to wed you! And I will take my leave!
Adieu, my lords and...ladies. I will *Ireland* retrieve.

Act Two, Scene 5

GAWAIN. O?! Shall I tell thee, *Princess*, what became of Wales?

(As GAWAIN narrates, LANCELOT and others of the Court of Camelot, may come into view. Encircling them both, just behind or beside the audience. Armed.)

ISEULT. I prithee, do.

GAWAIN. Not every tribe would bend.

ISEULT. So I have heard.

GAWAIN. My father, good King Lot,
Bent his stubborn knee, upon mine own request,
And I—his rightful son and heir—was first
To pledge my fealty to the King. But others...
The other tribes disdained King Arthur's cross.
Defied his Camelot. Burnt nunneries.
And so: I sued for peace, but they would none.
To make them bend the knee, Sir Lancelot,
But new arrived to court, and eager
To make my Arthur proud, he...

(GAWAIN looks off. Thinking of the carnage. Then:)

GAWAIN. ... You should thank me.

ISEULT. Thank you.

GAWAIN. Aye. Had I not come,
Had I not stood between Sir Lancelot
And all that thou couldst love, there'd be no dirt
For thee to eat. All salted. All undone.
You're welcome.

Act Four, Scene 4

GAWAIN.

When Camelot is best—as, indeed, it hath not been
These far too many years—the Camelot I love,
The *King I love*, and swore my fealty to:
Loves us.

Loves your peasant and your monarch.
Indeed: loves peasant *more* than monarch! He...
If you both had known my Arthur as a boy—
I say a boy: he's five years older than myself!—
If you had known mine uncle when they crowned him:
Still petite upon the throne; the weighty crown
Too large and falling lopsided on his head—
Hadst thou beheld him, then, as my cousin spoke
Of *equity*—of *peace*—of something...*Greater*
Than ourselves. Despite his youth, by Heaven's light:
He shone.

I swear: King Arthur—*shone.*

And for a time the warring tribes relented.
And I, who lived so often in the fear
One day I'd wake and see a neighbour blade
Descend upon my throat for that I was a *King*:
Began to breathe again. I say too much.

Play Two: The Seige Perilous

Act Two, Scene 3

GAWAIN.

I want to speak. I *want* to speak. To tell—

Anyone

(What should I tell? There's naught to say:) I did it.

God, I did it. Good *God*, I did it. Must have—

Wanted it, yes? That's how men are built: to *Want*?

Take, desire, need—a *Demon* always lurking:

But—if 'twere so, I should feel...grateful?

That my too-enforcèd celibacy's concluded;

Myself, most sated—Twice!...(God...!)

Why feel I so...*unmanned*?

My gorge repulsive, my flesh feel foreign,

As though I could crawl out of myself, cocoon,

And not be seen again. Think, Gawain, think.

It cannot be that she hath [~~raped thee~~]—

'Twas not force. She said as much:

"*This time, she was not forced.*" But chose me,

Of her own free will: her most gallant Knight, Gawain.

Who must have chosen back? Or given her some hope?

Think, Gawain! She came at you—she charged,

Held your belt and kissed you. You said: "No."

Felt your body freeze, and then an inward death...

Act Five, Scene 3

GAWAIN.

Said she loved me. But what we did...I have made love before. Been present with a woman I admired. Known what is to give and take; to share a breath; to laugh! To say: "Right now, there's only *us*." But this—the Gawain who stands here now is somehow *ugly*. Have been touched—*ugly*. Made—*ugly*. I look at my reflection and cannot see myself. I lack a poet's tongue to make more sense of it than that. I'm lost. My uncle, Kay, I'm lost. Lost Ireland and Cornwall, all besides. And nothing waits for me in Camelot but shame—

I can't go back.

KAY.

Then don't.

Act Seven, Scene 1

GAWAIN. (To ARTHUR.) Will burn—your wife?
Burn Lancelot? Or heed a *servant boy*?
What could they *possibly* have done?

MORDRED. Adultery.

GAWAIN. O, that. Why then, my liege, burn me!

KAY. He's joking, Wart.

GAWAIN. O, *no I'm not*. You want to burn the world? Start here.
For I'm adulterous—I'll tell [~~you how~~]—
I now hate Camelot. Would see it burn:
Aye, burn it down to ashes. She was right.
The woman who—who—the Irish maid, Iseult,
Aye, and King Mark, too: they blamed *you*, King,
For all their miseries.

KAY. Gawain—

GAWAIN. Nay, I will speak!
I once beheld thee, uncle, like a jewel.
Thought nothing rude could touch thee, like a saint.
Beheld thee pure, thine every law: divine.
I made of thee a God. Worshipped *nothing*
But a fragile, coward man who once had shone,
And now: turns against the only ones who love him.
I will none.

(GAWAIN *frees* LANCELOT *and* GUINEVERE.)

GAWAIN. No soul be captive now unto thy tyranny.

MORDRED. Call forth the Guard!

GAWAIN. I'll take thy guard instead.

Act Eight, Scene 2

ISEULT. *(To her army.)* This one's for me. *(Aloud.)* Aye there's my love, Gawain.
Where is thine army? I've got mine here.

GAWAIN. A fair assembly, Iseult.
I think I know a few of these brave faces.
Met some there in Cornwall, with King Mark.
And others who swore fealty to my father,
And thus belong to me. How do ye all?
(The army may make various noises at being called out.)

ISEULT. Speak not to them. Thy quarrel is with me.

GAWAIN. And mine with thee, Iseult. Thou hast gravely wounded me—

ISEULT. A scratch.

GAWAIN. A blow against mine honour and myself.
Before I met thee, *maid*, I was myself; Gawain.
But after what thou didst to me—

ISEULT. I loved thee—

GAWAIN. *No.*
(Whispering.) Assaulted me, and made me think it: Love.

ISEULT. What dost thou say?

GAWAIN. You heard me.

ISEULT. “Assaulted thee?”
Myself? A waif, with no more weight than water?
How could I have harmed thee?

GAWAIN. And yet, you did.
I know not where or why our story went astray.
For I could have loved the maid, Iseult—
If I had ever met her.

ISEULT. She died the day your Camelot arrived.

GAWAIN. I know.

ISEULT. She'll be reborn once Camelot is conquered!

(Cheers from army.)

GAWAIN. No. No, Iseult—there's no more need to fight.
King Arthur lies there, wounded. He may not rise.
Sir Lancelot is gone; the Queen is, too. Sir Tristan—
Thou hast killed.
As I supposed you've murdered my Sir Kay.
All gone. All lost. For what? A little throne?

ISEULT. I loved you.

GAWAIN. Mark showed me more love than thou couldst ever do.

(ISEULT backs up. GAWAIN takes the stage.)

GAWAIN. Ye warriors of Cornwall, Ireland, ye Woads,
Ye Picts, ye Scottish and ye Welsh—NOW HEAR MY VOICE!
I am your King, Gawain. Too long removed,
Too absent from my place to serve ye best.
But this I swear:
Those of you who wish to fight, I'll fight ye.
Give me your wounds; aye merry! I'll take'm all!
But those of you who only wish to live,
Who fight, not for your glory, but for Love:
Depart this place. Your battle's won. Camelot,
Is burning down in ashes. Then let it burn.
And when her hour's past, then ask of me
And I will serve you, humbly, as your King.
Imperfect as I am. Not worthy of the power.
Then go. Live. I'll fight the rest.
(To ISEULT.) And I'll see you in an hour.

Act Eight, Scene 3

ARTHUR. But who will rule hereafter? The nations left sovereign to themselves—some beggared of their Kings, because of me. We cannot leave the innocent to suffer. Here, take Excalibur, Gawain.

GAWAIN. Not I, my coz. My heart is far too heavy to lift a stone that's fallen. I'll rule over those who'll have me, my fallen Celts, and those whom Camelot's forgotten. None abandoned here. Yet, should one wear the triple crown, there is another Queen.

ARTHUR. Iseult is still in chains.

SCÁTHE. For now. I feel a little hungry.

LANCELOT. He means: to crown Elaine. Would you take it, Lady? I need not be your consort, but you should be our Queen.

ELAINE. And so I am a Queen. Who bear an heir already.

LANCELOT. We have...a son?

ELAINE. *I have* a girl or boy. Will name them Galahad. Will be monarch after me. But I'll not raise them here. Nor chain them to Excalibur, as our Arthur was. I will go home.

SCÁTHE. Of course you will. And I'm going with you.

(SCÁTHE and ELAINE start to exit.)

NIMUË. *(Taking the Grail, and giving it to ELAINE.)* One moment, Monarch. Take and guard this well. There well may be, there'll come a time, we'll need the Grail again. And so farewell.

(SCÁTHE and ELAINE exit. NIMUË starts to leave.)

ARTHUR. Will leave us, Nimuë? No Merlin now to guide us—will...you not stay?

NIMUË. I need some time—to rest. I'll visit the Lady of the Lake. And bring with me the souls of those who've fallen.

(She looks at the dead. Raises her hand. A benediction.)

NIMUË. Now, England: rise. And visit better shores.
Ye weary, and ye broken ones:
Come, and claim your peace at last.

KYRIE ELEISON

VOICES OF THE DEAD. CHRISTE ELEISON

NIMUË. AND IT'S HO-RO, SOON SHALL I SEE THEM, O

ALL BUT ARTHUR, GUINEVERE, LANCELOT, GAWAIN.

HEY-HO, SEE THEM O, SEE THEM O

HO-RO, SOON SHALL I SEE

SEE THE MIST COVERED MOUNTAINS OF MORNING...

(The fallen trail off, surrounding the world.)

(The living. Alone.)

ARTHUR. Who then will rule? Shall we leave Camelot alone?

GAWAIN. Aye. Leave it empty, Arthur. Leave all, leave everything. There's no more need be done. But put Excalibur back within a stone—the empty throne, and leave it there.

(ARTHUR listens. Makes a decision. Heaves Excalibur up, and leaves it on the throne. He nearly collapses into GUINEVERE and LANCELOT'S arms with joy.)

ARTHUR. 'Tis done. 'Tis done. Farewell, my Camelot.
And stay, Excalibur, for those who come behind.
When broken souls do need thee most,
Let them find thee here. Each time. Always. Now.
For Those who are Unworthy.